

**FILM NOIR AS THE SOVEREIGN-IMAGE OF EMPIRE: CYNICISM, WHITE MALE
BIOPOLITICS, AND THE NEOLIBERAL CINEMATIC APPARATUS**

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Abstract

This dissertation develops a theory of film noir as sovereign-image, a meta-generic and meta-cinematic discourse that confronts the viewer with the biopolitical ambivalence of the cinematic apparatus but enjoins her to nonetheless affirm its normative use. I argue that classical American noir deploys a proto-neoliberal ideology to turn the indeterminacy at its core into a spectacle of victimized white men, offering emphatically gendered and racialized images of a pathological “entrepreneur of the self” who is not ashamed to exhibit his wounded private life as the source of his singular market value. I claim, however, that even in his fully developed contemporary form in which his classical predecessor’s trauma induced shamelessness turns into a cynically calculated affective display, noir’s neoliberal hero is not the self-made man he appears to be but remains *delegated* by a homosocial group to be the sovereign arbiter of their life’s value for them, instead of them. As an individual who—not unlike the film viewer—is temporarily isolated from his peers he is in the exceptional position to freely decide what *kind* of life to consider productive for the process of capital accumulation, turning his body into the arbitrary link between what Agamben calls bare life and a qualified form of life—a link I call the sovereign-image. I track the evolution of film noir’s sovereign function alongside the expansion and transformation of the United States from a territorialized nation state to a deterritorialized global financial network (what Hardt and Negri call Empire) to shed light on how Hollywood’s anomalous noir crisis, its war trauma induced state of exception, became the expression of the governing paradigm of unbridled global biocapitalism in the age of North Atlantic unilateralism. In contemporary neo-noirs like *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Trainspotting* (1996), *Inception* (2010), *Fight Club* (1999), or *Drive* (2011) becoming a self-made neoliberal subject coincides with gaining membership in a hybrid and flexible white male *bios*, the old-new flesh of Empire

now cynically framed as the condition of possibility for autonomous selfhood as such. In critiquing neo-noir's cynical paradigm I demonstrate that its reactionary force can be mobilized only if the films first construct a biopolitical zone of indistinction where the inevitability of the western capitalo-patriarchal status quo is questioned and the equality of all forms of life is posited.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Towards a Film Noir Theory of Neoliberal Cynicism

We're talking about an ideology marked by the selling off of public goods to private interests; the attack on social provisions; the rise of the corporate state organized around privatization, free trade, and deregulation; the celebration of self-interests over social needs; the celebration of profit-making as the essence of democracy coupled with the utterly reductionist notion that consumption is the only applicable form of citizenship. But even more than that, it upholds the notion that the market serves as a model for structuring all social relations: not just the economy, but the governing of all of social life. – Henry Giroux on neoliberalism¹

In neo-liberalism [...] homo oeconomicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. – Michel Foucault²

[As a cynic] one catches a glimpse of oneself in individual “games” which are destitute of all seriousness and obviousness, having become nothing more than a place for immediate self-affirmation—a self-affirmation which is all the more brutal and arrogant, in short, cynical, the more it draws upon, without illusions but with perfect momentary

¹ Henry Giroux, “Henry Giroux on the Rise of Neoliberalism,” interview by Michael Nevradakis *Truthout*, October 19, 2014, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/26885-henry-giroux-on-the-rise-of-neoliberalism>.

² Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France (1978-79)*, trans. M. Senellart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 226.

allegiance, those same rules which characterize conventionality and mutability. – Paolo Virno³

In film noir privacy establishes itself as the rule, not as a clandestine exception. – Joan Copjec⁴

At the end of Bryan Singer's neo-noir mind game film *The Usual Suspects* (1995) Verbal, the limping, stuttering small time crook narrating the story from police custody is revealed to be the legendary criminal mastermind Keyser Söze, the man, allegedly, behind a series of high stakes robberies and drug deals whom the FBI had been unable to even identify. After the authorities cluelessly release him, his disabilities turn out to be faked, and the name Söze nothing but an empty signifier he had made up to manipulate his colleagues and enemies much the same way the viewer had been deceived by such a post-classical narrative device. As J. P. Telotte observes, Verbal therefore remains "unknowable, at least in the manner of classical narrative: as a figure who is marked by easily observable traits, whose motivations are readily understood, and who sets the plot in motion along a straight line."⁵ By consciously going against expectations about character and narrative form (deploying, for instance, an unreliable flashback sequence), the film makes the viewer reflect on classical Hollywood conventions as nothing but contingent linguistic constructs.⁶ The nonlinear narration becomes the carefully calculated

³ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. I. Bertoletti et al. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 87.

⁴ Joan Copjec, "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in Film Noir," in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1993), 183.

⁵ On *The Usual Suspects*' post-classical narration see J. P. Telotte, "Rounding up 'The Usual Suspects': The Comforts of Character and Neo-Noir," *Film Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1998): 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

unfolding of the hero's and indeed the film's fabricated persona, a code mobilized to eliminate characters with a traditional (realistic) psychology in the diegesis to preserve the myth of Söse, and compete with conventional Hollywood products on the extra-diegetic marketplace.

On the one hand, through his narrative self-mobilization, Verbal becomes a neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* in the Foucauldian sense, an “entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings.”⁷ At the same time he also represents the obscene underside of such neoliberal selfhood: the noir subject thrown into a Hobbesian world where capitalist competition, rather than being a liberal platform of meritocratic self-affirmation, becomes a struggle for life and death. Yet, he emphatically lacks the existential malaise of the classical noir characters who, as Foster Hirsch notes, “have no place of refuge in [noir's] cruel naturalistic world, this life-as-a-jungle setting. Alone and unprotected, they are truly strangers, to themselves as well as to others. The world is littered with pitfalls against which the individual has, at the most, meager defenses.”⁸ Verbal, by contrast, is a successful self-made man whose refusal to depend on others makes him stronger rather than more vulnerable: he triumphs by cutting his homosocial ties with his fellow gangsters working with him, and a flashback even shows him (as Keyser Söse) killing his own wife and children to avoid being cornered when they are taken hostage. He stands for the neoliberal fantasy of a fully autonomous subject always in control, self-programmed into a winning algorithm.

With its fetishization of the self-sufficient entrepreneur, *The Usual Suspects* is symptomatic of what Laurent Berlant calls the contemporary “waning of genre,” the increasing

⁷ Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 226.

⁸ Foster Hirsch. *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2008), 4.

difficulty to imagine shared fictions of “good life” under neoliberalism.⁹ It is the homosocial script of the gangster genre (men cooperating to break the law) that reaches a crisis in the film, collapsing into a noir story of an isolated individual whose very voice-over is a genre destroying weapon (weaving the fable about Söze killing off one by one the team of hard-boiled criminals he hired). Contrary to classical noir, where, as I will argue, the male protagonist’s increasing isolation from his patriarchal peers is death driven, *The Usual Suspects* presents it as a strategy that yields profit. In Giorgio Agamben’s biopolitical terminology, the film glorifies the separation of the noir subject’s bare life (*zoe*) from the (generic) life of his masculine community (*bios*).¹⁰ Or, insofar as we understand, with Althusser, ideology as the “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,”¹¹ the film is a product of today’s so called post-ideological age where subjects, supposedly, can directly connect to the world market, without the mediation of now outdated imagined communities like nation, family, or brotherhood. This is the epoch announced by theorists like Frances Fukuyama who saw in the fall of the Soviet Union and the triumph of global capitalism the end of history as we know it and the beginning of a universal free market utopia.¹² As Michel Foucault suggests, neoliberal governmentality accumulates human capital by activating an “abilities-machine” made up of qualities like mobility, flexibility, innovation, and the capacity to choose that are attributed to individuals rather than particular social groups.¹³ Along these lines one could argue that *The Usual Suspects* is a post-patriarchal film: by revealing the nonexistence of the hyperphallic gangster boss Söze,

⁹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.

¹⁰ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)

¹¹ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 162.

¹² See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); for a theory of postmodern condition as the end of ideological meta-narratives, see Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984)

¹³ Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 226-33.

masculinity itself is exposed as a hollow shell—or as Judith Butler would say: a performance with no essential core at its center—and the protagonist’s market value is attributed not to his manliness but to his entrepreneurial abilities as an individual.¹⁴ For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, this is how Empire, the global, deterritorialized regime of post-Fordist capitalism functions: instead of prescribing a particular group identity for the productive subject through disciplinary measures like Fordism did, Empire exploits the creative potential of human life as such, even in its forms that were previously considered useless and unproductive like Verbal’s disabilities. Now, they contend, “the construction of value takes place beyond measure,” “determined only by humanity’s own continuous innovation and creation.”¹⁵

Upon closer look at the film’s biopolitics, however, its post-ideological facade quickly dissipates. After his release from police custody, Verbal drops his faked limp and stutter he performed to remain invisible among hardened criminals and lawmen flaunting their machismo, and he is driven away in his Jaguar by his (white male) chauffeur/lawyer as an able bodied white man of the American bourgeoisie. He strategically wears the mask of a social abject not to subvert the norm of white heterosexual masculinity but to make it more flexible, hybrid, and all encompassing; deploying it against its former, more rigid and limited manifestations in the kind of postmodern ruse of patriarchal power critiqued by gender theorists such as Demetrakis Z. Demetriou,¹⁶ David Savran,¹⁷ Fintan Walsh,¹⁸ or Claire Sisco King.¹⁹ This synthesis between hegemonic and abject is perfectly captured in the protagonist’s (fake) German-Turkish

¹⁴ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990)

¹⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 356.

¹⁶ Demetrakis Z. Demetriou, “Connell’s Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique,” *Theory and Society* 30, no. 3 (2001): 337-61.

¹⁷ David Savran, *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998)

¹⁸ Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

¹⁹ Claire Sisco King, “It Cuts Both Ways: *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and Abject Hegemony,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 4 (2009): 366-85.

hyphenated identity: while in flashbacks he is depicted as a dark skinned, long haired gypsy from the Balkans (a romanticized nomadic subject in the south-eastern border zone of Europe), he has a western name, Kaiser being German for emperor. He is an “abject hegemonic”²⁰ subject of a neoliberal Empire that, despite its openness to the productive potential of multiple forms of life, hasn’t given up its allegiance with white male biopower as their hidden anchoring point. At the core of *The Usual Suspects*’ clever puzzle narrative is therefore a biopolitically motivated pathos of what Mark Fisher called capitalist realism, the resigned conviction that the current global capitalist status quo has no outside and no alternatives, that all counter-hegemonic and minority positions are coopted by it in advance.²¹

After Peter Sloterdijk I will use the term cynicism to describe this contemporary post-ideological state of mind exemplified by Verbal in Singer’s film; an “enlightened false consciousness” that puts on counter-hegemonic ideological masks without believing in them while driven by the inertia of the (bio)political status quo (the *bios* of western white patriarchy), forming a productive body that is completely flexible yet utterly rigid. Cynics, Sloterdijk argues, “know what they are doing, but they do it because, in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling them that it has to be so. Others would do it anyway, perhaps worse.”²² For Paolo Virno the cynic emerges after the decline of the modern social contract based on the principle of equality, and as such, he is the neoliberal subject par excellence who “renounces from the beginning the search for an intersubjective foundation for his practice and for a shared criterion of moral value” and

²⁰ See King, *Abject Hegemony*

²¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hants: Zero Books, 2009)

²² Peter Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. M. Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 5.

considers social codes to be games of self-affirmation.²³ He is both an opportunist and, as Sloterdijk notes, a “borderline melancholic” “who can keep [his] symptoms of depression under control and can remain more or less able to work.” “Indeed,” he continues, “this is the essential point in modern cynicism: the ability of its bearers to work—in spite of anything that might happen, and especially, after anything that might happen.”²⁴ Slavoj Žižek similarly emphasizes the practical dimension of cynicism, which he considers an ideology of the so called post-ideological age.

The fundamental level of ideology [...] is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way - one of many ways - to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them.*²⁵

In fact, he maintains, such blindness is a necessary condition of our libidinal cathexis to, our *enjoyment* of ideology.²⁶ In other words, not only is the seemingly self-enclosed cynic a socially mediated identity position, but hiding one’s ideological enjoyment under cynical roleplaying may actually be a more efficient way of preserving the biopolitical status quo than classical ideological indoctrination and discipline. In *The Usual Suspects*, the fundamental fantasy offered to the viewer for enjoyment underneath the multitude of Verbal’s cynically changing masks is

²³ Paolo Virno, “The Ambivalence of Disenchantment,” in *Radical Thought in Italy*, ed. P. Virno and M. Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 23.

²⁴ Sloterdijk, *Cynical Reason*, 5.

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso: New York, 2008), 30., emphasis in the original

²⁶ “[E]njoyment, in its stupidity, is possible only on the basis of certain non-knowledge, ignorance.” Ibid., 73.

the persistence of white masculinity as a kind of zero-institution, a condition of possibility for neoliberal entrepreneurship.²⁷

It is no coincidence that *The Usual Suspects* uses film noir tropes (voice-over confession, non-linear narration, *homme fatale*, deception and betrayal, murder as an existentialist act, etc.) to reflect on the transformation of Hollywood cinema in the age of neoliberal cynicism. Film noir is the Hollywood discourse of the self-enclosed, isolated modern subject par excellence, a meta-genre emerging out of the crisis of traditional generic communities—except that in its classical form such crisis was framed as a failure rather than an opportunity. I will argue that film noir has already been proto-neoliberal in its classical stage, but only in the era of unchallenged global capitalism could it realize its full cynical potential, freeing itself from the censorship of the Production Code and the early postmodern a nostalgia for it that anchored the viewer’s desire in an imagined national community of the past. The central claim of this dissertation is therefore that cynicism, neoliberalism, and film noir are interconnected; indeed it aims to develop what could be called a film noir theory of neoliberal cynicism, mapping the emergence and history of noir’s “self-made” sovereign subject in Hollywood cinema and its seamless knot with the patriarchal ideological fantasies supporting it. In critiquing its cynicism, I will consider film noir not only as a meta-generic but also as a meta-cinematic phenomenon that reflects not just on the crisis of generic communities but points also to a radical indeterminacy at the core of the cinematic apparatus itself that needs to be disavowed to suture the viewer into the culture industry’s biopolitical hegemony.

²⁷ The term zero-institution comes from Claude Levi-Strauss, for whom, as Žižek explains, it is an “empty signifier with no determinate meaning, since it signifies only the presence of meaning as such in opposition to its absence: a specific institution that has no positive, determinate content.” Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Discourses on the Left* (New York: Verso, 2000), 113. By contrast, I argue that zero-institutions are never neutral biopolitically.

1.2 Reconsidering Apparatus Theory

In reading film noir as the suture of the cinematic apparatus I will rely on Lacanian film theory while also expanding on it, taking into account the challenge of neoliberal cynicism. To understand the shortcomings of contemporary psychoanalytic approaches to the cinema, it's important to track the trajectory of Lacan's integration into the field. When two of his influential concepts, the suture and the imaginary first appear in French film theory in the late 1960s through the mediation of Jacques-Alain Miller and Louis Althusser,²⁸ they are read through the lens of structuralism understanding languages as self-contained systems structured by binary oppositions. On the one hand, suture theorists such as Jean-Pierre Oudart or Stephen Heath are interested in explaining how films can construct a meaningful signifying chain by including the point of view of the spectator in a continuous sequence of shots and reverse shots, where her perspective, that of the "Absent One," can temporarily totalize the diegetic space at a certain point of the narrative from the outside, only to be revealed later in an objective shot as someone's intra-diegetic point of view.²⁹ Suture names this retroactive moment of signification whereby the place of the spectator-subject as the absent cause of the film's symbolic structure gains a positive representation (enters the picture), leading to the deferral of the lack she stood for to a different spatiotemporal location, thus serving the development of the narrative. If the theory of the suture gives an account of the film viewer's look as a device of *subjectification* (subject formation), the theory of the apparatus goes a step further and maps her *subjection* to the ruling ideologies entrapping her gaze through the machinery of the cinema: she is lured into

²⁸ Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," trans. Kari Hanet, *Screen* 18 (1977/78): 35-47.; Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus," *Camera Obscura* 1, no. 1 (1976): 104-26.; Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture: Elements of the Logic of the Signifier," *Screen* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1977-78): 24-34.; Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-89.

²⁹ See Oudart, "Cinema and Suture"; and Stephen Heath, "Narrative Space," *Screen* 17, no. 3 (1976): 68-112.; Stephen Heath, "Notes on Suture," *Screen* 23, no. 4 (1977-78): 48-76.

taking the images on the screen for reality, regressing into an infantile state of narcissism like the slaves in Plato's allegorical cave of illusions.³⁰ This Althusserian concept of the imaginary as a site of self-alienation and ideological misrecognition is heavily influenced by Lacan's 1949 essay on the mirror stage where he discusses how the infant's ego is constituted through her imaginary identification with an idealized mirror image. Unlike Althusser, however, Baudry ignores Lacan's seminars from the early 60s (especially *Seminar IX* from 1961-62) where he develops how this imaginary ideal ego is offered by the child as an answer to the enigma of the (m)Other's desire which she misrecognizes as a demand for a complete image that lacks nothing—that lacks lack itself, negating the void in the symbolic order where Lacan locates the subject.³¹ In Baudry's version of the apparatus, instead of this tripartite structure we find the (rather inconsistent)³² duality of a *powerful* transcendental subject distanced (erased) from the cinematic spectacle on the one hand,³³ and an ego that is *imprisoned* in an ideological dream on the other.³⁴ What is missing from this framework is the Lacanian gaze of the (m)Other (or its equivalent in the Althusserian policeman's interpellation)³⁵ as the external cause of the subject's split, the gaze that in the later Lacan's post-structuralist theory becomes *objet a*, the real-impossible object-cause of desire which cannot be assumed by the subject. This is the gaze that Lacan in his *Seminar XI* identifies as the "source of light" "photo-graphing" the subject from behind what he calls the screen, the mediator between the gaze as the Other's desire and the eye that belongs to

³⁰ Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1974): 39-47.

³¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 75-82; Jacques Lacan, *Identification. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IX (1961-1962)*, trans. C. Gallagher (unpublished), accessed December 19, 2016, http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Seminar-IX-Amended-Iby-MCL-7.NOV_20111.pdf.

³² See Kaja Silverman's critique of Baudry in Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 127.

³³ Baudry, "Ideological Effects," 39-47.

³⁴ Baudry, "The Apparatus," 104-26.

³⁵ Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 174.

the ego (“the subject of representation,” see Figure 1).³⁶ This aspect of the gaze is ignored by early suture theory as well, insofar as the Absent One only accounts for one of cinema’s two extradiegetic gazes.

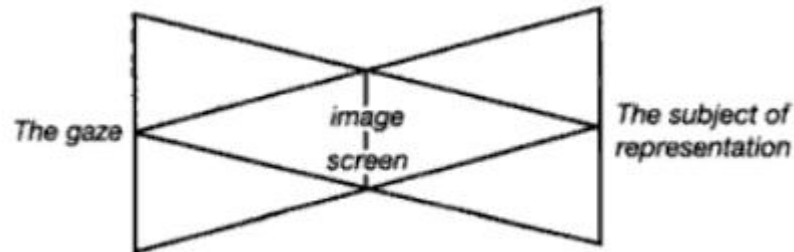


Figure 1.

Although both equally avoid the dimension of the real, the two early attempts to integrate Lacan into film theory avoid it in opposite directions. While suture theory focuses on how a film’s intradiegetic gazes are synthesized with the spectator’s/the camera’s extradiegetic perspective into a master signifier that, as its constitutive exception, helps the meaningful totality of a *symbolic* order to emerge, Baudry’s early apparatus theory takes cinema to be a machine of the *imaginary* where the binary conflict between the gaze of the transcendental ego and that of his imaginary other is never sublated into a higher unity. It is Christian Metz who reads suture theory’s focus on the symbolic and Baudry’s somewhat paranoid vision of the imaginary³⁷ together when he insists that while the cinematic situation resembles the child’s entrapment in the mirror stage, unlike the perfect image of the ideal ego in the mirror, the “imaginary” of film

³⁶Jacques Lacan, “Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*,” in Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 106.

³⁷ See Joan Copjec, “The Anxiety of the Influencing Machine,” *October* 23 (Winter, 1982): 43-59.; Constance Penley, “Feminism, Film Theory and the Bachelor Machines,” in Constance Penley, *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989), 57-83.

does in fact rely on its viewer's ability to realize its inherently lacking nature, which means that the "second mirror of the screen" is always already a "symbolic apparatus."³⁸ Metz demonstrates this through his theory of fetishism that introduces, borrowing the concept from Octave Mannoni,³⁹ a third term mediating between the viewer's gaze and the her perfect mirror image looking back at her from the screen: that of the naïve observer. It is the symbolic fiction of the Other as an idiot who, supposedly, takes the images on the screen for reality that alleviates the anxiety of the subject's imaginary struggle for completeness and allows her the fetishistic play with the medium through a dialectic of identification and disidentification, belief and knowledge, avowal and disavowal.⁴⁰ Or, to put it differently, this is what allows the viewer to identify with the camera without being swallowed up by its machinery. A similar (symbolic) reading of Baudry's theory is offered by Jean-Louis Comolli, for whom the naïve, ideal observer becomes the camera itself with which the viewer willingly identifies despite her awareness of the discord between actual and ideal. She wants to be fooled and oscillate between the position of distance and immersion because her playful complicity with the ideological spectacle is the very source of her pleasure.⁴¹

If Metz's intervention attested to the symbolic nature of what seemed to be imaginary in the cinematic apparatus, Laura Mulvey's influential 1975 article argues the opposite, developing what could be called an imaginary theory of suture, ignoring the structural role that the naïve observer plays in the apparatus of the cinema. For her, since a patriarchal ideology of sexual difference dominates Hollywood films, the main motor of their narrative is not simply the

³⁸ Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (London: MacMillan Press, 1982), 57.

³⁹ Octave Mannoni. "I Know Very Well, but All the Same..." in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. M. A. Rothenberg et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 68-93.

⁴⁰ Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, 72-76.

⁴¹ Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machines of the Visible," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. T. De Lauretis and S. Heath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 139.

integration of diegetic absence into the continuous signifying chain but a more fundamental operation that projects lack onto the female other who poses a threat of castration to the male spectator. This way Mulvey, drawing heavily on Baudry, turns around the Lacanian formula of the mirror by placing lack on the screen (locating it in representations of “passive” women) while identifying the masculine viewer’s transcendental “active look” with the place of power that voyeuristically investigates the feminine deviations from the phallic norm from a comfortable distance. For her, cinema’s ideal viewer is not the Lacanian subject as pure void but the socially constructed masculine ego looking for his own powerful double on the screen to identify with in representations where the active male look dominates women passively exhibiting themselves “to be looked at.”⁴² As Joan Copjec notes more than a decade later, such concept of the gaze has more to do with the Foucauldian notion of the panopticon as a disciplinary mechanism, which ignores the fundamental Lacanian insight about the gaze being ultimately impotent, blind.⁴³ Mulvey only hints at this possibility in her discussion of cases like Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) where the threat of femininity comes too close to the diegetic voyeur, to which he reacts with the fetishistic disavowal of feminine sexual difference by elevating a frozen image of the powerful woman as a shield against the threat of castration.⁴⁴ It is Gaylyn Studlar who explores Mulvey’s imaginary theory fetishism to its logical conclusion by claiming that fetishistic scopophilia is not a defense mechanism against castration anxiety but a properly non-phallic form of pleasure that the subject experiences masochistically, as the

⁴² Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Media and Cultural Studies Key Works*, ed. M. G. Durham and D. M. Kellner (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 342-53.

⁴³ Joan Copjec, “The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan,” *October* 49 (Summer, 1989): 53-71.; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-231.

⁴⁴ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure, 348

immobile cinema viewer exposed to the forces of the spectacle looking back at her.⁴⁵ In Studlar's Deleuzian reading the subject of the cinema is not the sadistic male voyeur but a pre-Oedipal masochist who enjoys being powerless in front of the gaze of the (m)Other. In the end, the problem with Studlar is the same as with Mulvey; they both oversimplify an already reductionist model of the apparatus by trying to uncover *the* founding gaze of the cinema, ultimately siding with one of Baudry's apparatus essays against the other, thus eliminating the productive tension between them that could reveal how they are always already mediated by a third (symbolic) term.⁴⁶

By contrast, a more Metzian route in feminist psychoanalytic film theory is taken by Mary-Ann Doane who argues that patriarchal ideology positions the feminine spectator as the naïve observer who, unlike the masculine voyeur, is unable to create a distance between herself and the screen which leads to her "over-identification with the image."⁴⁷ In the Mulveyian (imaginary) framework, Doane suggests, women's only alternative to passive femininity is to assume the position of the masculine voyeur through "transvestitism."⁴⁸ There is, however, a third (symbolic) option, that of masquerade, which allows the feminine spectator to play with her phallic distance from the image.⁴⁹ What Doane's move effectively amounts to is a democratization of the Metzian fetishist's position, which, in an unfortunate turn, creates the now "neutral" figure of the naïve observer as its ultimate disavowed ideological support. It is tempting to read this as a shift away from the sharp political antagonisms of Mulvey's second wave feminism towards the less confrontative multiculturalism of postfeminist identity politics,

⁴⁵ Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 9, no. 4 (1984): 267-82.

⁴⁶ Mulvey clearly prefers *the Ideological Effects* essay while Studlar draws from *The Apparatus*.

⁴⁷ Mary-Ann Doane, "Film and Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, no.3-4 (1982): 80.

⁴⁸ Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by *Duel in the Sun*," in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, ed. E. A. Kaplan (New York: Routledge, 1990), 24-35.

⁴⁹ Doane, "Film and Masquerade," 82.

theorizing different viewers' active negotiation of and participation in cinematic fantasies.⁵⁰ Within this framework, one of the most rigorous analyses of the Lacanian gaze as a symbolic apparatus is offered by Kaja Silverman who tackles the often ignored paradoxes of Lacan's *Seminar XI*, the gaze as *objet petit a*, positioned on the opposite extradiegetic side of screen as the viewer's transcendental look. In a simplification of the Lacanian model, however, Silverman reduces the Other's gaze to that of the camera as an apparatus providing socially constructed fictions for the spectator by "photo-graphing" her through a screen of cultural mediations.⁵¹

What Silverman ignores, according to Copjec, is Lacan's insistence on the purely fantasmatic status of the Other's gaze, the fact that its place cannot be occupied by any determinate look, for which reason the subject's encounter with it always remains a failed one.⁵² To put it differently, the Lacanian big Other doesn't *exist*: the object of its desire (of the subject's desire mediated by the symbolic order) is not some culturally specific representation on the screen but the subject herself as void, as a real-impossible kernel the concealment of which is the condition of possibility for any field of representation to emerge. Lacan's point, however, is *not* that the real gaze can never be represented; he claims, on the contrary, that this gaze as *objet a*, as the fantasmatic objectal stand-in for the subject, has to be inscribed into the "picture" as its stain, as its structurally necessary point of symptomatic torsion. This picture, which for Lacan refers to the fantasmatic *mise-en-scene* organizing the Other's desire for the subject, disintegrates the moment its stain becomes fully distinguishable.⁵³ In film theory the first to take into account

⁵⁰ For an illustration of the identity political turn in spectatorship theory see Judith Mayne, "Paradoxes of Spectatorship," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. L. Williams (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 155-183., and Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 123-66.

⁵¹ Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 195-229.

⁵² Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2002), 209.

⁵³ Lacan, "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*," 85-89.

this *real* dimension of the Lacanian gaze was Jacqueline Rose who used it to dismantle the doxa about the voyeur's control over his object.⁵⁴ But it took the intervention of two Slovenian philosophers, Joan Copjec and Slavoj Žižek, to change psychoanalytic film theory's preoccupation with the imaginary and the symbolic towards the direction of the real. Although their theories are not incompatible, they nonetheless emphasize different consequences of Lacan's *Seminar XI*. Copjec elaborates on Lacan's claim that the gaze of the big Other is blind in order to explore the affect of shame, defining it as the paradoxical experience of one's visibility accompanied by the awareness that "there is no external Other who sees."⁵⁵ A similar theoretical direction is taken by Hugh Manon in his discussion of the subject's anxiety ridden exposure to a nonexistent gaze in Michael Haneke's *Caché*.⁵⁶ On the other hand, Žižek is interested in how the real gaze enters the frame of the screen in the form of a stain that distorts it, as in the famous scene from Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) where the animals all of a sudden materialize from behind of a God's view shot of Bodega Bay.⁵⁷

The most systematic exploration to date of the sublime disruptions of the object gaze in cinema is offered in Todd McGowan's *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*, which, however, risks the fetishization of cinema's non-signifying real as a source of post-ideological cinephilia, not unlike some contemporary approaches to film phenomenology and/or Deleuzian film philosophy.⁵⁸ Critiquing classical apparatus theory he claims that "[t]he gaze triggers the subject's desire because it appears to hold the key not to the subject's achievement of self-

⁵⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (New York: Verso, 1986), 194.

⁵⁵ Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman*, 127.

⁵⁶ Hugh S. Manon, "Comment ça, rien?: Screening the Gaze in *Caché*," in *On Michael Haneke*, ed. B. Price and J. D. Rhodes (Wayne State University Press, 2010), 105-27.

⁵⁷ Slavoj Žižek, "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large," in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan: (but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1992), 237.

⁵⁸ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993); Anna Powell, *Deleuze and Altered States* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Laura M. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000)

completion or wholeness but to the disappearance of self in the experience of enjoyment.”⁵⁹ Accordingly, he proposes that “psychoanalytic film theory should pave the way to a more intense submission to the dictates of this experience in order to facilitate an encounter with the gaze.”⁶⁰ By contrast, Fabio Vighi warns against the temptation of theorizing the Lacanian real as the alternative to symbolic closure and ideological meaning: “the crucial psychoanalytic insight resides in the [...] operation of bringing the Real at the level of suture, showing that the Real is operative precisely in the field from which it is supposedly excluded.”⁶¹ In his attempt to move away from psychoanalytic film theory’s preoccupation with the Althusserian imaginary, what McGowan, contrary to Vighi, ignores is Žižek’s insight about the ideological function of (“post-ideological”) enjoyment, how the real as *objet petit a* can serve as “the sublime object of ideology.”⁶² *The Usual Suspects* is a case in point insofar as its finale delivers the viewer an encounter with the real gaze in the precise Lacanian sense. We learn that Verbal randomly used signifiers from his interrogator’s office—e.g. newspaper clippings attached to the wall in front of him or the brand name displayed at the bottom of his coffee mug—to embellish his fake Keyser Söze narrative. Throughout the film, these elements worked as stains on his web of deception; they had to remain invisible in order for the detective and the viewer to buy the story about Söze. The point, however, is that even though we, along with the policeman, discover their real function after Verbal’s release, not only does this not hurt the protagonist’s (and the film’s) scheme, it is in fact a necessary condition for his fetishization as a white male criminal

⁵⁹ Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶¹ Fabio Vighi, *Traumatic Encounters in Italian Film: Locating the Unconscious* (Portland: Intellect, 2006), 31. See also Vighi’s useful formula for Lacanian film theory: “The problematic distance between myself and the object-film (on account of which spectatorship theories exist) is coincidental not only with the gap or dislocation within my own subjectivity (due to the split introduced by the unconscious), but also with the internal deficit of film itself, its impossibility, as it were, to fully coincide with itself.” Fabio Vighi, *Critical Theory and Film: Rethinking Ideology through Film Noir* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 50.

⁶² See Žižek, *The Sublime Object*

mastermind. To put it differently, what cynical neo-noirs like *The Usual Suspects* confront us with is that classical psychoanalytic film theory's structuralist notion that the cinematic apparatus is a "bachelor machine"⁶³ rigged to reproduce patriarchal ideology may have been abandoned a little too hastily in the 90s, and the novel approach that bypasses old forms of ideology critique through the post-structuralist register of the *real* eventually has to face "die ganze alte Scheiße," the same old ideological problems as its predecessors.⁶⁴

The question is then how to develop an apparatus theory that doesn't assume that the viewer's encounter with the real gaze, disruptive though it may be of a film's symbolic order, is somehow inherently progressive politically (or even worse: entirely apolitical), while it also doesn't regress into what Copjec called the paranoid theory of the cinema as an "influencing machine,"⁶⁵ an ideological apparatus hermetically sealed by the unsuspecting viewer manipulated into submission. I suggest doing this by turning to the late Lacan's concept of sexual difference, which until now has been remarkably ignored by psychoanalytic theories of the cinematic apparatus.⁶⁶ The novelty of his approach in *Seminar XX* is that,⁶⁷ contrary to his own earlier work,⁶⁸ he considers femininity not as the unrepresentable, *real* excess of the social symbolic order, the stand-in for *objet a* as the object-cause of masculine desire, but as an alternative form of totalizing the symbolic without isolating and separating the sublime object of

⁶³ See Penley, *Bachelor Machines*

⁶⁴ The expression comes from Marx, and its literal translation would be "all the old crap," by which Marx refers to the pre-French revolutionary *ancien regime*. In Marxist theory the term is used to discredit liberal ideologies of post-politics that disavow class warfare for some idealist notion of social consensus. See Karl Marx, *Marx: Early Political Writings*, trans. J. O'Malley and R. A. Davis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 133.

⁶⁵ Copjec, "Influencing Machine"

⁶⁶ And vice versa: for instance, in his book on *Sexual Difference in Italian Cinema* Fabio Vighi dismisses apparatus theories claiming that "they place excessive emphasis on the audience's imaginary identification, thus neglecting what from a Lacanian perspective is the key issue, i.e. the analysis of how film masters its own symbolic efficacy, [...] how the film itself is constantly "at war" with the Real surplus it produces." Fabio Vighi, *Sexual Difference in Italian Cinema: The Curse of Enjoyment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

⁶⁷ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, trans. B. Fink (New York, W.W. Norton, 1998)

⁶⁸ Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 575-85.

the real. While the masculine order of language, he argues, reaches illusory completeness insofar as one exceptional element (*objet a*) is excluded (primordially repressed) from it, in its feminine use the symbolic has no such exception and as a result is “not whole.”⁶⁹ Crucially, Lacan stresses, whether one comes to be “sexuated” as a man or as a woman is ultimately a matter of choice.⁷⁰ In other words, we’re not talking here about socially constructed gender, nor biological sex, but a third category that overdetermines their binarisms through an existential decision. Accordingly, taking into account Lacan’s formulas of sexuation doesn’t mean that the theory of the cinematic apparatus should ignore representations of sexual difference on screen, only that they have to be supplemented with an analysis of sexual difference *of* the screen itself, of the viewer’s relationship to its potential for antagonistic totalizations, that is, his or her participation in contradictory regimes of symbolic power.

I will argue that the film noir meta-genre, by suspending the movement-image of the classical Hollywood narrative and its patriarchal ideological support, offers a unique meta-cinematic insight into the indeterminacy at the core of the cinematic apparatus, the existential choice of sexual difference faced by the viewer in a zone of indistinction between the feminine and the masculine logic of film language. Furthermore, noir also shows that the political stakes of this indeterminacy go beyond matters of gender and sexuality, that the decision of sexuation is the knot that holds together capitalism’s biopolitically grounded apparatuses of production. This is why my analysis of the cinematic apparatus will incorporate the Foucault inspired theories of biopower put forward by Roberto Esposito and Giorgio Agamben, as well as Marx’s labour theory of value and its recent updates by the *Wertkritik* school of German Marxism and post-autonomist Italian philosophers like Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato, Franco

⁶⁹ Lacan, *Encore*, 7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

Berardi, or Christian Marazzi. The common feature of these theories is that they point at the convergence in today's late capitalist society between the apparatuses administering life and the ones that manage labour power—a shift towards a new, totalitarian logic of biopolitical production that has various names: “post-Fordism,”⁷¹ “neoliberalism,”⁷² “the new spirit of capitalism,”⁷³ “the society of control,”⁷⁴ “biocapitalism,”⁷⁵ “flexible accumulation,”⁷⁶ “cognitive capitalism,”⁷⁷ “24/7 capitalism”⁷⁸ or “Empire.”⁷⁹ In film studies, the influence of these theories led some (mostly Deleuzian) scholars to conceptualize the new modalities of cinema in the digital age of global, networked capital as the expression of human life's breaking with its former boundaries and becoming post-human in a “life-image,”⁸⁰ “neuro-image,”⁸¹ “rhythm-image,”⁸² or “desiring-image.”⁸³ While drawing on these Deleuzian trends in contemporary film-philosophy, this dissertation remains skeptical of their vitalist tendencies that celebrate these new aesthetic forms for their fluidity, openness, multiplicity, and difference without considering that such qualities are the *norms* of neoliberal ideology today. The deadlock of the vitalist position is visible in Steven Shaviro's proposal of an “absolute identification” with capital for the reason

⁷¹ See Ash Amin, *Post-fordism: A Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1994)

⁷² Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*

⁷³ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. G. Elliott (New York: Verso, 2005)

⁷⁴ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter, 1992): 3-7.

⁷⁵ Andrea Fumagalli and Cristina Morini, “Life Put to Work: Towards a Life Theory of Value,” *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 10, no. 3-4 (2010): 234-52.

⁷⁶ David Harvey, “Flexible Accumulation Through Urbanization: Reflections on ‘Post-Modernism’ in the American City,” *Antipode* 19, no. 3 (1987): 260-87.

⁷⁷ Yann Moulier Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism* (Malden: Polity Press, 2011)

⁷⁸ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013)

⁷⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001)

⁸⁰ Cesare Casarino, “Three Theses on the Life-Image (Deleuze, Cinema, Biopolitics),” in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media*, ed. R. Khalip and R. Mitchell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 156-68.

⁸¹ Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012)

⁸² Steven Shaviro, “The Rhythm-Image,” (paper presented the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, Fairmont Queen Elizabeth Hotel, Montreal, QC, March 27, 2015)

⁸³ Nick Davis, *The Desiring Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)

that “the only thing that remains ‘transgressive’ today is capital itself”—⁸⁴ a position termed accelerationist by Benjamin Noys.⁸⁵ By adding the Lacanian framework of sexual difference to the biocapitalist theories of the apparatus, I aim to avoid the vitalist trap implying that totalitarian capitalism has no alternative.

Besides Lacanian psychoanalysis, my second, similarly dualistic master theory will be the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben. In his Foucauldian understanding an apparatus is “anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living beings”—and thereby produce subjects.⁸⁶ The purpose of apparatuses, he argues, is to isolate humanity’s common social-linguistic substance into a separate, “sacred” sphere where its free use is prohibited. After Walter Benjamin, he considers capitalism to be a religious machine that introduces a totalitarian logic of the sacred separation through commodification:

[T]here is now a Single, multiform, ceaseless process of separation that assails every thing, every place, every human activity in order to divide it from itself. [...] In the commodity, separation inheres in the very form of the object, which splits into use-value and exchange value and is transformed into an ungraspable fetish. The same is true for everything that is done, produced, or experienced even the human body, even sexuality, even language. They are now divided from themselves and placed in a separate sphere that no longer defines any substantial division and where all use becomes and remains impossible. This sphere is consumption. If, as has been suggested, we use the term

⁸⁴ Steven Shavero, “Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, *Boarding Gate* and *Southland Tales*,” *Film-Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2010): 31-32.

⁸⁵ Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014)

⁸⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. D. Kishik and S. Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.

‘spectacle’ for the extreme phase of capitalism in which we are now living, in which everything is exhibited in its separation from itself, then spectacle and consumption are the two sides of a single impossibility of using. What cannot be used is, as such, given over to consumption or to spectacular exhibition.⁸⁷

While consecration once installed bodies and objects into states of exception for limited, religious use, the apparatuses of global capitalism make the logic of sacred exception into a rule.

Not only does Agamben’s regime of the capitalist sacred where things become “ungraspable fetishes” resemble what Lacan calls the phallic-masculine logic of language isolating *objet a* in a separate sphere of the real, in a Lacanian manner he sees the alternative in a counter-apparatus he calls profanation that would restore to common use what has been captured in the sacred.⁸⁸ Counter-apparatuses, he maintains, are possible not because they are external to the capitalist machine, but because all apparatuses are fundamentally indeterminate, which is why “it is impossible for the subject of an apparatus to use it ‘in the right way.’”⁸⁹ For this reason the cinematic apparatus for Agamben is not simply, as Deleuzian theorist Jonathan Beller claims, the “hyper development of the commodity logic,”⁹⁰ “a technology for increasing the eloquence (efficiency) of capital through the optical and the visual,”⁹¹ but *both* the means of capital’s becoming image in the society of the spectacle, *and* a potential site of the common. He sums up this ambiguity when he suggests that “[i]n the cinema, a society that has lost its [common] gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss.”⁹² I will argue

⁸⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. J. Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 81-82.

⁸⁸ Agamben, *What is an Apparatus*, 19.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁰ Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2006), 9.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁹² See Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), 53.

that this is the ambiguity that film noir presents to the viewer as a choice between a sacred and a profane use of cinema's apparatus, a decision between what I will call sovereign-image and utopian gesture.

1.3 A Dialectical Method

By taking cinema to be a contradictory apparatus, this dissertation performs a *dialectical* critique of its noir suture in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, following Fredric Jameson's methodological principles of historicization and totalization. In his *Political Unconscious* Jameson considers the Lacanian registers of the symbolic, imaginary, and real as three layers of ideologies that should be totalized, studied together to understand how texts participate in historically specific discourses of power in relation to the capitalist mode of production.⁹³ I will expand on this tripartite notion of the ideological apparatus by insisting that the *real* anchoring it is the constitutive exception Lacan associated with the masculine use of language and what Agamben saw as the absent (sacred) center of sovereign biopower.⁹⁴ Asserting the isomorphy between their theories, I will offer a Lacanian reading of Agamben, pairing his category of bare or sacred life (*zoe*) with the real of the Lacanian enjoyment, communal life (*bios*) with the imaginary, and what Agamben calls glory with Lacan's symbolic. Furthermore, I will apply a similar conceptual map to the Marxian theory of labour, to Esposito's theory of immunization, and Rick Altman's notion of film genre. I also agree with Jameson that in the postmodern, post-

⁹³ See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Routledge, 1983)

⁹⁴ In Jameson's Althusser inspired model, the real that determines ideology in the last instance is history as an open process resisting rational appropriation. History, he suggests, is "what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its 'ruses' turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention." *Ibid.*, 88. History in the Jamesonian sense is therefore not an element in what I called the sovereign-masculine ideological apparatus but rather a synonym for the Lacanian sexual difference or the Agambenian antagonism between the sacred and profane uses of apparatuses that point beyond ideology. The difference between my approach and Jameson's is that he is not ready to accept a possible exit from ideological thinking in the way that my use of the feminine logic of the symbolic or the profane use of sovereign apparatuses implies.

historical context totalization becomes an interpretative technique that reads texts as cognitive maps of the global capitalist situation, as attempts at its aesthetic representation and historicization so that the present can appear as contingent, liable to change.⁹⁵ Totalizing here doesn't mean yearning for the imaginary completeness often critiqued by poststructuralists but, as Jameson and Žižek both insist, the inclusion into a conceptually total field a series of antagonisms, inconsistencies, symptoms, and unrealized possibilities. As Žižek argues, "the Hegelian totality is not merely the totality of the actual content; it includes the immanent possibilities of the existing constellation. To 'grasp a totality' one should include its possibilities; to grasp the truth of what there is, one should include its failure, what might have happened but was missed."⁹⁶ It is possible, he maintains, to "[make] a system' out of the very series of failed totalizations, to enchain them in a rational way, to discern the strange 'logic' that regulates the process by means of which the breakdown of a totalization itself begets another totalization."⁹⁷

This dissertation maps film noir's failed totalizations of the cinematic apparatus in two parts. The first two chapters deal with the pre-history of noir's neoliberal cynicism, tracking how the contradictions of the classical noir form blow up into a series of dialectical reversals and failed attempts at aesthetic reconciliation. The master narrative organizing this history will be the crisis of the American Empire discussed by Giovanni Arrighi in *The Long Twentieth Century*.⁹⁸ Arrighi claims that the US had risen to imperial power after eliminating its rivals in the Second World War, enjoying the benefits of the post-war economic boom until in the early 70s it faced a "signal crisis" of its dominant (Fordist) regime of capital accumulation. This meant that in order

⁹⁵ See Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of the Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 347-60.

⁹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 285.

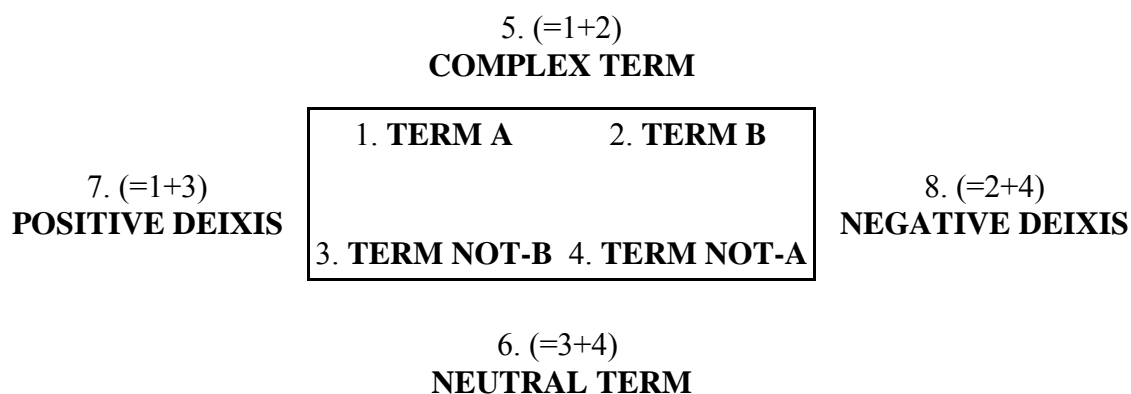
⁹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (New York: Verso, 2008), 99.

⁹⁸ Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (New York: Verso, 2010)

to expand further, it had to increasingly rely on finance capital and as a consequence its imperial infrastructure became more and more deterritorialized. The gold standard was abandoned, the welfare state gradually dismantled, the banking system deregulated, and global neoliberal institutions like the World Bank or the IMF were introduced to re-colonize the world through the instrument of debt. For Arrighi, such financial overexpansion cannot but lead to a “terminal crisis” of an empire—a prediction that may have come true with the 2008 collapse of the US economy from which it hasn’t recovered ever since. I will argue that there are four stages in American film noir’s development corresponding to specific moments in the rise and fall of the US Empire. If classical noir set the biopolitical grounds of the post-war nation state, what is commonly referred to as revisionist noir in the 60s and 70s is a reflection on the empire’s signal crisis. This crisis is temporarily resolved in Reagan-era neo-noirs that return to the memory of the classical period with postmodern nostalgia. Finally, the genre’s full-blown nihilism erupts in the mid-90s with the contemporary cynical cycle corresponding to the terminal decline of the US superseded by a deterritorialized Empire of global capital.

The second, main part of the dissertation focuses on this final period, offering a synchronic map of cynical neo-noir by close reading the films of four noir auteurs who are positioned as internal outsiders (or external insiders) to Hollywood, embodying different faces of the same hybrid hegemony of the North Atlantic white heterosexual male *bios* that, as Donald Trump’s recent victory indicates, holds on firmly to its power in the era of imperial decline. I will draw on the author structuralist method developed by Peter Wollen in focusing on how the directors’ work deals with the *bios* – *zoe* binary, more specifically its cynical collapse that constructs the neoliberal monad as a one member productive community who nonetheless

remains aligned to the dominant body politic of the west.⁹⁹ As Agamben stresses, “the author [...] is not something that can be directly attained as a substantial reality present in some place; on the contrary, it is what results from the encounter and from the hand-to-hand confrontation with the apparatuses in which it has been put - and has put itself - into play.”¹⁰⁰ Since my overarching argument is that the notion of the neoliberal apparatus producing an identity between *bios* and *zoe* is nothing but the ideology for our “post-ideological” era, the directors’ authorship in my analysis will ultimately correspond to their idiosyncratic failure to get caught up in cynicism’s post-ideological apparatus “in the right way,” leading to their unique form of regression into the phallic-sovereign logic of sacred separation. Expanding on Wollen’s method, I will consider the structural interconnectedness of the four filmmakers’ author-functions to one another, how their seemingly individual oeuvres are part of a series of failed totalizations that can be pushed to the point of logical exhaustion. This is what I hope to achieve by using the totalizing scheme of the semiotic square developed by A. J. Greimas and Francois Rastier in its simplest version that maps the logical outcomes of combining (“+”) two opposed terms (A and B) and their negations (NOT-A and NOT-B) into four analytical classes in the following manner (Figure 2):¹⁰¹



⁹⁹ Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 74-115.

¹⁰⁰ Agamben, *Profanations*, 72.

¹⁰¹ The sample semiotic square is taken from Louis Hébert, “The Semiotic Square,” *Signo: Theoretical Semiotics on the Web*, accessed January 19, 2017, <http://www.signosemio.com/greimas/semiotic-square.asp>.

Figure 2.

In our case, a simple semiotic square mapping four logical combinations of *bios* and *zoe* through the films of four filmmakers will look like this (Figure 3):

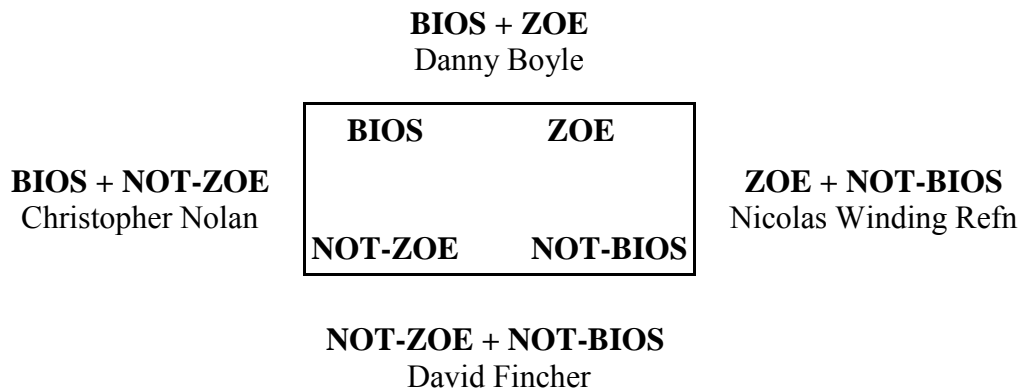


Figure 3.

To simplify, in each case the affirmed term or terms betray a hidden bias of the synthesis, the fetishization of one or more particular ideological content(s). We pass through the semiotic square when we get to the place of double negation (occupied here by David Fincher), where the attempted synthesis reveals its inherent contradiction and thereby exhausts its unconscious ideological appeal.

1.4 Chapter Breakdown

The first chapter serves as an introduction to the concept of film noir: it surveys the literature on and key examples of classical noir, tackles the dilemma whether noir is a genre or not, and maps its relationship to modern apparatuses of cinema, biopower, abstract labour, and

sexual difference. My main claim is that film noir is a sovereign exception to Hollywood cinema, a meta-genre that sutures together the classical Hollywood narrative in a moment of crisis when traditional generic discourses fail to do so. Reading Rick Altman's theory of film genre through a biopolitical lens, I suggest that genres are imagined communities that *immunize* themselves through partial exemption from the abstract universal demands of cultural norms (like those of the Hollywood Production Code), offering pleasurable scripts of shared transgression available to anyone willing to play the given genre game. Film noir, by contrast, emerges out of an *autoimmune* crisis of generic communities in which the immunizing tendency to suspend one's obligation to the symbolic law in the name of enjoyment starts to undermine generic codes of belonging as well, leaving the subject alone with his idiosyncratic form of life he is unable to share with anyone. This, I argue, is what leads to noir's all pervasive death drive responsible for bringing the films' Oedipalized movement-image to a halt. I further claim that noir's death drive is not in and of itself a subversive category but a device placing the protagonists as well as the viewer in a zone of indistinction between two, masculine-sovereign and feminine-utopian uses of the symbolic order. Classical noir both brings this existential choice to the surface and disavows it through its fatalistic sovereign-image that conjures up white heterosexual masculinity as a rigid biopolitical body, belonging to which is revealed to be the real source of life's value in the multitude of Hollywood genres inflicted by noir. Through a detailed discussion of Lacan's theory of feminine *jouissance*, Agamben's notion of gesture, and Jameson's concept of utopia, I also draw the contours of a non-sovereign use of film noir in the second half of the chapter introducing snow noir as the counter-apparatus to noir's sovereign-image.

Chapter 2 subsequently deals with the American film noir of the post-classical era, arguing for its historicization in three periods. The first, roughly coinciding with what noir

canons call the era of modernist genre revisionism (1962-1975), is examined for its counter-sovereign apparatus, what I call the subtraction-image deconstructing classical noir's fatalism. I suggest that such progressive rethinking of the noir form becomes possible through the crisis of America's territorial integrity due to its global capitalist deterritorialization that reframes the post-war masculine sovereign anchored to the nation state as a failure. The second stage of neo-noir, the chapter claims, starts with films like *Chinatown* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Body Heat* (1981) at the beginning of the postmodern era, and can be seen as a nostalgic return to classical noir's sovereign apparatus while also recognizing its irrevocable loss. My main point is that these films represent a compromise formation between two contradictory components of what solidifies in the 80s as the Reagan consensus, suturing together "feminine" neoliberal deterritorialization and "masculine" neoconservative reterritorialization in an aestheticized antinomy. Once the global status quo shifts, however, with the fall of the USSR after 1991, nostalgic neo-noir also disappears, giving way to a cynical paradigm in film noir reflecting the unchallenged unilateralism of the American Empire now imagining itself to be identical with the global apparatuses of neoliberal deterritorialization. The rise of cynicism in film noir corresponds to an anti-feminist backlash and a new fetishization of the white heterosexual male *bios* standing for the biopolitical inertia of Empire. I also examine the new cycle of snow noir films that starts in the mid-90s, arguing that despite their new traditionalist and post-feminist frame, they continue to have a potential for critical cognitive mapping.

Chapters 3 - 6 then move on to the discussion of individual filmmakers who represent different manifestations of noir's cynical paradigm today. Chapter 3 introduces the problem of neoliberal cynicism through the films of Danny Boyle, taking them as allegories for what Gilles Deleuze identified as the shift from disciplinary societies to societies of control, or what Hardt

and Negri saw as the transition from a territorially anchored imperialism to a deterritorialized Empire of global capital. Boyle's use of the noir form is examined in relation to the postmodern crisis of generic communities, highlighted in his autoimmune use of the smart film discourse framing shared irony as a dead end. I underline how his cynicism-images that stabilize this crisis are tied to digital cinema and new media aesthetics, commenting on a necessary evolution towards a global network society made up of self-reliant neoliberal monads.

Chapter 4 takes up the films of Christopher Nolan to show how cynical noirs continue to rely on a privileged white masculine *bios* as a condition of possibility for their neoliberal monadism. I discuss Nolan's use of the mind game film genre as a tool in his neoconservative interpretation of the postmodern cinematic apparatus in which a small group of viewers, who heroically embrace the truth-effect of the screen as the product of a lie, are opposed to the naive observers misreading the cinema as a machine of intersubjective truth. Through a close reading of his *Inception* (2010) I demonstrate how the construction of the cynic's interpassive "subject supposed to believe" through a fetishistic disavowal reproduces the masculine fantasy about Woman as *objet a*, while ignoring the utopian, counter-sovereign potential of the feminine subject. Furthermore, I suggest that Nolan's initial neoconservative position becomes even more pervasive in his later blockbusters that condone a corporate fascist patriarchy over the new democratic threats brought about by networked global capitalism and digital media, offering, at least on paper, to value everyone's bare life equally.

Chapter 5 focuses on the work of Nicolas Winding Refn, who proposes to solve the autoimmune crisis of film genres not by resurrecting classical Hollywood masculinity as their old-new anchoring point like Nolan does, but by aestheticizing its very disappearance. Instead of pathologizing the precarity and madness of the neoliberal individual pursuing the truth of his

isolated bare life, Refn deploys the language of slow cinema to underline how the cynic's self-erasure from his generic community is a neverending process. His films perform a Deleuzian schizo-analysis, fetishizing the masochistic self-sacrifice of their protagonists' fixed identity in front of neoliberal apparatuses of power ordering them to purify their bodies to the point of self-annihilation. Far from being the opposite of Nolan's glorification of the white masculine *bios*, I maintain that this procedure leads to the same result by different means, by valuing classical hegemonic masculinity through its inverted form as *biōs*.

Finally, Chapter 6 considers the possibility of cynical neo-noir's exhaustion in the films of David Fincher that in a double negation push the *bios* – *zoe* binary at their center to a contradiction without offering any resolution. Through the aesthetic of contradiction, I claim, these films are able to bring the utopian potential of the cinema to the surface, decreating the sovereign-image of neoliberal cynicism to give way to the existential choice of sexuation. I discuss these utopian aspects by introducing Agamben's notion of messianic time, Sloterdijk's idea of co-immunism, and Bracha Ettinger's concept of the matrixial borderspace—all of which aim at an alternative, "feminine" totalization of the symbolic order.

2 Between Sovereign-Image and Utopian Gesture: The Use and Abuse of Cinema's Inoperativity in Film Noir

2.1 Hollywood's Sovereign Exception: Film Noir as a Masculine Biopolitical Apparatus

2.1.1 The Indeterminacy of Film Noir as Sexual Difference

It is now commonplace to associate film noir's emergence in the 1940s with Hollywood's perverse preoccupation with the dark underside of American modernity hitherto repressed from the consciousness of mainstream audiences. By revelling in the anxieties and contradictions behind the façade of the official ideologies of capitalist progress and puritan conformism, these films turned the collective dream about a thriving American nation into a nightmare of detached and disaffected anti-heroes driven by self-destructive sexual and criminal obsessions.¹ At the same time, reading the noir phenomenon as a vaguely defined sickness unto death of modernity made its status within critical and academic discourse a prime example of what Hungarians call a veterinarian's horse, the figure illustrating all the possible illnesses the animal can have. Framing an object this way makes proper diagnosis impossible because its ontological status becomes overdetermined by the multitude of contradictory symptoms simultaneously projected on it. Perhaps this is why seven decades after the term film noir was first used by Nino Frank in 1946,² there is still no consensus within the discipline of film studies whether it designates a cinematic

¹ The first systematic study of film noir that set up this interpretative frame was Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941-1953*, trans. P. Hammond (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2002).

² Nino Frank, "The Crime Adventure Story: A New Kind of Detective Film," trans. R. Barton Palmer, in *Perspectives on Film Noir*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), 21-24.; As Charles O'Brien demonstrated, there are actually earlier uses of the term for French films before Frank's article. See Charles O'Brien, "Film Noir in France: Before the Liberation." *Iris* 21 (1996): 7-20.

genre on its own or it's just a category invented by French critics to retroactively make sense of Hollywood's change of tone towards darker, more nihilistic and violent films during and after the Second World War.³ The non-generic approach originated with Paul Schrader, who suggested that noir had been a set of stylistic traits such as high contrast lighting, unbalanced compositions, flashbacks, and the dominance of night scenes that, to a different degree, appeared in most American films regardless of genre in the 40s and 50s, expressing a sense of alienation, loss, and hopelessness—what Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton called the “malaise” of the war and postwar era.⁴ Yet, as many have pointed out, the implications of this zeitgeist-theory of noir are too strong and certainly can be challenged by empirical evidence: noir style films were almost completely missing from popular box office hits of the 40s and 50s that continued to radiate patriotic optimism.⁵ Other theorists like Thomas Schatz,⁶ Frank Krutnik,⁷ Elizabeth Cowie,⁸ or Steve Neale⁹ argued against noir's generic status without turning it into a period style. For them the corpus of films canonized later by critics as noir¹⁰ simply lacked a coherent set of discursive expectations and narrative conventions that characterize a genre proper. Some of them suggested instead the splitting up of the canon into more clearly identifiable clusters

³ As Marc Vernet puts it, “[a]s an object or corpus of films, film noir does not belong to the history of cinema; it belongs as a notion to the history of film criticism, or, if one prefers, to the history of those who wanted to love the American cinema even in its middling production and to form an image of it.” Marc Vernet, “Film Noir on the Edge of Doom,” in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. J. Copjec (New York: Verso, 1993), 26.

⁴ Paul Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir,” in *Perspectives on Film Noir*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), 99-108., and Borde and Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir*

⁵ See Richard Maltby, “‘Film Noir’: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text,” *Journal of American Studies* 18, no. 1 (1984): 49-71., and Mike Chopra-Gant, *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America: Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 1-26.

⁶ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981), 111-50.

⁷ Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (New York, Routledge, 1991)

⁸ Elizabeth Cowie, “Film Noir and Women,” in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1993), 121-67.

⁹ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 142-68.

¹⁰ See Alan Silver and Elizabeth Ward, *Film Noir: The Encyclopedia* (New York: Overlook Books, 2010)

such as the “hardboiled detective film,”¹¹ the “tough suspense thriller,”¹² or the “middle class murder narrative”¹³ while others proposed to reserve the generic designation of noir only for its post-classical, more self-conscious recurrences, usually referred to as neo-noir.¹⁴

In face of these criticisms, those who wanted to defend the concept of noir as a genre had to account for its diffuse nature—a challenge first taken up by James Damico who isolated, to his mind, the lowest common denominator of noir plots which, despite its diverse setting and capacity to attach itself to other genres, he saw as the recurring essence of the genre: a *femme fatale* luring a fallible male protagonist into violent crime and eventual self-ruin.¹⁵ It was clear, however, that even such minimal description fit only a small percentage of a much larger set of films marked by the noir style.¹⁶ To avoid this problem, scholars like J. P. Telotte drew a more abstract map of noir’s characteristic narrative structure, seeing the genre as the negative of classical Hollywood cinema, one that exposes the fragility of its normative constructions and thereby forms a meta-discourse within Hollywood, an immanent critique of the genre system as a whole. The unconventional narrative devices of noir that support this argument include flashbacks that break the linear progression of the often already convoluted plot, unclear character motives, voice-overs that draw attention to the cinematic artifice, a dreamlike

¹¹ Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 111-50.

¹² Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, 126-38.

¹³ Raymond Durgnat, “Paint it Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir,” in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. A. Silver and J. Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 46.

¹⁴ Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 165.

¹⁵ “Either because he is fated to do so by chance, or because he has been hired for a job specifically associated with her, a man whose experience of life has left him sanguine and often bitter meets a non-innocent woman of similar outlook to whom he is sexually and fatally attracted. Through this attraction, either because the woman induces him to it or because it is the natural result of their relationship, the man comes to cheat, attempt to murder, or actually murder a second a man to whom the woman is unhappily or unwillingly attached (generally he is her husband or lover), an act which often leads to the woman’s betrayal of the protagonist, but which in any event brings about the sometimes metaphoric, but usually literal destruction of the woman, the man to whom she is attached, and frequently the protagonist himself.” James Damico, “Film Noir: A Modest Proposal,” in *Perspectives on Film Noir*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), 137.

¹⁶ See Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), and Helen Hanson, *Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007)

subjectivism that challenges the false objectivity of the camera, the use of documentary techniques mixing reality and fiction, sexual innuendos and an overall sense of moral ambiguity reflecting the crisis of the heterosexual couple and the bourgeois family that is never fully resolved by the occasional tacked on happy ending.¹⁷ It is for these features that some theorists like James Naremore or Andras Balint Kovacs placed film noir within the historical trajectory of modernism, either by claiming that the genre “can be explained in terms of a tense, contradictory assimilation of high modernism into the American culture industry,”¹⁸ or by identifying film noir’s contradictory form—its synthesis between high and mass culture, its unorthodox “modernist” tendencies that are nonetheless bound by the Hays Code—as a transitory phenomenon between classical (Hollywood) cinema and modern art cinema proper that emerged later in the 50s.¹⁹

Once film noir thereby becomes the synonym for a Hollywood version of modernism, however, it can be referred to as a genre, much like modernism itself, only in a very loose sense of a Wittgensteinian language game of which, Naremore stressed, “we can never establish clear boundaries and uniform traits.”²⁰ Indeed, as Steffen Hantke observes, contemporary scholarship “has begun to coalesce around the idea that, in a sense, there never was such a thing as film noir.”²¹ As Ben Tyrer puts it, “film noir doesn’t exist;” as a master signifier it fails to meaningfully totalize a group of films, designating rather an incomplete set which can never be closed with the addition of a definitive element. As such, he argues, the noir discourse

¹⁷ J. P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989)

¹⁸ James Naremore, *More Than a Night: Film Noir and Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 7.

¹⁹ Andras Balint Kovacs, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 246-47.

²⁰ Naremore, *More Than a Night*, 6.

²¹ Steffen Hantke, “Boundary Crossing and the Construction of Cinematic Genre: Film Noir as 'Deferred Action,'" *Kinema* (Fall 2004), accessed Feb 20, 2016, <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=76&feature>.

exemplifies the radical openness of what Lacan called the feminine use of language that is antagonistic to the phallic-masculine one seeking closure and the setting of clear boundaries.²² Similarly, Jonathan Auerbach sees “film noir less as a bounded genre than a ‘meta-genre’--a threshold concept, or better yet, a concept or mode that tests the very permeability and limits of borders.”²³

Should we then understand noir as a “feminine” tendency that inflects other genres—or indeed the genre system as such—negatively, undermining their “masculine” discursive identity while also creating, as Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo suggest, anxiety about the “arbitrary and blurred borders of race, sex, and nationality”?²⁴ And, to go further, does this make film noir politically progressive, subversive of Hollywood’s capitalo-patriarchal ideology that critics like Robin Wood saw as the promotion of bourgeois values of entrepreneurship, property ownership, heterosexual family and the dominance of men?²⁵ As the next section will show, scholars have been divided on this issue from the very beginning, and the consensus seems to be that noir’s subversive tendencies are themselves inconsistent, opening up contradictory, what I will call feminine-utopian and masculine-fatalistic directions, lines of flight from the ideological status quo as well as feedback loops that perpetuate it. My endeavour here is to offer a totalizing framework explaining these antagonistic trajectories in relation to cinema’s role in modern apparatuses of biopower.

²² Ben Tyrer, “Film Noir Doesn’t Exist: A Lacanian Topology,” in *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, ed. D. Henderson (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 127-41.

²³ Jonathan Auerbach, “Noir Citizenship: Anthony Mann’s ‘Border Incident,’” *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 4 (2008): 116.

²⁴ Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, *Noir Anxiety* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2003), xv.; On noir as an inflection of genres see Elizabeth Cowie, “Film Noir and Women,” in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1993), 129.

²⁵ Robin Wood, “Ideology, Genre, Auteur,” *Film Comment* 13, no. 1 (1977): 46-51.

2.1.2 Subversion or Perversion? Film Noir and the Death Drive

There are many modern precursors to film noir's death driven gender dynamics, such as German Expressionist and French Poetic Realist films or hard-boiled detective novels from the 20s and 30s,²⁶ not to mention the rich history of *femme fatale* representations in 19th century gothic novels, operas, Romantic paintings, etc. The unique historical conditions, however, that led to Hollywood's own "noir anxiety"²⁷ about the boundaries of traditional gender roles were made possible by the Second World War, during which a large part of the female population in the US had to enter the workforce to fill in for the men fighting overseas. As a result, after the war the returning GIs were faced with a double loss; not only did they have to abandon the space of wartime male bonding, but their formerly homosocial workplace back home also lost its phallic status, i.e. its clear separation from the feminine household. As life returned to "normal," a large number of women were eventually fired from their jobs, and the *femme fatale*, the sexualized threat of autonomous feminine labour power also gradually disappeared from film noir.²⁸

What is less often noted is that at the core of noir is therefore a conflict inherent in the capitalist mode of production that today's *Wertkritik* (value-critical) school of Marxism refers to as value dissociation. In Marx's theory the source of a commodity's value is the amount of labour time socially necessary to produce it, and capitalism is nothing but an apparatus that organizes the social totality by turning all human endeavours into units of abstract labour to be measured, collected, sold, and consumed—feeding ever expanding cycles of production and

²⁶ Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (New York: Longman, 2002), 6-19.

²⁷ Oliver and Trigo, *Noir Anxiety*

²⁸ Jack Boozer, "The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition," *Journal of Film and Video* 51, no. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 1999/2000): 23.

capital accumulation. Yet, as Marx famously demonstrated, the capitalist market also obfuscates the real source of the commodity's value while relying on it in practice:

Men do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do not know it, nevertheless they do it. Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language.²⁹

The becoming hieroglyphic of value is what Marx referred to as commodity fetishism, attributing a magical-transcendental power to commodities outside the real process of value producing labour. The value-critical reading of Marx supplements this basic model by arguing that capitalism at the same time devalues other activities, turning them into the gendered ideological opposite against which the idea of “commodity-producing patriarchy” is constructed.³⁰ As Roswitha Scholz puts it, “value dissociation means that capitalism contains a core of female determined reproductive activities and the affects, characteristics, and attitudes (emotionality, sensuality, and female or motherly caring) that are dissociated from value and abstract labor.”³¹ Devalued in this strict Marxian sense, of course, doesn't mean not being invested in libidinally.

²⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, trans. B. Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 92.

³⁰ Roswitha Scholz, “Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender without the Body (2009),” *Mediations* 27, no. 1-2 (2014), accessed December 20, 2016, <http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/patriarchy-and-commodity-society>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

In fact it is precisely because of its dissociation from productive labour that femininity in capitalism develops its magical-fetishistic character.³² For our historical context the logic of value-dissociation is important because it shows that capitalism's rationale of transforming all human life into wage labour to be exploited actually threatens to undermine the very basis of that exploitation: an effective organizing principle of abstract labour that is always already distorted by biopolitics. This is the contradiction the American society had to face during the Second World War when the use of a feminine labour force both strengthened and weakened the nation: it increased production but destabilized the masculine identity of the workers, which could be resolved through a re-fetishization of femininity, its exclusion from value producing activity.

As Krutnik perspicaciously observes, because these socioeconomic circumstances led to the crisis of America's Oedipal order (of commodity-producing patriarchy), for a brief period in this select group of Hollywood films heterosexual coupling itself was presented as a threat to the male hero's agency or even mental health, who preferred the company of other men or desexualized and/or masculinized women.³³ This makes the typical noir protagonist's desire for the *femme fatale* a perverse one in the psychoanalytic sense, often fixated, as Hugh Manon notes, on fetish objects the real function of which is to shield the man from the abyss of feminine sexual difference, blocking his access to the woman they merely pretend to pursue. Walter Neff, the murderous insurance salesman of *Double Indemnity* (1944), for instance, falls in love with the ankle bracelet of his female partner in crime, Phyllis Dietrichson, only for his already distorted desire for the woman to get further diverted toward his male colleague, Keyes, who is investigating them. Keyes is the obstacle to the heterosexual couple's official romantic quest and

³² See Roswitha Scholz, *Das Geschlecht des Kapitalismus: Feministische Theorie und die postmoderne Metamorphose des Patriarchats* (Bad Honnef: Horlemann-Edition Krisis, 2000); See also Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003)

³³ Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, 56-75.

therefore Walter's true homoerotic love object to whom he addresses the final intimate confession of his sins, using him as a fetish-filter against femininity. While in classical narratives, Manon argues, obstacles to heterosexual romance are what effectively make the male protagonist desire his partner (they are what Lacan called *objet a*, the object-cause of desire), noir's perverse hero gets fixated on the obstacle to prevent himself from getting what he seems to want.³⁴

This perverse libidinal economy, "the systematic halting of the forward progress of desire"³⁵ for a traditional (heteronormative) outcome leads to a spatiotemporal suspension unique to film noir, what Vivian Sobchack calls the chronotope of "lounge time" where the protagonists idle their life away in the non-spaces of hotel rooms, dining lounges, night clubs, gambling joints and cars, cut off from productive work and the safety of home alike, forever fixed in a transitory moment without arriving anywhere.³⁶ For Sianne Ngai, noir's characteristic "stretching" of narrative time produces moments of affective disorientation in the viewer, "a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about what one is feeling."³⁷ Noir thereby touches on what Giorgio Agamben terms the fundamental inoperativity of the human subject, the fact that her life, instead of unfolding (actualizing itself) according to a predetermined essence, is radically contingent, exists as pure potentiality.³⁸ Despite its attractiveness, scholars are nonetheless split about the critical merits of film noir's perverse universe, alternating between Sobchack's and Ngai's quasi utopian enthusiasm about its capacity to suspend normative affects and gender roles, and a more pessimistic claim that such space-time is more like an inherent

³⁴ Hugh S. Manon, "Some like It Cold: Fetishism in Billy Wilder's 'Double Indemnity'," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 4 (Summer, 2005): 18-43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁶ Vivian Sobchack, "Lounge Time Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. N. Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 129-69.

³⁷ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 14.

³⁸ See Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, trans. D Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 243-75.

transgression of classical Hollywood ideologies, a very much controlled and limited release of their excesses.³⁹

Regarding noir's weak masculinities, some like Richard Dyer suggest that film noir is characterized by a general anxiety over defining normative manhood, demonstrating the difficulty of presenting a positive masculine image, which in turn allows for embracing a series of non-normative and queer representations.⁴⁰ On the other hand, as Marc Vernet argues, there is a reactionary dimension to noir's excessive depiction of impotent men as victims, typically as petty bourgeois white Americans who are stuck in the doubly besieged position between the ominous, abstract forces of corporate capitalism beyond their control and a mass of lower social strata including women and racial minorities threatening to engulf them (the structuring absence for the creeping shadows of noir's empty streets has often been identified as the post-Jim Crow black population migrating to urban areas whose presence was foreclosed by Hollywood's white supremacist imaginary).⁴¹ Vernet sees the hardboiled detective film in particular as the manifestation of the conservative-populist ethos of the (white) masculine entrepreneurial spirit under the threat of extinction.⁴² Along these lines one can read Andrew Spicer's catalogue of male roles in classical noir—the male victim, the damaged man (maladjusted veteran or rouge cop), the private eye and the psychopathic criminal—as variations on the same petty bourgeois archetype (with the exception of the *homme fatale* who is rather a fetishistic stand-in for corporate capitalism).⁴³ Noir's ambiguous mixing of progressive and reactionary elements also divides critics when it comes to focusing on the masochistic, self-shattering dimension of the

³⁹ Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, 22.

⁴⁰ Richard Dyer, "Resistance Through Charisma: Rita Hayworth and Gilda," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. A. Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998)

⁴¹ See Eric Lott, "The Whiteness of Film Noir," *American Literary History* 9, no. 3 (1997): 542-66., and Julian Murphet, "Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious," *Screen* 39, no. 1 (1998): 22-35.

⁴² Vernet, "Film Noir on the Edge of Doom," 1-33.

⁴³ Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (New York: Longman, 2002), 84-105.

male protagonist's gender performance on the one hand,⁴⁴ or on its downright sadistic aspects on the other.⁴⁵ Karen Hollinger sums up this contradiction in her commentary on the film noir voiceover by maintaining that it may be true that "what central male characters seek to confess about their past is their femininity," but they do this from the position of phallic authority in order to *disavow* their feminine excess/lack which in turn is projected on the *femme fatale*.⁴⁶ The femininity of men in film noir, then, even if it indeed signals the temporary suspension of capitalist value-dissociation and thereby the paradigm of wage labour itself, still tends to be framed as an illness to be cured.

The glass is also half full and half empty when it comes to the subversive potential of the *femme fatale* herself. For some, like the contributors to the volume *Women in Film Noir*, she is a protofeminist subject playing an active part in the narrative instead of serving as a background for the male quest, which is precisely why she has to be destroyed or punished at the end.⁴⁷ As Janey Place insists, noir *femmes fatale* are "intelligent and powerful, and derive power not weakness from their sexuality."⁴⁸ She contrasts this deadly figure of the "spider woman" to another, more traditional (that is, devalued but fetishized) female role in film noir, what she calls the "nurturing woman," whose function is precisely to redeem the male protagonist from his dark obsessions with crime and the *femme fatale*, and pull him back into a productive bourgeois life, usually through marriage or a conventional romantic relationship. By operating under Screen

⁴⁴ Raymond and Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir*; Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*; Gaylyn Studlar, "'The Corpse on Reprieve': Film Noir's Cautionary Tales of 'Tough Guy' Masculinity," in *A Companion to Film Noir*, ed. Andrew Spicer and Helen Hanson (Malden: Blackwell, 2013), 369-87.

⁴⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, "Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?" *New German Critique* no. 89 (Spring - Summer, 2003), 105-11.; Robert Lang, "Looking for the 'Great Whatzit': Kiss Me Deadly and Film Noir," *Cinema Journal* 27, no 3 (1988): 32-44.; Christine Gledhill, "Klute 2: Feminism and Klute," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. A. Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), 112-28.

⁴⁶ Karen Hollinger, "Film Noir, Voice-Over, and the Femme Fatale," in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. A. Silver and J. Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 244-45.

⁴⁷ E. Ann Kaplan, "Introduction to 1978 Edition," in *Women in Film Noir*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), 15-35.

⁴⁸ Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. A. Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), 46.

theory's assumption that the ultimate ideological process in these films, the same way as for classical Hollywood cinema in general, is the development of the narrative towards an equilibrium and closure, these readings ignore the potentially no less ideological dimensions of film noir's perverse economy which was, to be sure, partially masked by Production Code regulations. It is Mary Ann Doane who formulates a Lacanian-feminist response to the authors of *Women in Film Noir* that takes into account the challenge of masculine perversion. According to her, one should resist reading the *femme fatale* as an autonomous figure since she is nothing but the embodiment of male castration anxiety, fear of sexual difference and feminism that finds its historical roots in the late 19th century's male loss of control over the self amidst the rapidly exploding, destabilizing forces of urban modernization (new mechanical technologies of production, bureaucratization, cinema, psychoanalysis, etc.).⁴⁹ The *femme fatale*, then, is not an independent agent but a symptom of modern masculinity in crisis, the amalgamation of various hostile apparatuses of capitalism that, from the traditional masculine perspective, can't but seem to be running amok, melting the solid ground of men's former lives into air (or abstract labour to be more precise). What one should add to Doane's analysis is that being transformed and exploited by the capitalist machine is only part of the reason for modern masculine anxiety; its other source, paradoxically, is the simultaneous fear of *not* being captured by the apparatuses of production and being devalued, i.e. feminized as a result.

A move towards unraveling this dialectic is Joan Copjec's and Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian account that complicates Doane's thesis about modernity as the crisis of the traditional with an inquiry into the crisis *of* modernity itself. They argue that the gender dynamics of film noir attests to a general decline of the modern (rather than a premodern) public sphere, a tendential

⁴⁹ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales* (New York, Routledge, 1991), 1-17.

retreat of what Lacanian psychoanalysis calls the Oedipal father-function of the phallic signifier that used to publically mediate, keep at bay irreconcilable forms of life, different practices of enjoyment.⁵⁰ For Lacanians, the father-function is activated in the process of symbolic castration, the introduction of empty signifiers like father, nation, or democracy into public discourse that, precisely by not having a rigid referent, allow for different parties to fill them out with their own, potentially incompatible fantasies.⁵¹ When considering symbolic castration in the field of vision, Lacan's starting point is that human subjectivity is always already a condition of being looked at by the gaze of the Other. This gaze is the *real*, primordially separated objectal correlate (*objet a*) to the subject, the reminder of his founding trauma, loss. Writes Lacan, "From the moment that this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt himself to it, he becomes that punctiform object, that point of vanishing being with which the subject confuses his own failure."⁵² In turn, symbolic castration is an operation that puts a mediatory bar between *objet a* and the subject in the form of a symbolic (as opposed to the *real*) gaze of the Other (the visual equivalent of the empty phallic signifier) that is not identical with the missing (*real*) piece of the subject, one that cannot see the supposedly complete, fully enjoying self he had lost. Symbolic castration thereby allows the subject to playfully appropriate his loss, to fill in its place with *phantasmatic mise-en-scenes* of desire where *objet a* is positioned as their structurally unattainable transcendental object-cause instead of being a paralyzing reminder of the subject's existential failure. As Henry Krips observes, Lacan is therefore in agreement with Foucault that the panoptic institutions of the modern world, what Foucault referred to as apparatuses of

⁵⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 149-65.; Joan Copjec, "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in Film Noir," in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1993), 183.

⁵¹ See Ernesto Laclau. "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" in *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, Volume IV: Society, Politics, Ideology*, edited by S. Žižek, 305-14 (New York: Routledge, 2003)

⁵² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 83.

disciplinary power, work well only insofar as they remain virtual, without a fully actualized determinate content at their center.⁵³ Modern (capitalist) subjects are never completely alienated; they gain their autonomy against an *imagined* panoptic gaze of Oedipal authority (of the father, state, police, factory, prison, etc.), by resisting its instrumentalizing force through constructing spaces, inventing practices beyond its *phantasmatic* field of vision. In other words, the panoptic-Oedipal gaze of power works (holds together a social order) insofar as it's blind, insofar as its locus is empty, symbolically castrated. For Lacan, enjoyment (*jouissance*) is the *real* that resists symbolization (explicit linguistic articulation); Oedipalization "tames" the paralyzing force of *jouissance* by turning it into the amalgam of social practices born out of *imaginary* resistance to abstract, *symbolic* authority; one enjoys only where the imagined demanding gaze of such "big Other" cannot see.⁵⁴ In biopolitical theory the equivalent of this regime is what Roberto Esposito calls the immunization paradigm in which cohesion within a community is built through the partial exemption (immunity) of its members from their obligations (*munus*) to an abstract-symbolic law imposed on them to regulate their life.⁵⁵

However, in film noir's atomized social landscape lacking the mediation of modern symbolic institutions such as the bourgeois family, the workplace, the army, or the church, the isolated male hero becomes terrorized by the hallucinated return of an all-seeing (real) gaze of a primordial father beyond castration who, unlike his symbolic (Oedipal) counterpart, not only knows about enjoyment but even commands it, turns it into a perverse ethical duty the force of

⁵³ Henry Krips, "The Politics of the Gaze Foucault, Lacan and Žižek," *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 2 (2010): 91-103.; see also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by A. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-231.

⁵⁴ On the role of the symbolic father's blind gaze as a condition of possibility of enjoyment see Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 6-51.

⁵⁵ See Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. T. Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 45-78.

which there is nowhere to hide from.⁵⁶ Previously, the blind gaze of the modern symbolic indirectly helped to create common ways of being in the world through a shared resistance to it, serving as a condition of possibility for immunized communities. By contrast, the perverse, all-seeing gaze of power is something like an autoimmune excess of the Oedipal-disciplinary regime of commodity-producing patriarchy. Autoimmunity, in Esposito's words, is a "condition in which the protective apparatus becomes so aggressive that it turns against its own body (which is what it should protect), leading to its death."⁵⁷ What is crucial here is that death for Esposito is not the opposite of life, on the contrary, it is the name for too much life:

[E]ntrusted to itself, freed from its restraints, life tends to destroy and to destroy itself. It tends to dig a crevasse on every side as well as within, one into which life continually threatens to slip. Such a self-dissolving tendency isn't to be understood as a defect of nature or as a breach that is bound to damage an initial perfection. Nor is it an accident or the beginning that suddenly rises up or penetrates into life's domain. Rather, it is the constitutive character of life. Life doesn't fall in an abyss; rather, it is the abyss in which life itself risks falling.⁵⁸

When life's resistance turns against the life of the community it was supposed to protect, we arrive to the fragmentation of the social characteristic of the noir universe. I'd like to suggest that Copjec describes the same shift from immunity to auto-immunity with psychoanalytic terminology as the move from "the old modern order of desire, ruled over by an oedipal father" to "the new order of drive" in which "ever smaller factions of people [are] proclaiming their

⁵⁶ Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 149-65.

⁵⁷ Esposito, *Bios*, 116.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

duty-bound devotion to their own special brand of enjoyment.”⁵⁹ In this reading the noir universe, far from offering an inoperative respite from the capitalist demand to be productive in fact preserves what Agamben calls the “ontology of operativity” (the ontology of “having-to-be”) at its core by reducing it to a pure ethical duty without a determinate content.⁶⁰ This new noir subject of drive is the one caught in a libidinal economy that Manon called perverse, suspending the forward movement of the classical Hollywood narrative after its desired, socially acceptable goal. Instead, he gains partial satisfaction from what Lacan associates with the topology of drive: the repetitive circular movement around *objet a*.⁶¹ Contrary to Manon’s suggestion that the noir hero tends to fetishize external objects and other characters (obstacles to narrative progress), Copjec goes further and maintains that the ultimate noir fetish is the masturbatory *jouissance* of one’s own being, the subject’s own gaze and voice as *objet a*, insofar as it’s separated from the community of language users. The noir protagonist is *driven* to make his inner excess seen and heard, paradoxically, *beyond* the possibility of reciprocal communication, to the point when it clearly undermines his belonging to any community and risks sliding into madness.⁶² As Antonio Quinet explains, “the drive indicates that the subject is

⁵⁹ Copjec, *The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal*, 182-83.

⁶⁰ See Giorgio Agamben, *Opus Dei: An Archeology of Duty*, trans. A. Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 60., 84.

⁶¹ See Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 174-87.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 188. This includes, we could add, breaking from the immunized group of those who perform what Marx called living labour—abstract labour from the perspective of the embodied worker, posited against the inhuman mechanisms of production—which explains the noir hero’s characteristic aversion to work. It’s worth noting that in the *Grundrisse* Marx himself offers an immunological definition of what he calls living labour: “not-objectified labour [nicht-vergegenständlichte Arbeit], conceived negatively (itself still objective; the not-objective itself in objective form). As such it is not-raw material, not-instrument of labour, not-raw-product: labour separated from all means and objects of labour, from its entire objectivity. This living labour...” Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. M. Nicolaus (Penguin: London, 1993), 295.

seen, that there is a gaze which aims at the subject, a gaze we cannot see because it is excluded from our field of vision.”⁶³

We have to make two clarifying remarks here. First, for Lacan “the drive, [which is always] partial drive, is profoundly a death drive and represents in itself the portion of death in the sexed living being.”⁶⁴ Second, this portion of death refers to the signifier and not some kind of enjoyment-substance separate from it. As Alenka Zupancic puts it, “it is by means of the repetition of a certain signifier that we have access to *jouissance* and not by means of going beyond the signifier.”⁶⁵ She argues that Lacan described this unconventional (we might say anti-Oedipal) deployment of the signifier with his category of the “unary trait,” a contingent semiotic marker like a nervous tick or a unique tone of voice that becomes libidinally invested by the subject, standing for her singular being in the world. “The uniqueness of the trait springs from the fact that it marks the relation of the subject to satisfaction or enjoyment, that is to say, it marks the point (or the trace) of their conjunction.”⁶⁶ As a contingent stand-in for *objet a* that carries no meaning, the unary trait is part of a non-signifying semiotic; as the gravitational center of the subject’s libidinal economy it perpetuates the repetitive *jouissance* of the death drive, the surplus enjoyment that is the useless (inoperative) but necessary byproduct of the social-symbolic order.⁶⁷ It is this nonsensical death drive that comes to the fore in film noir’s

⁶³ Antonio Quinet, “The Gaze as an Object,” in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. R. Feldstein et al. (Albany: State University Of New York Press, 1995), 139.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁶⁵ Alenka Zupancic, “When Surplus Enjoyment Means Surplus Value,” in *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, ed. J. Clemens and R. Grigg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 158.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 159. In Lacan’s own words: “Jouissance is very precisely correlated with the initial form of the entry into play of what I am calling the mark, the unary trait, which is a mark toward death [...] Observe that nothing takes on any meaning except when death comes into play.” Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, trans. R. Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 177. But also “*jouissance* is what serves no purpose” Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, trans. B. Fink (New York, W.W. Norton, 1998), 3.

fetishization of the unary trait through formal devices such as the voice-over, extreme facial close-ups, skewed camera angles reflecting the fantasy of being looked at from a unique perspective, and flashbacks to traumatic or emotionally charged events in the past like the male hero's first encounter with the *femme fatale* whose intense presence is often condensed into a piece of clothing or jewellery.⁶⁸ Similarly to Esposito's model, then, death for Lacan is also the name for the unproductive excess of life, for life threatening to throw itself off balance. The difference is that for psychoanalysis the autoimmunity of the death drive doesn't so much kill the organism as it infinitely prolongs its agony by conferring on it, as Žižek suggests, "the obscene immortality of the 'living dead' which, after every annihilation, reconstitute themselves and shamble on."⁶⁹ Copjec brings up the same trope about the noir hero stuck in a lonely place between social life and biological death with the self-enclosed enjoyment of his voice that "bear[s] the burden of a living death, a kind of inexhaustible suffering."⁷⁰

Walter Neff is a case in point insofar as he narrates his perverted crime story while already fatally wounded, the deadly bullet in his body fired by Phyllis Dietrichson marking his singular encounter with *jouissance*. Driven by death he then records his confession of murdering both Phyllis and her husband on a dictaphone, addressing Keyes as if he were some all-knowing, obscene, machinic deity demanding proof that Walter had been enjoying properly—a pervert's projection that undermines his friendship with his colleague. As Žižek insists, this paralyzing relationship to a hallucinated all-seeing gaze of power should not be confused with illicit

⁶⁸ See also Fabio Vighi's definition of film noir: "the ultimate senselessness of external reality (i.e. the 'crack' within reality's symbolic fabric) overlaps with the subject's self defining fixation on such senselessness." Fabio Vighi, *Critical Theory and Film: Rethinking Ideology through Film Noir* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 50.

⁶⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *How To Read Lacan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 62. As Žižek suggests, "death drive' is, paradoxically, the Freudian name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life, an 'undead' urge that persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, generation and corruption." Ibid., 62-63.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 185.

homosexual desire, nor should it be reduced to the fascinating lure of femininity: whoever comes to occupy the place of the primordial father in film noir is there as a fetish to mask the fundamental breakdown of the social-symbolic order.⁷¹ It is this taming of the real that Copjec identifies in the male hero's desperate attempt to impose rational limits on his enjoyment by establishing it as matter of exchange with an all-powerful specter of the *femme fatale*:

Having chosen *jouissance*, the noir hero risks its shattering, annihilating effects, which threaten his very status as subject. In order to *indemnify* himself against these dangers, he creates in the *femme fatale* a *double* to which he surrenders the *jouissance* he cannot himself sustain. That is, he tries to take some distance from himself, to initiate some alterity in his relation to himself: to split himself, we could say, not as the desiring subject between sense and being, but between knowledge and *jouissance*. Giving up his right to enjoyment, the hero contracts with the *femme fatale* that she will henceforth command it from him, as levy.⁷²

In other words, the very method the noir hero uses to separate himself from his female double (an actual insurance contract in the case of *Double Indemnity*) simultaneously ties him to her—an operation that, for Copjec, cannot but end in mutual self-destruction.

What is striking in both Žižek's and Copjec's reading of noir's gender dynamics is their downplaying of its biopolitical dimensions highlighted by feminist critics. Instead of talking about a struggle for power between unequal subject positions they suggest that at the heart of noir is the radical equalizing force of the death drive. We could say that for them the defining characteristic of the noir protagonist is his *failure* to scapegoat the *femme fatale* by isolating in

⁷¹ Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 160.

⁷² Joan Copjec, "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in Film Noir," in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1993), 193-94.

her, like a proper Oedipal regime would, the useless surplus enjoyment dissociated from the commodity producing patriarchy.⁷³ Yet, it's also worth considering that even in noirs like *Double Indemnity* where the male protagonist is indeed never allowed back into the company of men, his misogynistic violence nonetheless has a stabilizing function for the patriarchal order. After the wounded Walter kills Phyllis and Keyes overhears him recording his confession, although his co-worker cannot reciprocate with an equivalent story of noir *jouissance*, de facto excommunicating Walter from the homosocial community of their workplace by reporting him to the police, he nonetheless adds that the man has always been close to his heart. This, I claim, is the area where the Lacanian theories of perverse noir masculinities above have to be supplemented: what exactly is the nature of this half successful homosocial and often homoerotic bond the noir protagonist pursues instead of siding with the *femme fatale*? How should we understand the stabilizing role of the male hero's crime, the fact that in the end it seems to be indirectly accepted by representatives of the normative masculine community? What is the relationship between the apparently gender neutral perversion of drive, the male community of homosocial desire, and the symbolic law restored at the end of these films due to Production Code regulations? Without clarifying these questions, the Lacanian critique of noir perversion and its pseudo subversiveness cannot be fully effective. It is this line of questioning that will be developed later in this chapter to reveal noir's fatalistic ideology the sovereign function of which is to perpetuate the masculinist status quo.

The other weak point of the Lacanians' perspectives above, which several contemporary feminist criticisms are directed against, is the reduction of film noir heroines to props in the masculine imaginary. As a solution, Cowie proposes that these strong and autonomous women

⁷³ Such scapegoating, as Silvia Federici has famously shown, has been the byproduct of capital accumulation since the early modern era witch-hunts. See Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*

should be considered just as much a feminine fantasy as a masculine one.⁷⁴ Alternatively, Julie Grossman and Helen Hanson argue that the significance of the duplicitous spider woman for the noir canon has been largely overstated, ignoring a number of different female characters, such as the working girl investigator⁷⁵ or the trapped housewife,⁷⁶ who represent actual struggles of women at that time to be acknowledged as value producing labourers. While these suggestions are valid, they don't address the fundamental contradiction of capitalism that gave birth to film noir, namely the system's structural inability to allow everyone who wants to work to even seek employment, to value every human being's potential labour equally. A different direction is taken by Elisabeth Bronfen who discovers feminine agency within the Lacanian reading of the *femme fatale*, identifying her tragic acceptance of death over life as the moment of freedom and responsibility in the otherwise fatalistic noir universe.⁷⁷ Her rereading of *Out of the Past* and *Double Indemnity* through the lens of the Wagnerian *Liebestod* narrative of *Tristan and Isolde* also points towards a different 19th century genealogy of noir, emphasizing the heroine's feminine death drive to abandon the patriarchal regime rather than her masculine desire to enter it, serving as a useful counterpoint to the male protagonist's different mobilization of drive.⁷⁸ Bronfen's intervention is a step away from Doane's, Copjec's, and Žižek's reductionist approach to the *femme fatale* that was based on Lacan's early notion of femininity as masquerade, nothing but a lure for the male gaze. While Lacan's theory is an important critical tool against the essentializing tendencies of the phallic imaginary, it leaves the question "what is femininity when it *doesn't* play its designated role in a masculine fantasy?" unanswered. Lacan himself

⁷⁴ Cowie, *Film Noir and Women*, 136.

⁷⁵ Hanson, *Women in Film Noir*, xvi.

⁷⁶ Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale*, 57

⁷⁷ Elisabeth Bronfen, "Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire," *New Literary History* 35, no. 1 (Winter, 2004): 103-16.

⁷⁸ Elisabeth Bronfen, "Noir Wagner," in *Sexuation*, ed. R. Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 170-216.

explored this problem later in his *Seminar XX* where he rethought femininity as an alternative mode to organize the symbolic order as such, adding not only an autonomous but also a utopian dimension to the feminine use of language.⁷⁹ This theory will be the basis of my investigation of film noir's utopian impulse later on.

Let's sum up for now the various categories used to illustrate the tripartite division of reality in film noir:

<i>Wertkritik</i>	Foucault	Esposito	Lacan	
abstract labour	disciplinary power	obligation	symbolic	demand
living labour	resistance	immunity	imaginary	desire
non-productive activity	madness	autoimmunity	real	drive

Figure 3.

2.1.3 Between Generic Immunity and Meta-Generic Autoimmunity: The Sovereign-Function of Noir's Fatalistic Necropolitics

Copjec's and Žižek's Lacanian reading of noir's unique brand of masculine perversion as drive nonetheless helps to clarify its relation to the symbolic norms of classical Hollywood cinema and the genre system as such. It is not enough to say, as Naremore or Kovacs do, that noir goes against these norms within the limits of the Production Code. If we accept that Hollywood functions as an Oedipal-disciplinary apparatus, this means that such discourses of resistance are constitutive of its ideological regime from the very beginning; they are formative of its immune system. This is exactly what Rick Altman proposes, claiming that genres as such are nothing but communal suspensions of cultural norms, creating pleasure through a distance to

⁷⁹ See Lacan, *Encore*

an imagined authority: “[Generic] pleasure derives from a perception that the activities producing it are free from the control exercised by the culture and felt by the spectator in the real world. For most of the film, then, the genre spectator's pleasure grows as norms of increasing complexity and cultural importance are eluded or violated.”⁸⁰ To put it bluntly, viewers root for the monsters, villains, murderers or sex offenders of various genre plots and take pleasure in seeing the bourgeois order of a family, a city, or a nation disrupted or destroyed. There are three important consequences of this model. First, normative aspects of Hollywood (including the enforcement of a morally acceptable narrative closure) are not part of an actually existing set of cultural practices but are *assumed* as such for the purposes of “genre games” played by the community of viewers, critics, studios, directors, etc.; presupposed “in order to permit the construction of generic pleasure as in some way contradicting that norm.”⁸¹ It is completely false to conclude, for instance, that Hollywood audiences in the Production Code era really believed in the sanctity of bourgeois marriage and that this belief was expressed in the endings of most films. To paraphrase Žižek, they believed instead that ‘the big Other’ of Hollywood—this purely virtual entity (the “subject supposed to believe”) they relied on to assert their autonomy against it—believed in it.⁸² Or, to use Christian Metz’s term, it is only a fictive “credulous observer” who was assumed to have taken these norms seriously.⁸³ This leads to the second consequence, namely that “to accept the premises of a genre is to agree to play within a special set of rules, and thus to participate in a community precisely not coterminous with society at large.” In other words, generic communities are *immunized*, they are posited through the suspension of one’s

⁸⁰ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), 156.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁸² On such a delegation of belief see Slavoj Žižek, *How To Read Lacan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 29-30.

⁸³ Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. C. Britton et al. (London: MacMillan Press, 1982), 72.

obligation to a larger symbolic collective the norms of which are, supposedly, to be enforced at all times. Generic immunization therefore protects particular forms of enjoyment (or forms of life in Esposito's biopolitical terminology) against an imagined rigidity and abstract universality of the symbolic law ignorant of their existence. Crucially, the result of this move is the narrowing down of the possible forms of life available for subjects that now become limited by generic conventions. As Esposito puts it:

[I]mmunization is a negative [form] of the protection of life. It saves, insures, and preserves the organism, either individual or collective, to which it pertains, but it does not do so directly, immediately, or frontally; on the contrary, it subjects the organism to a condition that simultaneously negates or reduces its power to expand. Just as in the medical practice of vaccinating the individual body, so the immunization of the political body functions similarly, introducing within it a fragment of the same pathogen from which it wants to protect itself, by blocking and contradicting natural development.⁸⁴

Simply put, what secures the life of the generic community also cuts its participants off from relating to others outside the genre's limits. No wonder that Altman considers the imagined communities of modern nations to be generic in nature.⁸⁵ This also leads to the third important consequence Altman draws from his theory: "Isolated from each other, reduced to imaging the larger group on the basis of a few faint sightings, generic communities constitute what I call constellated communities, for like a group of stars their members cohere only through repeated acts of imagination."⁸⁶ At the heart of the generic function is the detached individual trying to connect with those select few who he imagines to be like him.

⁸⁴ Esposito, *Bios*, 46.

⁸⁵ Altman, *Film/Genre*, 86.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

The question that Altman, contrary to Esposito, doesn't explore is what happens if the process of generic immunization gets out of hand and becomes an autoimmune disorder of the symbolic that threatens to undermine its stabilizing function all together? What happens if the distrust of resisting individuals towards social norms extends to smaller scale communal practices of life, effectively sabotaging even the subjects' limited, generic links with one another, making them more exposed and vulnerable instead of more safe as a result? This is the situation that can be mapped through the Lacanian theory of the death drive and the returning primordial father and is, as Žižek and Copjec suggest, the breeding ground of film noir. The autoimmune tendencies of noir therefore have to be distinguished from standard games of generic transgression. I propose that noir is precisely the name for a failure to transgress against the cultural norms of Hollywood in any way that could create a generic community of shared resistance. The noir hero, like Walter Neff, is stuck with the inoperative excess of his idiosyncratic enjoyment⁸⁷ that he nevertheless imagines to be the direct command of the all-seeing gaze of a perverse law—this is why he addresses his confession to such a superego authority, (mis)interpellating the viewer also as such authority instead of addressing her as a fellow player in a genre game with whom he could share his form of being in the world. The source of the drama at the end of *Double Indemnity* is precisely that while Keyes considers Walter his friend all along, trying to involve him in masculine homosocial rituals of immunization (shared misogyny and mockery of clients), these mundane pleasures don't satisfy the protagonist who goes on to commit murder and then pushes Keyes to know and see all of it just so that the man could condemn him. This transformation is symptomatic of an autoimmune turn of the generic in film noir, of a moment when modern communities start to destroy

⁸⁷ Lacan ultimately defines *jouissance* as the inoperative core of the human subject: “*jouissance* is what serves no purpose” Lacan, *Encore*, 3.

themselves. At the beginning of the film, Keyes and Walter are situated on the same level of their homosocial workplace as friends and colleagues. When Phyllis seduces Walter, Keyes plays the role of the benevolent symbolic authority whose blindness makes the romance possible (this is underlined, for instance, by the scene where he visits Walter in his apartment but remains unsuspecting of his involvement with the woman who is right there hiding behind the half open door—the viewer, by contrast is positioned to see and know all). By killing Phyllis and confessing to Keyes, however, Walter blows up both immunological bubbles he had with the other characters, exchanging them for the perverse solitude of a dying man (for the “lonely room”⁸⁸ of the gas chamber in the original ending). At the same time, as his voiceover narrated precisely from such a place of abandonment clearly shows, he is not fully cut off from the community of language users in the way the silenced *femme fatale* eventually comes to be. This is why his confession can be *overheard* by Keyes, even though the addressee of the message is the real-impossible (all seeing and all knowing) gaze of the Other. And this is how, although his colleague officially condemns him (to a certain death sentence) by calling the police, their brief exchange also suggests the restoration of an illicit homosocial link: Walter: “You know why you couldn’t figure this one, Keyes? I’ll tell you. Because the guy you were looking for was too close. He was right across the desk from you.” Keyes: “Closer than that, Walter.” Walter: “I love you too.” The film then ends with Keyes lighting Walter’s cigarette as a homosocial or perhaps homoerotic gesture. To explore further this strange link between the isolated noir hero and the immunized community that expelled him, let’s look at a series of classical noirs with a similar narrative pattern.

⁸⁸ Copjec, *The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal*, 189.

Like *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Killers* (1946) also starts with its male hero, the Swede, withdrawn to an isolated room, resigned to his fate of certain death at the hands of two contract killers hired by his former partners in crime he, supposedly, had betrayed years ago after a successful heist. The rest of the film is in part a series of flashbacks to the Swede's past leading up to the robbery, complicated by his love affair with the boss's treacherous girlfriend. While this narrative technique of opening with the protagonist's death emphasizes the determinist trajectory of his life in a typical noir fashion that denies his agency, it's important to add that, paradoxically, he plays a much more active role *after* his death by leaving clues behind in his will that incriminate those who killed him, most importantly the *femme fatale*. Therefore, although it's true that in the last moments of his life the Swede chooses the solitude of his death drive over the protection of the small town community he came to hide and work in after a life of crime—unable to share the burden of his past with his young apprentice who comes to warn him about the arrival of the gangsters—he nonetheless builds a strange homosocial bond from beyond the grave with the investigator of his life insurance policy, making him follow up on his unusual will and thereby untangle his story of victimhood *as a byproduct*. Significantly, he is not the only posthumous fan of the foolish lover's tale of melancholic self-abandonment; a detective, now happily married to the Swede's former, more nurturing, less wicked girlfriend joins the posse of men hunting down the *femme fatale*—a group that in a bizarre final twist comes to include the crime boss himself who once ordered the Swede's execution, and who is now husband and final victim of the spider woman.

Out of the Past (1947) offers an interesting variation of *The Killers* storyline. The male protagonist is a former private eye, Jeff, who, while working for a gangster, got involved with the man's mistress, Kathie, but after she eventually betrayed his trust he retired to a small town

where he now lives running a gas station, about to marry a local girl. His past (revealed also in a flashback) comes to haunt him when his former employer bursts the bubble of his rural idyll, demanding one more favour of him. The job, of course, once again involves Kathie who, much like Jeff himself, keeps getting drawn back to the powerful criminal who marks their original encounter with *jouissance*. This magnetism of the obscene father figure is responsible for a certain fatalistic disposition in both protagonists; yet, as Robert Pippin stresses, this should not be simply identified with that lack of reflective deliberation in their actions that separates them from classical Hollywood heroes. It is wrong to conclude from their stoic appearance that they are *entirely* passive tools in the hands of their superego master, determined by their past or indeed fate itself. Instead, “noir participants are [...] perhaps best thought of creatively improvising on the fly, thrusting themselves into the future without benefit of much reliance on reflection and the past in general, much as a painter or a poet will improvise a figure or a line and try to determine afterward if the improvisation was appropriate.”⁸⁹ Pippin points out that it is not true that either Jeff or Kathie would always fatalistically betray the other when they are forced to improvise this way, that is, when they cannot rely on pre-established cultural/communal codes to identify their motives through reflection (when their ontology of operativity breaks down as Agamben would put it). There is a radical indeterminacy of their acts which makes them both fundamentally free from the confines of normative society, yet also highly vulnerable to its judgment. As Kathy finally suggests to Jeff, Pippin notes, “neither of them is any good; they belong together. That is, she is encouraging Jeff to realize something about his fate, that neither of them belongs in the square or straight world, content with the limited room for maneuver as agents that fate allows them. *That* world has its appropriate rules or morality, and neither of them

⁸⁹ Robert B. Pippin, *Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 40.

shares that world, and in that sense will always be ‘bad.’”⁹⁰ In other words, towards the end, in a retrospective deliberation about the couple’s improvisatory acts throughout the narrative Kathie proposes that their fate is precisely to break with their fate—a formula that appropriately summarizes the paradox of the death drive, the compulsion to repeat a past encounter with *jouissance* that eventually destroys linear temporality itself and with it any meaningful notion of the past.⁹¹

While Pippin strangely (and against his own theory developed later in his book) dismisses here the woman’s project as vulgar fatalism that disavows the couple’s agency, I suggest reading it as a productive contradiction of the *femme fatale* figure that points precisely toward her (or indeed anyone’s) inability to autonomously assume a fatalistic stance.⁹² This is the dilemma the couple is stuck with after the elimination of the primordial father figure, the anchoring point between their *jouissance* and the symbolic economy of debt, the authority enforcing the linear notion of time through the pressure of future repayment, who thereby also stood as a convenient external source of superego pressure towards private enjoyment, i.e. an excuse for betrayal. Now with the gangster gone, when Kathie chooses to flee with Jeff, her fatalistic statement that she is no good is all of a sudden turned inoperative: she doesn’t betray the man despite her official warning suggesting that it is in her (and his) nature. Jeff, by contrast, makes an anonymous phone call to the police to give himself and Kathie up. There is an almost comic theatricality to the denouement he thereby orchestrates insofar as it provides the perfect appearance of a divine intervention while he (and the viewer addressed by the charade) knows

⁹⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁹¹ As Colette Soler explains, the temporality of the drive is “a time of encounter, structured like an instant, which operates as a cut in the continuity of signifying time.” Colette Soler, “The Subject and the Other (II),” in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. R. Feldstein et al. (Albany: State University Of New York Press, 1995), 52.

⁹² See Ibid., 69.

very well that there is no such invisible hand at work. It is only for the naïve observer (like an imagined censor of the Production Code) that the scene looks as if an outlaw couple were getting what they deserved just when they thought they could get away from fate's punishment. It's quite logical to assume, as Pippin does,⁹³ that Jeff expects Kathie to shoot him when she sees the police cordon blocking the road, which means that he set up his own death, constructing a fantasy scene of castration by the *femme fatale* (literally as she shoots him in the crotch) for which the woman is immediately gunned down by the police. This means that at a decisive moment Jeff makes a decision to rather die a painful death but uphold the patriarchal hierarchy of sexes than live to accept that they are equally inoperative. Significantly, like the Swede in *The Killers*, he also builds a postmortem homosocial link with a mute boy working at his gas station who is asked by Jeff's small town bride whether her now dead fiancée was planning to run away with the *femme fatale* or not. The boy, as if his muteness gave him a sixth sense to read his boss's melodramatic intentions, lies to the woman and says yes, suggesting that Jeff wasn't in love with her anymore, thereby handing her, as an object of patriarchal symbolic exchange, to the next man in line to marry. By *pretending* to condemn Jeff and excommunicate him from the town community, the young man's gesture in fact immunizes the masculine bond against the fiancée's ignorant gaze (when she is gone he salutes the sign on the top of the gas station spelling Jeff's name). On the one hand, this scene retroactively feminizes the Metzian credulous observer in the presupposed audience who falls for the male protagonist's theatrical *dénouement* and genders those who know about Jeff's orchestrating his own downfall masculine. At the same time, however, the ending also reveals the Production Code's gender norms as artificially constructed by male conspirators.

⁹³ Ibid., 47.

Contrary to *Out of the Past*, the fugitive couple of *Gun Crazy* (a.k.a. *Deadly is the Female*, 1950) do explore possibilities of living together outside the law and capitalist labour. Interestingly, they manage to avoid the traps of extreme individualism despite their awareness that after a series of bank robberies committed together their chance of survival would be significantly higher alone. Uncommon among noir protagonists they are actually married, tied through a symbolic bond which, however, lacks its usual immunological supplement of a home (they exchange it for the transitory non-places of the road). At the end, cornered by a state wide manhunt they are chased into a foggy swampland by the police. The netherworldly *mise-en-scene* carries a sense of hopeless isolation; we see the couple's frightened faces, framed together in a series of close-ups. The woman's whisper then breaks the ominous silence: "Bart, we're in real trouble this time," to which her husband responds: "Laurie, no matter what happens, I wouldn't have it any other way!" They embrace but their final kiss is disturbed by the sound of loud speakers; it's the voice of Bart's childhood (male) friends the police brought along to help convincing him to surrender: "We know you won't kill us, you're not a killer, Bart." The implication is clear: he is not responsible for killing the couple's victims; Laurie is. The woman, now indirectly interpellated as the *femme fatale*, steps away from her husband who stays frozen. The framing changes, we now see them in separate close-ups.⁹⁴ As the group of men approaches, Laurie stands up and starts shouting at them with a death driven attachment to the signifier: "One more step and I'll kill you! I'll kill you! I'll kill you!", but before she could do anything Bart, still squatting, yells: "Laurie, don't!", and shoots dead, as if he were taken over by an uncontrollable impuls. Then, realizing what he had done, he stands up to look at her body, providing a clear target for the police who kill him immediately.

⁹⁴ We see here the emergence of the properly noir-style extreme or "choker" close-up that captures the excesses of a single person's *jouissance*, the isolated individual in existential despair in opposition to the symbolic law.

The film, in a modernist gesture, exposes the so called Hollywood ideology of producing a heterosexual couple for what it always already has been: an element of genre games with a purely formal role that can be fulfilled even by a final shot of dead lovers. However, it also reveals that such form cannot be properly ideological without its no less normative immunizing supplement transgressing and limiting it, appearing here as the law of the male homosocial brotherhood standing for a Repressive State Apparatus that literally puts an end to the excesses of heterosexual marriage itself, to the emancipatory potential opened up by its formal equality that threatened to subvert capitalism's patriarchal hierarchy of gender roles. As in the previous examples, the community of men cannot seem to be able to do this on their own; they need the help of someone who is, paradoxically, both inside and outside of their immunized bubble. This is the responsibility often delegated to the lone male hero in film noir who is alienated, confused, and disoriented—forced to improvise until the moment he hears or hallucinates the call of his fellow men from beyond the walls of his lonely room, giving him hidden direction, inciting him to push the *femme fatale* away as an illicit act of banishment necessary to secure the boundaries of the male tribe. This is when he realizes that, contrary to his female double, his fate is not to break with his fate but to uphold the operativity of the status quo where no one else can.

We find this structure already in one of the first canonical film noirs, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Sam Spade, the private detective protagonist, after uncovering his *femme fatale* lover's involvement in a series of crimes and acts of betrayal (including the murder of Sam's investigator partner), phones the police with the promise of clearing the case for them once they arrive at the scene. In the ensuing suspense before the officers' arrival the always rather unscrupulous Spade puts up a highly theatrical and inconsistent (overdetermined) performance condemning the woman and rejecting her love in the name of masculine honour (his debt to his

partner), cynical rationality (the assumption that she would betray him again), and cold petty-bourgeois professionalism (solving the case needs someone to take the fall). None of these rationalizations seem to stick, however. Hesitating what to do, he only makes the decision to actually *act* like he says and *really* denounce her lover, to reject her final kiss and push her away, a moment before the doorbell announces the police's arrival. It is this small spatiotemporal interval that separates the noir hero's death drive from the desire of a male homosocial community that retroactively sutures him into its midst—an unbridgeable gap of radical indeterminacy and freedom he overcomes/disavows through fatalistic telepathy and the ultimately arbitrary violent expulsion of the *femme fatale*.⁹⁵

According to Agamben, the performance of such violence that from our liberal democracies appears fascistic has been the designated role of the sovereign in various state apparatuses throughout history; his function has always been to decide on the undecidable ground of any living (for Esposito: immunized) political community by setting up a state of exception where the communal rules are suspended so that the sovereign can *arbitrarily* separate lives that should belong to the community from those that should not.⁹⁶ Agamben doesn't have a theory of immunization as inherent transgression against the universal force of law and as a result he also has no concept of a symbolic apparatus in which life (enjoyment) is captured insofar as it resists being captured. He doesn't believe in a neutral virtual space with regulative ideals such as universal equality and emphasizes how such concepts are always already imbued with particular forms of life.⁹⁷ This is why he is pessimistic about the long term effects of

⁹⁵ As Lacan puts it, "drive divides the subject and desire, the latter sustaining itself only by the relation it misrecognizes between this division and an object [*objet a*] that causes it. Such is the structure of fantasy." Lacan, *Écrits*, 724. [§854]

⁹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 136-43.

⁹⁷ Significantly, Agamben's early theory of sovereignty as biopolitical violence is then supplemented with a purely symbolic function in his later *The Kingdom and the Glory* which introduces glory as the non-productive, purely

modern universalism for he sees it pursuing an impossible project: by merging two formerly distinct notions of the people, one referring to members of the political community, the other to the poor who are excluded from it, modern democracy seeks to collapse the boundary between fundamentally antagonistic forms of life.⁹⁸ While in the classical Greek polis *bios*, the (generally masculine) life lived inside political institutions was clearly separated from *zoe*, the (feminine) life of mere self-preservation lived within the household, modern democracies consider bare life (*zoe*) the source of political sovereignty, aiming to liberate the element that was the sign of subjection in the classical political model.⁹⁹ This project for Agamben (much like for the value-critical Marxists) is a self-defeating one because every politics of sovereignty necessarily involves a founding decision on what is going to be political and what is not. Therefore, in modern (capitalist) democracies the need to find the *bios* of *zoe*, to emancipate bare life *as such* brings with it the contradictory need to delineate *what kind of* bare life will be considered political (or in Marxist terms: productive), which now in the universalist context increasingly means *worth living*, and what kind of bare life will the sovereign have to let die (a slippage from being marked as unproductive). This is why the modern universalist biopolitics of life soon turns into thanatopolitics, constantly redrawing the unstable boundary between life worth living and life void of value.¹⁰⁰ As a result, Agamben stresses, the political community's founding site of the sovereign decision—the zone of indistinction between *bios* and *zoe* holding the vulnerable life of those who the Romans called *homo sacer*, the “sacred” person who can be killed without

ceremonial excess of the modern apparatus of biopower. Yet, even glory is always attached to a particular form of life for Agamben. This additional dimension of sovereignty will be explored later in this chapter. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. L. Chiesa and M. Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011)

⁹⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 177.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.; There is a clear homology between Agamben's biopolitical theory of modern life and the value-critical approach to capitalist labour: universal citizenship and universal employment are both impossible projects as long as we remain within sovereign power/capitalism.

repercussions—stops being a state of exception and becomes the rule.¹⁰¹ This means that the popular sovereignty of “modern democracy does not abolish sacred life but rather shatters it and disseminates it into every individual body; making it into what is at stake in political conflict.”¹⁰² This is the biopolitical paradigm the modern democratic state develops towards and that Agamben, after its Nazi example, calls the camp, “the new, hidden regulator of the inscription of life in the order—or, rather, the sign of the systems inability to function without being transformed into a lethal machine.”¹⁰³

If Esposito’s theory explains the emergence of stable communities through a top down model of immunization, Agamben has a bottom up approach where the communal security is reached through the violence of sovereign exclusion. I will use a Lacanian synthesis of the two theories to explain the complex biopolitical role of film noir, why the multitude of Hollywood genres immunizing different forms of life have to be supplemented with the meta-generic noir state of exception arbitrarily deciding on what life would be valuable for the genre system as such and what life would be devalued and/or expelled from it. As Agamben stresses, “The camp is the space of [the] absolute impossibility of deciding between fact [*zoe*] and law [*bios*], rule and application, exception and rule, which nevertheless incessantly decides between them.”¹⁰⁴ The camp is the (non)-place where characters of film noir are thrown with their idiosyncratic excess of unproductive enjoyment (death drive), their bare life hopelessly separated from the immunized life of any capitalist community that could give an operative meaning to their existence. This is where both men and women lose their traditional gender identity and white people slide towards blackness (their shadowy existence signalling their ontological

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 83.

¹⁰² Ibid., 124.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 175.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 173.

indistinction from the nation's ultimate non-citizens: African Americans). As *homo sacer*, subjects of a sacred life the value of which is suspended,¹⁰⁵ they are equally vulnerable to the violence of others. Yet, others in this noir camp of modernity are just like them: lonely, exposed, and distrustful; improvising as they go along, betraying those they assume could betray them. And the price to leave this precarious but equalizing site of the camp behind is precisely the assumption of the role of the sovereign instead of the *homo sacer*; to forge an arbitrary link with an imagined (constellated) community, to *pretend it exists* and commit a violent act of exclusion on the basis of its norms: a sovereign decision that would retroactively *make it exist*.¹⁰⁶ As Agamben writes, "what confronts the guard or the camp official [in Auschwitz] is not an extrajudicial fact (an individual biologically belonging to the Jewish race) to which he must apply the discrimination of the National Socialist rule. On the contrary, every gesture, every event in the camp, from the most ordinary to the most exceptional, enacts the decision on bare life by which the German biopolitical body is made actual."¹⁰⁷ As I have indicated, the biopolitical body actualized through the noir hero's sovereign decision is a constellated community of petty-bourgeois heterosexual white men, a meta-generic zero-institution valorizing bare life that props up Hollywood's ideological apparatus when the traditional dialectic of generic immunization fails. Contrary to genre games that are "democratic" insofar as they are open to anyone who plays along, noir's meta-discourse posits an exceptional *bios* with rigid

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹⁰⁶ To my knowledge the only application of Agamben's biopolitical theory to film noir is Jonathan Auerbach's concept of "noir citizenship," which he introduces as "a condition of statelessness or non-existence" that "sheds light on the psychological contours of film noir as well as the anxieties of the nation-state at midcentury intent on policing itself against uninvited outsiders." Jonathan Auerbach, "Noir Citizenship: Anthony Mann's Border Incident," *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 4 (2008), 102-03. Auerbach focuses on how noir depicts the crisis of the nation state's territorial boundaries, undoing the distinction between citizen and non-citizen, and then reinforcing it arbitrarily. My approach, while based on the same theoretical framework, is different in the sense that I'm interested in the biopolitical division that cuts through the imagined community of the American nation from within.

¹⁰⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 174.

boundaries.¹⁰⁸ That is to say, what comes alive through the sovereign act in film noir is not the masculinity of this or that particular generic community constituted negatively through resisting disciplinary power but the flesh of an self-made brotherhood that perpetuates itself, or so it seems, by affirming its own bare life through an endless short circuit between its *bios* and *zoe*.

Crucially, once the masculinist status quo is thereby consolidated, its illicit origins are immediately repressed. As a rule, the sovereign act of the noir hero (his arbitrary punishment of his *femme fatale* double from the position of their equality) cannot be explicitly acknowledged as such by the brotherhood whose existence is depending on it; doing so would expose its missing foundations, its essential indistinction from the feminine sphere. As Žižek notes, even Nazi Germany developed the same attitude towards the Holocaust, treating it as an obscene secret never to be publicly recognized.¹⁰⁹ And didn't critical discourse have a similar relationship the phenomenon of film noir itself? Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland point out that the decision to canonize the French interpretation and grouping of these films was a rather arbitrary and biopolitically motivated one.¹¹⁰

First of all, the authors note, in the same year when Nino Frank “coined” the term film noir Sigfried Kracauer also published an article called “Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?” in which he traced the genealogy of what Frank called noir back to Hollywood's anti-Nazi propaganda films, suggesting that their pedagogical display of totalitarian dread among the German population eventually overflowed the limits and purposes of

¹⁰⁸ The opposition between generic and meta-generic technologies of power also recalls Althusser's distinction between Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses. For him, the latter's blatantly anti-democratic role has to be exercised when ISAs are unable to perpetuate the status quo. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-89.

¹⁰⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 2008), 64.

¹¹⁰ See Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland, *Film Noir: Hard Boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalization* (New York, Routledge, 2010), 126; 166.

the genre and gave way to films registering America's own fascist tendencies. These terror films "evoke a world in which everybody is afraid of everybody else, and no one knows when or where the ultimate and inevitable horror will arrive. When it does arrive it arrives unexpectedly: erupting out of the dark from time to time in a piece of unspeakable brutality. That panic which in the anti-Nazi films was characterized as peculiar to the atmosphere of life under Hitler now saturates the whole world."¹¹¹ It's symptomatic of the discourse on noir that the rather disturbing claims of this text were later repressed: the whole issue of American noir's fascism was reduced to the matter of interwar German cinema as well as the war itself *influencing* noir's development.¹¹² That is, until Edward Dimendberg looking at the spatial politics in Weimar cinema and American film noir rehabilitated Kracauer's original argument by insisting that instead of causality we should be talking about "parallel modernities"¹¹³ as both groups of films represent "urban spaces inextricably identified with violence."¹¹⁴ Along these lines I suggest to consider film noir's parallel thanatopolitics or, to use Achille Mbembe's term,¹¹⁵ necropolitics to Nazism: it offers us a formula not of the totalitarian suspension of democracy but the fascism at the core of modern democracy itself.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, following Julien Morphet, Fay and Nieland also draw attention to the racially charged nature of the term noir in the post-war French context of imminent

¹¹¹ Kracauer, "Hollywood's Terror Films," 106.

¹¹² It is this the German influence hypothesis, the formative role of German Expressionism and Weimar filmmakers on the noir canon that Thomas Elsaesser convincingly refutes in Thomnas Elsaesser, "A German Ancestry to Film Noir? Film History and its Imaginary," *Iris* 21 (Spring 1996): 129-44.

¹¹³ Edward Dimendberg, "Down These Seen Streets a Man Must Go: Siegfried Kracauer, 'Hollywood's Terror Films,' and the Spatiality of Film Noir," *New German Critique* no. 89 (Spring/Summer, 2003), 113.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹¹⁵ Necropolitics is Achille Mbembe's term for the systemic "subjugation of life to the power of death," the creation of shadowy zones supplementing modern state apparatuses that function as "death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*." I will use the term as a synonym for Agamben's thanatopolitics. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," in *Biopolitics: A Reader*, ed. T. Campbell and A. Sitze (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 186.

¹¹⁶ More recently Jonathan Auerbach has also discussed film noir's depiction of the American state apparatus as fascistic in its own right in *Dark Borders: Film Noir and American Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011)

decolonization, and how the French critics' look at these films through the prism of existentialism may have offered them a convenient device to both express and obfuscate their anxieties over the decline of imperial white supremacy.¹¹⁷ The libidinal investment in a discourse where blackness is detached from skin color and is turned into an abstract existential threat—while remaining metonymically linked to African Americans with noir's urban shadows or jazz music score signifying their absence—may be the reason why, as Eric Lott argues, “the specifically racial means of noir's obsession with the dark side of 1940s American life has been remarkably ignored.”¹¹⁸ This implies that the initial critical discourse on noir was complicit in the films' depoliticizing move, the foreclosure of America's white supremacist biopolitics through the displacement of its systemic violence onto the existentialist crimes of petty-bourgeois white individuals who, according to Robert Porfirio, faced the choice between “'being and nothingness', between the 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' life.” In the noir universe, he suggests, “[t]he inauthentic life is the unquestioned one which derives its rationale from a facile acceptance of those values external to the self. To live authentically, one must reject these assurances and therein discover the ability to create one's own values; in so doing each individual assumes responsibility for his life through the act of choosing between two alternatives. And since man is his own arbiter, he literally creates good and evil.”¹¹⁹ What this fetishization of the noir choice of authenticity (the choice of one's death driven surplus-enjoyment) ignores is that such authenticity can only be actualized through a sovereign submission to the unquestioned values of a biopolitical apparatus. And while various aspects of the noir discourse have by now been re-politicized through feminist, queer and critical race theory readings of the canon, these criticisms haven't been totalized into considering noir as a form of American fascism. For

¹¹⁷ Murphet, “Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious,” 32.; Fay and Nieland, *Film Noir*, 166.

¹¹⁸ Lott, “The Whiteness of Film Noir,” 542.

¹¹⁹ Robert G. Porfirio, “No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir,” *Sight and Sound* 45, no. 4 (1976): 216.

instance, as if to continue with the existentialist biases of noir's early critics like Porfirio, Fay and Nieland suggest that "[a]gainst the culture of moral absolutism promoted by the Nazis and fascists, film noir presented a world of moral ambiguity in which the protagonist must, nevertheless, decisively act." Our Agambenian reading of film noir, by contrast, allows us to see existentialist freedom as a key component of a fascistic biopolitical apparatus rather than its alternative.

Agamben's later work in *The Kingdom and the Glory* makes this connection between totalitarianism and individualism even tighter by suggesting that in addition to necropolitical violence, sovereign power also relies on a purely symbolic function of glorification. In Nazi Germany, for instance, the arbitrary terror of the camps was supplemented by mass celebrations of the Aryan *Volk*. According to Agamben, under the guise of secularisation western modernity remains within the political theological paradigm of the Christian Trinitarian ontology of operativity, for which the predetermined task of the worldly economy is to become the mirror image of God's perfect and eternal heavenly order (for example, Adam Smith's notion of the invisible hand creating equilibrium on the capitalist market is an example of divine providence in secular guise).¹²⁰ This ideology produces what he calls "the paradox of glory," insofar as glory, "the uncertain zone in which acclamations, ceremonies, liturgies, and insignia operate,"¹²¹ "is the exclusive property of God for eternity, and it will remain eternally identical in him, such that nothing and no one can increase or diminish it; and yet, glory is glorification, which is to say, something that all creatures always incessantly owe to God and that he demands of them."¹²² Because God doesn't lack anything, he cannot be glorified through productive activity: the instrumental rationality of the worldly economy can in itself never be a mirror reflection of his

¹²⁰ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 277-86.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 216.

being. It has to be supplemented by a fundamentally inoperative sphere of glory that—in a paradoxical performative gesture similar to the sovereign exclusion—presupposes his perfection and short circuits it with the economic realm by glorifying it, becoming the ultimate driving force towards totalized production and bureaucratic administration, in other words, western modernity.¹²³ It is this glorified economy that Agamben calls *oikonomia*, “a pure activity of government that aims at nothing other than its own replication.”¹²⁴

With the theory of glory, Agamben develops a functional equivalent of the Lacanian symbolic as the order of castration, lack. If for Lacan the secret of the symbolic is that it's held together by an empty signifier, Agamben similarly claims that the apparatus of glory is inoperative, and therefore “finds its perfect cipher in the majesty of the empty throne. [...] The void is the sovereign figure of glory.”¹²⁵ Film noir makes this empty performativity of glory visible through the tacked on endings that execute the symbolic norms of the Hollywood Production Code against the logic of the noir universe that emerges precisely out of the autoimmune crisis of the symbolic order, that is, through the decline of the apparatus of glory. Crucially, it is the arbitrary sovereign violence of the noir protagonist that indirectly reestablishes the sphere of glory as the glory of a particular (white patriarchal) *bios*, even if in most of the examples above the male hero himself is not allowed to participate in the subsequent symbolic rituals of glorification as they occur at his expense (such as the demonstration of police force that produces a dead heterosexual couple in *Out of the Past* or *Gun Crazy*). The central male characters of *Double Indemnity*, *The Killers*, and *Out of the Past* take this into account by

¹²³ “The economy of glory can only function if it is perfectly symmetrical and reciprocal. All economy must become glory, and all glory become economy.” *Ibid.*, 210.; “the governmental apparatus functions because it has captured in its empty center the inoperativity of the human essence. This inoperativity is the political substance of the Occident, the glorious nutrient of all power.” *Ibid.*, 246.

¹²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. D. Kishik and S. Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 22.

¹²⁵ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 245.

sending their messages from a place where they are already dead, so to speak, to a masculine community that receives them yet never fully acknowledges the men's sovereign role, abandoning them to existential solitude, madness, or death. Two more examples can elucidate this division further.

In *Scarlet Street* (1945), a middle aged bank teller, Chris, with a boring petty-bourgeois life and painterly ambitions falls in love with a prostitute, Kitty, after he saves her from what he misrecognizes as a mugging attempt but what is in fact a dispute with her pimp/boyfriend. The gullible man is then conned by the two criminals who exploit his obsession with the *femme fatale*, persuading him to gradually give her his life savings, his paintings, and even embezzle money from the bank. When Chris finally catches Kitty with her boyfriend and realizes he's been duped, he stabs her to death with an icepick in a raging moment of temporary insanity. The next day, ridden by guilt, he is waiting for the police to arrest him but to his surprise the officers coming to see him in the bank only ask about the money he took from the cash desk. Since his boss, a gentlemen with a great deal of understanding in such matters ("Was it because of a woman, Chris?") doesn't want to press charges, he is free to go (although he is fired from his job, of course). He is also not convicted for Kitty's murder as all the evidence incriminates the pimp who is sentenced to death and is executed soon after. Tortured by the hallucinated voices of his victim, desperate for not being able to tell the truth to anyone, he withdraws into the solitude of a dark hotel room where he tries to hang himself—in vain as the hotel staff saves him in the last minute, offering yet another example of noir's homosocial telepathy. The final scenes show him years later, living homeless on the street as a local madman, the police kicking him out of a park for the night and gently mocking him behind his back for his obsession with a murder he, they think, didn't commit. This rejection of Chris by the masculine community, his

transformation into a *homo sacer*, a living dead, can be productively read as his identification with femininity; not simply with the fetishized image of Kitty as Mark Osteen argues,¹²⁶ but with the very place of the *femme fatale*'s bare life behind the fetishistic male fantasy, with her body as death drive he killed acting as sovereign. At the very end of the film, after the incident with the policemen, we see Chris staring at the portrait of Kitty he once painted and what the woman sold to a gallery as her self-portrait. The scandalous murder of the assumed artist, of course, raised the price of the painting which is now sold in front of Chris's eyes for 10000 Dollars to a female collector. On the one hand, this transaction wouldn't be possible without the disappearance of both Kitty's and Chris's bare life behind the commodity-fetish living its own life without them. Yet, like with most voice-over narrated noirs, the viewer gets to witness the man's exposed bare life at least as potentially productive (he made the painting, after all) while that of the *femme fatale* simply falls outside the boundaries of the visible and the audible: it is not her living labour as model and agent but the man's sovereign act of killing her that becomes the source of the painting's market value.

Night and the City's (1950) Harry Fabian is also a male sovereign who ends up as *homo sacer*, abandoned and eventually killed by the masculine community he helped to create. As a small time grifter he makes a living by abusing the trust of others, specializing in faking male camaraderie. London, the film's noir city of choice is populated by crooks just like him to the point where the only honest people around seem to be naïve foreigners—Harry's primary targets. He manages to convince one of them, the Greek wrestling legend Gregorius that he is interested in setting up a club glorifying traditional Greco-Roman wrestling where he would not tolerate the decadence of modern fighting spectacles like the ones run by Gregorius's gangster son Kristo. His real intention, of course, is to manipulate the old man into challenging his son's arrogant

¹²⁶ Mark Osteen, "Framed: Forging Identities in Film Noir," *Journal of Film and Video* 62, no. 3 (2010): 28.

celebrity wrestler into a “match of honour” with the Greek champion Gregorius brought along. While he knows that he is playing with fire by risking a confrontation with Kristo, he assumes, correctly, that all the son wants is for his father to remain ignorant about the corrupted realities of for profit wrestling going on under his nose. He agrees to the fight as long as Gregorius doesn’t get hurt, as long as the old man believes the fight is honourable. Yet, to set up such a bubble of glory in the biopolitical camp of the noir city takes more than just the presence of a naive symbolic father figure. To raise the money for the fight, Harry has to act as a sovereign by cheating one woman and stealing from another, neutralizing their labour and treating them as *homo sacer* in support of his masculine games. Ironically, his eventual downfall is caused by his schemes working all too well, leading to a premature fight between the future opponents started by Kristo’s bully who takes Harry’s suggestion to provoke the Greeks a little too far. Gregorius steps in and wins honourably but dies out of exhaustion afterwards. This shows all too clearly that in classical noir the three, inconsistent layers of capitalist patriarchy, the ignorant symbolic father (Gregorius) standing for glory, the homosocial techniques of inherent transgression (the gangsters), and the sovereign (Harry) cannot be represented on the same plane, that they are traversed by a fundamental inconsistency mediated/neutralized thorough the topology of separate levels.¹²⁷ This is what Kristo’s furious response to his father’s death aims to restore: his putting a price on Harry’s head starts a city-wide manhunt that makes all the hustler’s *male* friends betray him. The only remaining shelter is offered by the woman he once loved but whom he robbed and abandoned for his sovereign break. But even there he refuses to share her *homo sacer* status and disappear from the masculine order of capital, making instead one last attempt to have the

¹²⁷ As Paul Verhaeghe points out, “the seminar ‘R.S.I.’ [Lacan] considers the number of names of the father to be ‘indefinite,’ and he stresses their function, that is, to keep the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary distinct from each other.” Paul Verhaeghe, “The Collapse of the Function of the Father and Its Effect on Gender Roles,” in *SIC 3: Sexuation*, ed. R. Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 143.

gangsters recognize *his* sacred life as part of the homosocial community: he wants to collect the money on his own head and then give it back to his girlfriend he stole it from, undoing through its open recognition the illicit sovereign act that brought together the brotherhood now hunting him. In other words, what he wants is to glorify his sovereign act, to reveal the entire economy built on it as fundamentally inoperative. In his tragicomic blindness to his own role he doesn't realize that what he is asking for is structurally impossible: his sovereign decisions are both the conditions of possibility for the immunized consensus of the city to emerge and have to be foreclosed to cover up that community's lack of solid foundation. This is why Harry's fate is sealed the moment he even offers such symbolic reconciliation: without saying a word, Kristo orders his henchman to quickly strangle him and throw his body into the Thames. This way film ends without the restoration of Hollywood's glory, which should come as no surprise since the director, Jules Dassin was blacklisted in America during the production of *Night and the City* in England.

2.1.4 Cinema's Feminine Gesture and the Sovereign-Image of Masculinity

Noir's male protagonist, therefore, often ends up in the place of the feminine *homo sacer*, abandoned by his peers to cover-up the dependency of the male community on his sovereign violence. What is not to be missed here is that the logic of this temporal sequence is circular. In *The Killers*, for instance, the Swede's fatalistic acceptance that he could be killed anytime at the beginning of the film is caused, in a paradoxical temporal loop, by an event in the future, after his death when he will have punished the *femme fatale* through his proxies. It is his fatalistic identification with the female *homo sacer*'s life not worth living that performatively leads to her sovereign exclusion that will have been the condition of possibility for her sacred life. In other

words, the Swede identifies with the *femme fatale* qua *homo sacer* in order to turn her into one, to facilitate her punishment, yet he publicly denies his agency in the matter, acting like he was paralyzed by primordial, irredeemable guilt: “There ain’t anything to do [...] I did something wrong, once.” (the word once does not refer here simply to the past but to what will have been). The noir hero’s voice-over can also be read this way as a fatalistic message to a future past, the function of which is to perpetuate the sovereign *oikonomia* by hiding behind the mask of a man wounded by it. His wound is his non-reciprocal message to the brotherhood, the mark of his sovereign crime repressed by the homosocial community it helps to create. Fatalism is therefore the meta-ideology through which film noir grounds in the masculine regime of sovereign violence against women by endlessly presupposing it, covering up its necessary inconsistency and founding crisis by acting as if it were always already there in men’s dark past. Fatalism is film noir’s version of phallic *jouissance* through which the masculine body politic gets off on its sinful self while excluding the feminine subject from this ritual of guilt-ridden self-glorification. It is through fatalism that, as Fabio Vighi puts it, “film noir enjoys its symptoms.”¹²⁸ In Deleuzian terminology, noir fatalism constructs crystal images of time, points of “indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary, or of the present and the past, of the actual and the virtual.”¹²⁹ It produces the time of modernity itself (the time of abstract labour), time in a “pure state” as the missing transcendental link between the isolated masculine individual’s (real) *jouissance* and the constellated (imaginary) homosocial community of his fellow monads, between the atemporal order of drive and the order of desire based on linear, progressive temporality. The connection is made through men’s sovereign capacity to become *homo sacer*, to inflict deadly wounds upon themselves in the name of a perverse law in front of which they are always already guilty,

¹²⁸ Vighi, *Critical Theory and Film*, 67.

¹²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 69.

thereby offering the masochistic *jouissance* of the petty-bourgeois white male flesh as the embodiment of productive life as such, the *bios* of *zoe* that capitalist biopower needs to keep its *oikonomia* running.¹³⁰ As Agamben puts it, “sovereignty is, after all, precisely this ‘law beyond the law to which we are abandoned,’ that is, the self-presuppositional power of *nomos*.”¹³¹

For this reason, if there is a truly subversive form of femininity specific to the noir universe it cannot be simply identified with the *homo sacer* as patriarchy’s absolute victim. If noir’s sovereign masculinity is nothing but the masochistic articulation of his own sacred life, men absolutizing the power of their own law by falling victim to it, then to embrace some unrepresented, absolutely other feminine capacity to be hurt by the force of law that is refusing to be silenced would simply return us to the sacred life of noir’s sovereign man who is *already* precisely such “feminine” excess of the masculine regime, repressed by the community yet incessantly making itself seen and heard by them.¹³² Either way, we can say with Lacan that such a hidden essence of Woman, i.e. of the *femme fatale* (Woman as a Marxian fetish) doesn’t exist,¹³³ in capitalism, all sacred life with a *sovereign* voice is masculine, the rest is simply marked for potential execution.¹³⁴ Consequently, if there is any alternative to this masculine logic in film noir it has to undermine the male hero’s fatalistic presupposition and perpetuation of the very system of capitalist sovereignty. A move towards this direction is Pippin’s reading of Phyllis Dietrichson’s unexpected breakdown at the end of *Double Indemnity*:

¹³⁰ The implication here is that what Deleuze calls the time image, “pure optical and sound situations” detached from the linear logic of the Classical Hollywood Narrative—images where “time is out of joint and presents itself in the pure state”—far from being a “pure” a priori container of human life is in fact always already linked to sovereignty, that is, arbitrary biopolitical violence. Ibid. 271-72. For more on the Deleuzian ontology of images and noir sovereignty see Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

¹³¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 59.

¹³² See also Agamben’s similar conclusion: “[s]acred life -the life that is presupposed and abandoned by the law in the state of exception -is the mute carrier of sovereignty, the real sovereign subject.” Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), 113.

¹³³ Lacan, *Encore*, 7.

¹³⁴ See also Žižek’s formula: “If woman does not exist, man is perhaps simply a woman who thinks that she does exist.” Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso: New York, 2008), 82.

In the first place, Phyllis, who has come to represent the ineradicability of a remorseless, self-serving, and so always fated presence of evil in human life, shoots her partner, but in the name of a sudden discovery of at least something like love, does not finish off Walter with a second shot, surprising herself and him. (MacMurray is surprised but not too much, though. He coolly takes the gun from her, which she meekly surrenders, then kills her as she embraces him.) We have come to expect from her what she clearly expects from herself—unremitting self-interest, her destiny—and her own genuine puzzlement at what she does not do, what in effect gets her killed, figures the puzzlement of the viewers.¹³⁵

Phyllis falls victim to the internal contradiction of her death drive: while it is a drive towards self-valorization, it simultaneously undermines the social condition of all capitalist value, that is, membership in a productive community. Contrary to Walter who performs here a sovereign act proper, Phyllis remains frozen into what Lacan calls a gesture, an arrested movement suspended in time. Lacan sees the origin of gestures in a paralyzing encounter with the enigmatic gaze of the Other (recounting the ancient myth about Medusa's gaze). What immobilizes the body, he suggests, is the sense of visibility without the knowledge of what the subject is for the Other. In order to unfreeze herself, one has to imagine being part of a meaningful "picture," an imaginary scene satisfying the Other's desire that in turn offers coordinates for possible action. Such picture emerges in what Lacan calls "the moment of seeing" that "sutures" the gesture back to the realm of temporal progress by "warding off" the "evil eye" of the Other into the realm of the symbolic, thereby making it castrated, part blind, part seeing.¹³⁶ The passage from gesture to the picture therefore corresponds to the Oedipalization (i. e. immunization) of the subject in the scopic

¹³⁵ Pippin, *Fatalism in Film Noir*, 104.

¹³⁶ See Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 116-18.

dimension, taking partial control of the signifier *qua* gaze by offering it self-images that are incomplete, their lack activating a desire for one signifier more, one more picture. If, as Lacan famously claimed, “a signifier is what represents the subject for another signifier,” in the field of vision it is an image (*qua mise-en-scene* of desire in which the subject imagines herself to be “photo-graphed”¹³⁷ by the gaze) that represents the subject for another (the next) image. And, of course, this is precisely why psychoanalytic film theorists like Christian Metz talked about the imaginary *signifier* of cinema instead of simply reducing the screen to the imaginary *qua* complete ego-image the child faces in the mirror stage: “while the mirror instituted the ego very largely in the imaginary, the second mirror of the screen, a symbolic apparatus, itself in turn depends on reflection and lack.”¹³⁸

Where Lacan’s genealogy of images nonetheless digresses from the apparatus theories it later inspired is the slightly different role he attributes to the “suture.” As I have argued in the Introduction, in Lacanian film theory suture names the retroactive moment of signification whereby the place of the spectator-subject as the absent cause of the film’s structure gains a positive representation (enters the picture), leading to the deferral of the lack she stands for to a different spatiotemporal location, thus serving the development of the narrative. In short, suture is the name for the passage from imaginary to symbolic, from the spectator trapped in the mirror stage facing a scene of completeness she is absent from towards an Oedipalized subjectivity where she is sutured into the image as its constitutive lack. By contrast, Lacan seems to talk about suture *qua* passage from gesture to image in a more primordial sense, as a condition of possibility not only for the temporality of narrative (the *symbolic* sliding of the imaginary signifier) but also “the moment of seeing” a coherent image at all, that is, the *imaginary* of the

¹³⁷ Ibid., 106.

¹³⁸ Metz, *Imaginary Signifier*, 57.

mirror stage where the subject is *fixed* into an image.¹³⁹ In other words, gesture seems to fall into the domain of the *real*.

Interestingly, it is not a Lacanian but Agamben who investigates the gestural origins of images in the cinema. He posits a similar opposition between gesture and image to Lacan's, claiming that "on the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture (it is the imago as death mask or as symbol); on the other hand, they preserve the dynamys intact (as in Muybridge's snapshots or in any sports photograph)."¹⁴⁰ That is to say, just like Lacan he sees in the image the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (sublation) of the gesture that both maintains and eliminates its inner tension. Contrary to Lacan, however, he privileges gestures over images, going as far as claiming that "[t]he element of cinema is gesture and not image."¹⁴¹ Gestures, he argues, exhibit mediality without meaning, they are "means without an end," communicating nothing other than communicability.¹⁴² By becoming images, he asserts, gestures lose their pure potentiality and become commodified in the society of spectacle.¹⁴³

Agamben doesn't offer a detailed analysis of how this transformation occurs, but I suggest that reading his film-philosophy together with the Lacan's model of the suture can provide an answer. As I have already indicated, the conclusion of the Lacanian theory of the image is that once Oedipalized, our ordinary (desiring) life starts to function in a cinematic manner, as a movement from one *mise-en-scene* of the self photo-graphed by the gaze to another. While psychoanalytic film theory took note of this, perhaps most exhaustively Kaja Silverman in

¹³⁹ If anything, the elaboration of suture in Seminar XI seems to link the emergence of the imaginary to the symbolic, contrary to Lacan's early work on the mirror stage that proposes the imaginary as a pre-symbolic developmental stage of human subjectivity. See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, 75-82.

¹⁴⁰ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 55.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴³ Giorgio Agamben, "Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films," in *Guy Debord and The Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. T. McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 313-19.

her *The Threshold of the Visible World*,¹⁴⁴ the conceptual filter for this school of thought has been Althusserian since Jean-Louis Baudry's seminal essays introduced the cinema as an ideological apparatus.¹⁴⁵ This means that the cinema has been understood as just one among many modern disciplinary apparatuses—a reading that ignored the unique anti-ideological potential in its very *redoubling* of life's already existing moving image on film. Such redoubling through the screen has either been read as an imaginary mirror deceiving the viewer (in Baudry)¹⁴⁶ or as a symbolic playground where various cultural masks (or as Silverman puts it: “poses”)¹⁴⁷ of the self are put into play—a site of ideological fantasies in both cases. And despite a theoretical shift in the 90s towards the Lacanian register of the real by Joan Copjec,¹⁴⁸ Slavoj Žižek,¹⁴⁹ or Todd McGowan,¹⁵⁰ these scholars have not theorized the screen itself as real, as the uncanny double of our ordinary *mise-en-scenes* of desire.

I propose that such understanding of the screen as real in the Lacanian sense is offered by Stanley Cavell, who draws attention to the strange realism cinema derives from the fact that it's a “succession of *automatic* world projections,”¹⁵¹ that its images are of a world that, contrary to ordinary reality, is *not* created through dialectical mediation by the viewer.¹⁵² “In screening reality, film screens its givenness from us; it holds reality from us, it holds reality before us, i.e.,

¹⁴⁴ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996)

¹⁴⁵ Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus,” *Camera Obscura* 1:1 (1976): 104-26.; Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1974): 39-47.; Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-89.

¹⁴⁶ See Baudry, “The Apparatus”

¹⁴⁷ See Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible*, 202-26.

¹⁴⁸ Joan Copjec, “The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan,” *October* 49 (Summer, 1989): 53-71.

¹⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large,” in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan: (but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1992), 211-73.

¹⁵⁰ Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007)

¹⁵¹ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 72.; my italics

¹⁵² “How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen. This is not a wish for power over creation (as Pygmalion's was), but a wish not to need power, not to have to bear its burdens. It is, in this sense, the reverse of the myth of Faust.” *Ibid.*, 40.

withholds reality before us.”¹⁵³ For this reason, Cavell argues, “[f]ilm is a moving image of skepticism: not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that here our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist—even, alarmingly, *because* it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes.”¹⁵⁴ In Lacanian terms, the reality that does not exist on screen is the one mediated by Oedipalization, the *mise-en-scene* the subject places herself into for the gaze of the Other *qua* the alienated piece of herself she imagines watching her. Strictly speaking, the cinematic image is therefore not an image in the Lacanian sense. It is rather a gesture that momentarily stops the moving image of the viewer’s life by screening a world that is not for her, not for anyone in particular, but which is there for everyone to see. And it is this gestural potential of the cinematic medium that is neutralized by what I will call the meta-suture of the sovereign-image, the Oedipalization of cinema *qua* means without end, its integration into chains of signification grounded in a sovereign topology. The stake of this meta-suture is not the passage from imaginary to symbolic image as in the suture described by apparatus theorists, but the passage from the real of gesture to the domain of the image as such, from a non-signifying semiotic to (phallic) signification proper.

It is against such suture that Agamben proposes that the task of cinema is the “decreation” of images through the means of repetition and stoppage.¹⁵⁵ While his favoured examples are early cinema and the experimental films of Guy Debord, I suggest to consider the autoimmune metagenre of film noir as an example of decreation of the classical Hollywood narrative insofar as its mobilization of the logic of the death drive leads to the gestural stoppage of signification. On the part of the male protagonist, it’s perhaps more appropriate to talk about a gestural hesitation in the moment of absolute freedom preceding his sovereign suture back to the

¹⁵³ Ibid., 189.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 188-189.

¹⁵⁵ Agamben, “On Guy Debord’s Films,” 313-19.

territory of the image as it's highlighted especially well in films like *The Maltese Falcon* or *Gun Crazy*. In the examples above it is the *femme fatale* who embodies gestural stoppage proper, most often against her will like Laurie in *Gun Crazy* whose action of shooting at the police is stopped by her husband killing her before she could pull the trigger. It is Bart's sovereign deed that sublates her gesture of pointing a gun and repeatedly yelling "I'll kill you!" into an image: through a sovereign moment of seeing he re-joins the patriarchal apparatus as its fatally guilty prodigal son, his fantasy image captured in the final glorious overhead shot of the police walking up to his dead body. This way he is able to capture, at the price of his death, "in a separate sphere the inoperativity that is central to human life," make it work for the glory of what Agamben calls "the governmental machine" of *oikonomia*.¹⁵⁶ If Laurie's gesture nonetheless carries a utopian hope it's because it reveals that not all of the existing population can be captured in the mechanism of capitalist sovereignty even though, at least in film noir, all of them might want to be. Or more precisely, not all of them can be sovereign *because* all of them want to be, because sovereignty is necessarily based on the exclusion of *some* life not worth living.¹⁵⁷

Double Indemnity is interesting insofar as it goes further and explores the feminine consciousness of the gestural and the possibility of choosing it against the masculine-sovereign act. I suggest reading Phyllis' stoppage together with what I called the *inoperative* fatalism of Kathie in *Out of the Past*—inoperative being another Agambenian name for means without an end.¹⁵⁸ While both *femmes fatale* see themselves as egotistic sociopaths pursuing only their self-

¹⁵⁶ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 245.

¹⁵⁷ A life not worth living, of course, is another way of saying a life not producing valuable labour, a life excluded from the accumulation of abstract labour. The sovereign exclusion of femininity is therefore the condition of possibility for a hierarchical class structure based on one's position in the labour process. If the Marxan capitalist class includes those who control the accumulated abstract labour in the form of capital, and the proletariat refers to the people who have nothing but their (living) labour power to sell, the feminine subject excluded (dissociated) by the sovereign exclusion designates those whose life doesn't even enter the space of the world market, who don't even have that nothing of the sanctioned worker (his potential labour) to be valued for.

¹⁵⁸ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 141.

interest, choosing *jouissance* over the Oedipalized society by orchestrating the murder of the father figures in their lives, to commit their transgressions throughout the film they had always needed the help of a male patsy.¹⁵⁹ This is why the final confrontation with their masculine doubles has a more primordial dimension and is ultimately a move towards ontological self-sufficiency, that is, sovereignty. However, as Pippin suggested, the radical indeterminacy of the noir universe where individuals are separated from communal norms doesn't lead to self-transparency but to self-opacity. Or, in biopolitical terms, the gap between the unique life-enjoyment one has and its articulation/valorization as political life is unbridgeable without a reference to a virtual entity (to some figure of the Lacanian big Other). Walter can only leap through this void with the help of the sovereign presupposition of the superego gaze of perverse masculine community (including the viewer) that always already has punished him for the illicit act he is just about to perform, and the punishment for which exposes his life-enjoyment as sacred, vulnerable, but, paradoxically, valued as such. The illicit crime in his presupposition, of course, has to do with the *arbitrary* (rather than substantiated) demonization and sovereign exclusion of the *femme fatale* from that constellated masculine community. Therein lies the fundamentally conservative function of noir's sovereign-image: it sutures together and strengthens the boundaries of a social order that is *already supposed to exist*. By contrast, Phyllis cannot rely on such presupposition despite the fact that she initially clearly wants to. Her attempt at sovereign fatalism fails simply because the hegemonic biopolitical body of her time consists of petty-bourgeois white heterosexual men like Walter. Her sovereign threats fall back on her, they are turned inoperative much like Kathy's, disconnecting rather than conjoining the actual and the

¹⁵⁹ Incidentally it is because of this dependence on men that Imogen Sara Smith considers the classical noir *femme fatale* to be inferior to the "free spirited 'new woman'" of interwar Hollywood who were "allowed to be smart, capable, funny and sexy all at once." Imogen Sara Smith, *In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 81.

virtual dimensions of her life. Instead of covering up the missing foundation of modern biopower they *unintentionally* expose them, laying bare its contradictions. And before she dies, Phyllis reflects on her disconnect from what she thought were her own sovereign motives: “No, I never loved you or anybody else. I’m rotten to the heart. I used you just as you said until a minute ago, when I couldn’t fire that second shot. I never thought that could happen to me.” Her response is a gesture of embrace, communicating nothing but the desire to connect, which, however, is rejected by Walter (“Sorry baby, I don’t buy it.”) who shoots her dead.

The proper Lacanian name for Walter’s dismissal is disavowal; it refers to an act of un-seeing something that is in front of one’s eyes by substituting for it a fetish, in this case, that of the specter of the eternally evil Woman, the *objet a* the masculine subject separates himself from. It is by offering such fetishistic disavowal that film noir sutures the viewer into its sovereign-image, making him ignore cinema’s gestures in front of him. For Lacan, disavowal is the form of denial specific to perversion, which he distinguishes from the less drastic repression, a symptom of neurosis, and the more radical foreclosure that accompanies psychosis. The three layers of denial are mobilized in film noir’s white heterosexual male dominated biopolitical regime against different forms of life. While disavowal is directed against femininity, blackness, as Morphet and Lott demonstrated, is rather foreclosed; it returns only *in the real* in the form of the hallucinatory noir *mise-en-scene* itself. And finally, what film noir represses is male homosexuality, which means, in a Foucauldian manner, that while explicit male to male intercourse is prohibited, illicit homoerotic and homosocial desire is constantly produced through this very prohibition as the self-enjoyment of the male *bios*.

To sum up, the sovereign-image of masculine perversion and the feminine gesture of its utopian subversion are two contradictory aspects of the death drive film noir puts into play.

Sovereignty offers a meta-generic biopolitical support to the multitude of Hollywood's generic-immune communities through the flesh of a perverse white male brotherhood whose desire for its feminine other is suspended in favour of an endless performance of self-positing. Noir femininity *qua* male fantasy, *homo sacer* as the bare life of the *femme fatale* is "exclusively included"¹⁶⁰ in this regime: violently expelled but through that very same gesture also constituted as a transcendental, unrepresentable, purely virtual force that the male sovereign's drive to make *his* sacred life seen and heard is pitted against. By contrast, the *femme fatale*'s subversive potential becomes visible when we shift to her actual perspective and note that she aims to follow the masculine example but hits the invisible walls of sovereign exclusion (value dissociation), generating a utopian hope for a different, non-sovereign and non-capitalist paradigm of life *as a byproduct*. This also means that while in its masculine use the death drive produces crystal images of time, showing us time as a transcendental a priori of commodity producing patriarchy, the feminine breakdown of the time image into a gesture points towards a subject of drive beyond capitalist temporality. This brings the question whether noir also offers an autonomous form of femininity beyond the experience of the *femme fatale*'s failed masculinity, one in which the time of bourgeois life is permanently suspended. To explore this question, we have to consider whether a different relationship to the abstract-disciplinary dimension of the modern symbolic order is possible, one that is not based on the logic of sovereign immunization. This is the possibility that the late Lacan explores in his *Seminar XX*.

2.2 Noir Sovereignty's Utopian Alternative: The Feminine Logic of Snow Noir

¹⁶⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 85.

2.2.1 Feminine *Jouissance* as Film Noir's Utopian Impulse

I'd like to propose that the utopian dimension associated with film noir femininities insofar as they don't conform to the masculine notion of the *femme fatale* can be productively read through the late Lacan's model of sexual difference already mentioned in relation to noir's indeterminacy. This theory is often misunderstood as yet another ideological binary of psychoanalysis where instead of Freud's outdated biologism it is now essentialized linguistic constructs that justify the unequal treatment of men and women.¹⁶¹ What Lacan calls sexualization, however, is not only not based on anatomical difference, but it also doesn't simply designate the social (discursive) construction of gender. Instead of referring to particular symbolic categories it relates to the symbolic order as such, to the set of signifiers that constitute a language insofar as it is always necessarily incomplete, lacking, unable to signify itself (we always need one signifier more to do this ad infinitum). Based on this premise, Lacan, first of all, locates the human subject *as such* in the place of the big Other's (the social symbolic order's) fundamental lack, point of inconsistency. Second, he calls the exceptional signifier that fills the very same place the phallus; it is what signifies the very inability of the symbolic to close upon itself. Third, he proposes that there are only two, radically incompatible relations to the phallus (or master signifier) that subjects can have and these are responsible for one's sexuated position. In patriarchal-Oedipal societies¹⁶² man is the name for someone who has control over phallic signifiers that suture subjects into the field of the symbolic by turning their own constitutive negativity (lack) into positivity through the performative magic of the phallus, exchanging their vulnerability for power over society's dominant discourses. On the one hand, master signifiers

¹⁶¹ See for instance Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 37.

¹⁶² As his feminist critics rightly point out, Lacan doesn't have a proper historicization of the Oedipus complex. See for instance Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984)

such as father, family, nation are empty; they are symbolic manifestations of nothing (they are in themselves inoperative as Agamben would say). Yet, this is precisely the reason why they also help those who control them to evoke the semblance of something substantial (*real*). Lacan suggests that the alternative to this masculine *having* the phallus *qua* signifier is the feminine *being* the phallus *qua* remainder-lack, the real that cannot be symbolized—two mutually exclusive positions which leads him to conclude that men desire precisely what they *are* not, that is, woman as the phantasmatic embodiment of lack (*objet a*) whereas women want the phallus they cannot *have*. Crucially, in this early framework both male and female subjects acquire *jouissance* through the mediation of the phallus. What Lacan calls feminine masquerade is precisely the phallic enjoyment available for women who can claim unsanctioned possession of master signifiers by imitating the masculine rituals associated with them.¹⁶³ In the previous sections I have outlined the biopolitical edifice supporting phallic signification, emphasizing that its *symbolic* dimension (such as the Hollywood Production Code) capturing glory is always supplemented by the immunized life of an *imaginary* community (the level of fantasy in Lacan’s system), and how the whole apparatus has to be grounded in a sovereign decision made in the place of the system’s undecidability (what Lacan calls the void of the *real*). *Jouissance* is produced here always through some imaginary articulation of the real against the ignorant gaze of the symbolic.¹⁶⁴

In his later work, however, Lacan complicates his previous formulations by introducing an additional, non-phallic *jouissance* on the feminine side that he calls “Other-*jouissance*” or the

¹⁶³ Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,” in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 575-85.

¹⁶⁴ This is expressed in the Lacanian formula of fantasy: $\$ \diamond a$, where the split subject (half represented in the symbolic, half distanced from it through immunization) relates to *objet a*, the fantasmatic embodiment of the real. See Jacques Lacan, *The Object Relation. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IV*, trans. L.V.A. Roche (Unpublished)

“jouissance of being,”¹⁶⁵ through which women relate to the big Other “insofar as it is barred,”¹⁶⁶ without this bar (lack) in the symbolic—the source of the subject’s enjoyment—being mediated (signified) by the phallus to give the illusion of completeness. This doesn’t mean that Lacan posits what he calls the feminine logic of “non-all” as independent from the phallic function (Φ),¹⁶⁷ his name for the masculine apparatus of sovereignty.¹⁶⁸ In his formulas of sexuation (Figure 4.) both the masculine (left) and the feminine (right) positions are still defined in relation to this phallic function. However, the first line of the formulas reverses his earlier claims by suggesting that it is the feminine position that follows the phallic logic without exception while the masculine side is not fully submitted to it. Still, Lacan’s paradoxical conclusion in the following line is that it is nonetheless woman, despite her complete alienation in the symbolic, who escapes full subordination to the phallic apparatus while man, despite his partial freedom from it, gets caught in it entirely.

¹⁶⁵ Lacan, *Encore*, 70.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁶⁷ The official English translation uses the term “not-whole” for the French “Pas-tout,” but many Lacanians prefer “non-all” for its set theoretical implications (the feminine set is one to which we can always add new elements without completing it). For a detailed reflection on this terminological debate see Ben Tyrer, *Out of the Past: Lacan and Film Noir* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 115-119.

¹⁶⁸ As Eric Santner puts it, “The ‘phallic signifier’ as the signifier of castration (also referred to as the signifier of lack) is, one could say, the signifier of the missing link between the biological and the Symbolic (or between nature and culture) as the generic point of sexuation.” Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), 80.

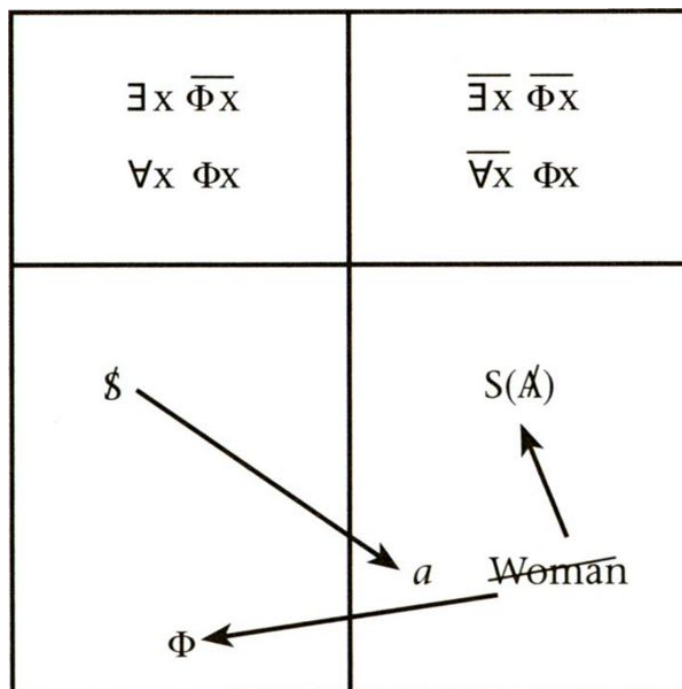


Figure 5.

Žižek proposes to resolve this apparent contradiction by turning to topology, emphasizing how Lacan places phallic *jouissance* and the symbolic order on two different levels of reality: “What Lacan designates as the 'phallic function' is this very splitting between the domain of phallic enjoyment and the desexualized 'public' field that eludes it - that is to say, 'Phallic' [the phallic function] is this self-limitation of the Phallus [the phallus as signifier], this positing of an Exception.”¹⁶⁹ He thereby turns phallic into a synonym for what Esposito calls immunization. Consequently, he argues, all men are caught in the phallic function not despite but *because* they maintain an *imaginary* distance towards their own public-*symbolic* mask of power, i.e. the phallus as signifier. They enjoy this very ironic distance from it in an immunized (but, we might add, always potentially autoimmune) space of exception where they imagine having the *real* (as opposed to merely symbolic) phallus, the enjoyment-substance that would make up for the hole

¹⁶⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (New York: Verso, 1994), 153.

in the symbolic order. Such a semblance of the impossible fullness and self-sufficiency of the social (expressed in the noir hero's fatalism), of course, "merely 'gives body' to the impotence/inconsistency of the big Other."¹⁷⁰

By contrast, Žižek interprets the feminine non-all as the position from which the subject "sees through' the fascinating presence of the [real] Phallus, that she is able to discern in it the 'filler' of the inconsistency of the big Other."¹⁷¹ She is able to do this because all of woman is submitted to the phallic function without an immunizing exception; that is, woman cannot but know that there isn't such a thing as the real phallus in men's possession because her bare life is placed outside that supposedly complete universe that the *jouissance* of the male flesh closes upon itself. One might say that it is this knowledge that constitutes woman's Other *jouissance*, however, Lacan is quick to add somewhat enigmatically, such knowledge cannot be articulated directly as it doesn't exist in the symbolic; it rather "ex-sists" (or "insists" as Žižek puts it);¹⁷² it can only be experienced through the body.¹⁷³ Once we try to make this excess sovereign, we end up reproducing the *femme fatale* as man's double whom he kills so that he can take her place. As the bottom right corner of the formulas indicate, Lacan conceptualizes feminine *jouissance* (the subjectivity of the Woman who ex-sists) as a non-phallic relation to the social symbolic order, embracing a big Other that includes its lack instead of positing one that is blind to it; a symbolic that is inconsistent and therefore open to any form of bare life precisely because none of them could complete it. For this reason, Lacan's claim that "there is no such thing as a sexual

¹⁷⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (New York: Verso, 1996), 157.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 156.

¹⁷³ Lacan, *Encore*, 74.

relationship”¹⁷⁴ means that the feminine and the masculine logic of sexuation represent two contradictory but, despite the masculine side’s best efforts, equally *failed* totalizations of the symbolic order as well as two irreconcilable ways to enjoy its lack. Sexual difference then is the Lacanian name of a fundamental deadlock of symbolization that accompanies every subject position,¹⁷⁵ masculine (sovereign) and feminine (utopian) alike, destabilizing each through the exposure to the other’s incompatible way of making sense of the very same (inconsistent) universe, pushing them repeatedly to either support sovereign power’s *oikonomia* or, to use another Agambenian term, “destitute it,” “to rake away its legitimacy, compel it to recognize its arbitrariness, reveal its contingent dimension.”¹⁷⁶

Other *jouissance* is what *femmes fatale* like Phyllis Dietrichson or Kathie Moffat started to exhibit the moment when they fell out of the fetishistic role designated for them by the masculine imaginary, the role of the *subject supposed to enjoy*, the uncastrated Woman who supposedly has full access to *phallic* enjoyment.¹⁷⁷ By not following this fatalistic script, they made their male counterpart’s act of sovereign violence appear arbitrary, even ridiculous. But doesn’t this mean they are tamed into the opposite noir stereotype, that of the nurturing woman who, as I have suggested, plays the role of the *subject supposed to believe* taking, presumably, the symbolic rituals of patriarchy at face value *instead* of the members of the masculine

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 144.

¹⁷⁵ As Žižek puts it, “sexual difference is not some mysterious inaccessible X which can never be symbolized but, rather, the very obstacle to this symbolization, the stain which forever keeps the Real apart from the modes of its symbolization.” Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 278.

¹⁷⁶ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. R. Hurley (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 75.

¹⁷⁷ The “subject supposed to enjoy” is Žižek’s term for the externalization of one’s excess of *jouissance* on an imaginary figure of the other. See Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 147.

community (including the viewer)?¹⁷⁸ As Nicholas Christopher summarizes, such female character is usually depicted as

unrelievedly pallid and passive—to the point of repulsing us, as well as the hero. She is most often the girl back home, or the faithful, long suffering wife, or the steady fellow worker at the office, or the platonic friend futilely in love with the hero. She is very much not a denizen of the night. In fact, she tends to be portrayed in the few daylight, pastoral scenes in film noir, usually with flat, high-key lighting, in the kind of wide open spaces to which the femme fatale would be a rare visitor, indeed.¹⁷⁹

In other words, she is a subject who is *not* supposed to enjoy, not even supposed to know about enjoyment (about the male hero's dealings with the *femme fatale*), which makes her one of the names of the father, only instead of standing in for the primordial (real) father of the superego she plays the role of the castrated and blind symbolic one. While such woman is undoubtedly a reactionary fantasy, what's crucial in films like *Out of the Past* or *Double Indemnity* is that she appears outside of her designated sphere as a layer of the *femme fatale*'s persona that contradicts her stereotypical mask of evil, exposing the ontological inconsistency of Woman *qua* male fantasy, turning it inoperative, that is to say, useless for the apparatus of patriarchal sovereignty. Insofar as Lacan maintains that "*jouissance* is what serves no purpose,"¹⁸⁰ it is the feminine logic that embraces *jouissance* as such, and the masculine logic is nothing but a defense against this feminine enjoyment of inoperativity by turning *jouissance* into a building block of an operative

¹⁷⁸ As Manon notes, "noir's central fantasy: the notion of an utterly oblivious "public eye," corresponding to that of the average citizen in the real world outside the theater, who does not know that s/he does not know." Manon, "Some Like it Cold," 32. What I would add to this is that such oblivious public eye is feminized precisely through the figure of the nurturing woman.

¹⁷⁹ Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 198.

¹⁸⁰ Lacan, *Encore*, 3.

machine. For the phallic logic, (feminine) enjoyment is split up into two operative components, *supposed* enjoyment and *supposed* belief—two feminine roles that appear on two different (real and symbolic) levels of reality. When Lacan talks about feminine *jouissance* as Other *jouissance* and *jouissance* of Being, this means that enjoyment that he in his early work positioned in the real as a state of exception from the big Other can now appear, in a feminine form, at the level of the symbolic itself precisely because it collapses the phallic topology of separate levels.

This indicates that there may also be more to noir's nurturing woman than the above quote from Christopher suggests, that just like the *femme fatale* she might at times fall out of her designated operative role as a passive believer in the power of patriarchy. The atypical noir heroine of the "working-girl investigator" identified by Helen Hanson in films like *Phantom Lady* (1944) or *The Dark Corner* (1946) is a case in point insofar as she typically is an assistant platonically in love with her male employer, but after the man is falsely accused of a crime, she puts on the mask of the *femme fatale* and descends into the underworld to find the real culprit and clear the boss's name. *Phantom Lady* is particularly interesting because it juxtaposes two contradictory deployments of the feminine gaze in the same protagonist, Carol "Kansas" Richman. One of them is her excessive and seemingly naive adoration of his boss, the refusal to believe that the man could commit a crime, which is framed in a series of close-ups of her troubled face reading the news about his arrest, looking worried while the man is being convicted in court, and watching his resignation to his fate in prison with pity. Later, however, as she progresses with her investigation her gazing becomes both sexualized and threatening: she now uses it to stare at a false witness for hours to break him psychologically, seduce another to find out what he is hiding, and check out his boss's body while he is not looking. And, although the

eventually cleared male protagonist's decision to marry Kansas can be interpreted as an attempt to re-assign a rigid role to her (probably away from the masculine sphere of wage labour), the actual proposal that closes the film is more ambiguous. The boss records it at the end of his usual dictaphone message about the daily tasks for his secretary to which the woman listens in his absence: "You know you're having dinner with me tonight, and tomorrow night, and the next night... and then... every night!" Here the record gets stuck repeating the words "every night" ad infinitum, while the camera closes in on Kansas's face looking upwards in ecstasy, pulling the speaker close to her chest. I propose not to read her enjoyment (merely) as a phallic one, gained through the mediation of the master signifier controlled by the male hero. The uniqueness of this ending lies rather in its decreation of the phallic signifier of bourgeois marriage through its endless repetition that brings out what Lacan calls "the being of signifierness" which he identifies as the source of feminine *jouissance*. As he puts it, "that being has no other locus than the locus of the Other (Autre) that I designate with capital A," that is to say, the *jouissance* of such being is not based on a phallic exception.¹⁸¹ This is also why Lacan maintains that feminine enjoyment belongs to a subject who is "non-all," that it delineates an "indeterminate existence" belonging to an "infinite set" instead of the finite one totalized/closed off by an exceptional phallic signifier.¹⁸²

2.2.2 Sexual Difference as Utopian Program?

If Lacan's theory of feminine *jouissance* opens up utopian possibilities for the non-masculine reading of the *femme fatale* as well as the nurturing woman, the question nonetheless remains whether, to use Fredric Jameson's Blochian distinction, film noir also offers something

¹⁸¹ Lacan, *Encore*, 77.

¹⁸² "When I say that woman is not-whole and that that is why I cannot say Woman, it is precisely because I raise the question (je mets en question) of a *jouissance* that, with respect to everything that can be used in the function ϕx , is in the realm of the infinite." *Ibid.*, 103.

like a utopian program in addition to the utopian impulse or hope expressed from within the confines of the masculine world. What the former, according to Jameson, “all have in common, [...] besides the Utopian transformation of reality itself, is that closure or enclave structure which all Utopias must seemingly confront one way or another. These Utopian spaces are thus on whatever scale totalities; they are symbolic of a world transformed; as such they must posit limits, boundaries between the Utopian and the non-Utopian.”¹⁸³ What we are looking for, therefore, is the space within which noir femininities stop functioning as the symptom of the masculine-sovereign universe and become instead the rule in an autonomous and self-sufficient totality opposed to the standard masculine logic of film noir, a totality that gains its closure effect from this very antagonism rather than from valuing any particular form of life. It should be emphasized, however, that Jameson does *not* suggest that utopian programs are actual blueprints for future societies to come: “Utopia is not what can be positively imagined and proposed, but rather what is not imaginable and not conceivable. Utopia, I argue, is not a representation but an operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future, the lines beyond which we do not seem able to go in imagining changes in our own society and world (except in the direction of dystopia and catastrophe).”¹⁸⁴ Lacan’s theory of feminine *jouissance*, I claim, is just such a utopian program. If from the masculine perspective femininity is the symptom of the phallic order (its inclusive exclusion that supports it from the outside through its very exclusion), with the feminine logic of language Lacan formulates how the same society would look like from its symptom’s perspective, with the very mechanisms that turned it into a symptom still present but put out of order. Such an operation is properly unimaginable from a masculine position of the status quo. Yet, even the activation of this utopian (feminine) imagination beyond

¹⁸³ Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2009), 415.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 413.

the everyday (masculine) ideological imaginary only leads to contradictions. Utopias can be critical apparatuses not because they offer an actual alternative to the present but because they draw attention to how the same symbolic order can always be totalized in antagonistic ways.

2.2.3 Freezing Capital's Masculine Dialectic: The Utopian Program of Snow Noir¹⁸⁵

Snow is a rare substance in film noir primarily because it illuminates the gloomy *mise-en-scene* too much, breaking with stylistic conventions of chiaroscuro lighting by exchanging the creeping shadows threatening to engulf the doomed protagonists for a more redemptive vision of universal brightness. As Ken Hillis argues, the noir universe is based on the scarcity of light as a resource. After Augustine, he distinguishes between two forms of light: *lumen*, “the objective, inexhaustible, intelligible, and divinely created radiance passing through and illuminating space,” (which Hillis identifies with Enlightenment universalism in the modern era) and *lux*, “*lumen*’s earthly reflection,” light in its culturally mediated form.¹⁸⁶ The human in this framework “is a light also lit by light,” which—insofar as this circular economy of *lumen* and *lux* is a perfect example of the paradox of glory—can be rephrased as: humans perceive God’s (Enlightenment’s) glory but they are also supposed to glorify God (work on their own enlightenment).¹⁸⁷ If we take light as a metaphor for the ineffable substance of glory, film noir’s autoimmune crisis of the symbolic order appears as the crisis of the universal light supply (*lumen*), which is resolved through light’s sovereign privatization (as *lux*) for a masculine body

¹⁸⁵ My use of the term was inspired by the following article: Ian Buckwalter, “Snow is the New Noir: In Praise of Wintery Crime Films,” *The Atlantic*, December 10, 2012, accessed February 28, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/12/snow-is-the-new-noir-in-praise-of-wintery-crime-films/266007/>.

¹⁸⁶ Ken Hillis, “Film Noir and the American Dream: The Dark Side of Enlightenment,” *The Velvet Light Trap* no. 55 (2005): 9.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

politic. By contrast, snow noir imagines a world in which such limitation doesn't occur and light belongs to everyone.

Snow, of course, is also a pure manifestation of the eternal noir trope of death as everyone's inevitable destiny, yet, as I will show, its power to freeze life curiously works against the noir heroes' already death driven sovereign transgressions of immunized social norms. Within the unique constellation of what can be called the snow noir universe, the frozen landscape, much like death itself, is not a cruel fate's punishment for the inherently flawed human condition as in traditional noir's masculine fantasies but rather a sign of grace marking the exit from the Paulean vicious circle of sin, the perverse dialectic of the law and its sovereign exception that noir characters are caught within. As a decreation and "profane illumination" of the canonical noir image into a realm of gesture, the apparently dystopian spectacle of snow noir with its mythical space and time isolated from the rest of the world by eternal winter carries an unexpected message of hope. The desolate, icy locations of these films symbolize not simply the temporary suspension but the permanent deactivation of the law of the father, allowing for a utopian articulation of feminine *jouissance* not captured in noir's masculine apparatus of compulsory transgression. The frozen landscape of these films is the result of a negation of negation. It's a feminine utopia that undermines the official phallic symbolic order's constitutive sovereign exception, that is, the temporal dialectic of the Oedipal law between pure time and productive time, in the name of an atemporal/eternal feminine non-all, universality without exception.

Snow noir is even less of a genre in Altman's sense of the term than film noir itself and, as I will show in the next chapter, it cannot even be considered a cycle until the mid-90s. We are talking about a few isolated examples at the fringes of classical noir that represent a common

utopian agenda in negating noir's masculinist ideological and stylistic traits. One of the paradigmatic snow noirs of the classical era is Nicholas Ray's *On Dangerous Ground* (1952), a film that sets up the *mise-en-scene* for its second act by inverting the shadowy urban cityscape that dominates the first half of the film into a bright, snowy countryside. This is the destination where Wilson, the sadistic detective protagonist is sent on a temporary exile for enjoying beating up his suspects and his women little too much even for the cynical standards of the city's rather unscrupulous police force. As he is driving away from the suffocating metropolitan core, however, instead of a sublime landscape of nature yet to be tainted by forces of progress he encounters what Edward Dimendberg calls the centrifugal forces of modernity: highway constructions, commuter trains and a steel bridge signifying the inevitable link of the small village community stirred up by the murder of a little girl with the already corrupted (modernized) centripetal space of the noir city. Upon the detective's arrival, the dark fate of the countryside is foreshadowed by an overhead shot of the bridge that reveals a local lynch mob passing underneath, hunting for the killer.

Historically, as Dimendberg argues, this shift in noir's favored territories can be linked to the increasing decentralization and suburbanization of American cities after 1949, which replaces the former noir sensation of being overwhelmed by and getting lost in the urban crowd with anxieties over perpetual motion and disorientation in a vast space without established landmarks.¹⁸⁸ In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, the new suburban sprawl involves capital's dialectic of deterritorialization and reterritorialization; in order for it to move away from the city's center, the remaining pre-modern territoriality of the countryside has to be destroyed, preparing the ground for its reterritorialization. The film maps this duality in capital's movement

¹⁸⁸ Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 172.

through its male protagonist who is both the representative of the city's expanding symbolic law and the agent of its deterritorializing sovereign suspension. Lacking a conventional *femme fatale* opponent to undermine his endeavour, he is notably different from the typical noir hero who usually fails to maintain the appearance of phallic authority. In a larger historical context, Wilson is an example of what Michael Kimmel calls marketplace manhood, a modern American gender performance that has its roots in the mid-19th century when men had to adapt to the endless pressures of market competition. In this environment they developed a split consciousness, showing calmness, strength and independence on the outside while remaining restless and agitated on the inside, suspicious of any achievement, preparing for newer and newer tests of their manhood. Such dynamics produced its own ideology of sexual difference, the "flight from the feminine," starting with the son's repudiation of his dependency on the mother which then extended to the devaluation of femininity in the self and in the other, marking it as "sissyness." The individual's quest for real manhood, of course, is a goal that can never be reached as traces of unmanliness always remain that are continuously scrutinized and challenged by the gaze of a masculine community.¹⁸⁹ In Kimmel's model, therefore, it is the market that is responsible for the autoimmune turn of the homosocial and the individual's sovereign quest for the real phallus.

The different functions of the feminine and the masculine gaze in Ray's film are linked to the two moments of marketplace manhood's dialectic and to its dual role in reterritorialization and deterritorialization. When Wilson interviews the mother and sister of the victim in their family home, he performs the reassuring patriarchal role expected from a male representative of the law (his authority is further emphasized by his towering figure making the much shorter women somewhat uneasy). Their "talk" about the case is then quickly interrupted by the barging

¹⁸⁹ Michael S. Kimmel "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," in Michael S. Kimmel, *Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 23-43.

in of the murdered girl's father who doesn't want to waste time with formalities and quickly sends the women and children away, revealing his intention to lynch the perpetrator instead of bringing him to justice. Wilson doesn't reply but when the two men step outside and look at each other again, a smirk appears on his face establishing a homosocial pact to transgress the limits of the official symbolic law he pretended to stick to only in front of the subjects supposed to believe. Accordingly, what follows is the detective's frantic car chase after the killer into the wilderness, intensified by the impatient shouting of the bloodthirsty father on the passenger seat, leading the two men beyond territoriality. Their homosocial lynching ritual, however, is undercut when the car swerves off the road, which is now fully covered in snow, hiding the traces of the fugitive. After a short walk through the woods they happen upon an isolated house amidst the vast frozen landscape where they find a blind woman, Mary, the killer's older sister who dedicates her life to taking care of her mentally retarded brother. Her Biblical name is appropriate for her saintly persona of love and forgiveness that offers sanctuary to her fallen sibling from the murderous rage of the village posse. Like the heavy snow before, the presence of the woman's blind yet perceptive gaze derails Wilson's quest further, confusing his gender performance as his sturdy façade doesn't seem to have any effect on Mary who sees him as an embittered, broken, but ultimately kind hearted man, decreating his masculine self-image into inoperative gestures. Hers is the same all seeing and emasculating gaze the *femme fatale* has in the usual noir scenario, except it is now framed by a different symbolic regime, de-fetishized from its role in the masculine imaginary as the perverse superego underside of the symbolic law that pushed men over the edge towards a real-impossible manhood.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 160.

It is the pressure *and* the enjoyment of this constant sovereign flight from the feminine that snow noir's redemptive woman dislocates men from. Wilson, of course, doesn't fully abandon his sadistic urge to kill, never openly conceding Mary's request to take her brother alive, nor does Danny let go of his own sovereign-murderous impulse entirely. Their encounter nonetheless leads to a temporary feminine bond between the existentially disillusioned detective and the social outcast mentally ill boy. In their former noir scenarios now left behind for the snowbound sanctuary both of them played the sovereign murderer/abuser of *femmes fatale* for which both of them were abandoned by their local masculine communities. When they finally meet, the two men stare at each other as if they were looking into the mirror in a suspended showdown, both of them ready to use their weapon but never getting around doing so. Yet again, it is the father's arrival that interrupts the potentially non-antagonistic scene of exchanging gestures, reactivating the economy of the superego that drives the boy off a cliff into his designated place in death. He is pushed outside the rapidly expanding territory of capital with the assistance of the masculine law that needs its illicit sovereign support such as Danny's crime to remain irredeemable. Significantly, this arbitrary biopolitical separation of Wilson and Danny has to do with their relation to women. While in the first half of the film we see Wilson physically abusing *femme fatale* characters and thereby successfully exercising phallic control over them, Danny's confession that his murderous outburst was motivated by his sense of inadequacy in front of a girl gets marked by the patriarchal regime as sissyness, and becomes the ultimate reason why he has to die (a "real man" like Wilson would have just raped or beaten the girl).

Wilson himself also flees from the feminine back to the city, which is how the original script ended the film, in an appropriately downbeat manner for its noir aspirations. Nicholas

Ray's final version, however, adds what appears to be (at least in noir terms) a tacked on sentimental twist by having the male protagonist return to the countryside and live with the woman offering him redemption from his dark past happily ever after.¹⁹¹ Such a closure is certainly suspicious, fitting into the ideologically loaded centrifugal shift in the second half of the classical noir cycle when the *femme fatale* gradually loses her central role¹⁹² and the focus of crime films shifts to the suburbs where the ideological restoration of the bourgeois family is taking place towards a new postwar society of affluence and conformism.¹⁹³ Yet, *On Dangerous Ground* doesn't quite fit this paradigm as Mary's lonely house on a snowbound hill where the couple withdraws into remains outside capital's new centrifugal territoriality: the final panning shot of the icy landscape surrounding it lacks any sign of human civilization. At the same time, this strange non-place also resists deterritorialization; unlike all that is solid in Marx's famous metaphor, this frozen country refuge emphatically does not melt into air. For this reason, it's more appropriate to describe the film's snow noir universe as what Jameson calls a utopian enclave, an imaginary by-product of modernization "dependent on the momentary formation of a kind of eddy or self-contained backwater within the general differentiation process and its seemingly irreversible forward momentum."¹⁹⁴ In this case it's a rural utopia (but not an idyll as it barely has any living plants or animals) where time stands still (or, rather, time is dislocated from the temporality of abstract labour), appearing against the background of the increasing disappearance of the American countryside due to the expanding forces of capitalism that previously concentrated in urban centers.

¹⁹¹ Imogen Sarah Smith, *In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 39.

¹⁹² Boozer, "The Lethal *Femme Fatale*," 23.

¹⁹³ Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," 108.

¹⁹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), 15.

The film's mobilization of a Lacanian feminine symbolic to map this utopian space is thus an attempt to negate the masculine dialectic of capital's expansion in a historical moment when its wheels are changing directions. It is by seeking newer and newer sovereign exceptions from its shifting territorializations that the machine of the Oedipal law's masculine dialectic (ultimately, as Deleuze and Guattari suggested, the machine of capital itself)¹⁹⁵ moves forward, running in circles after its own tail. By contrast, the feminine logic of non-all eliminates the space of exception by collapsing the two functions of the gaze, the universality of the symbolic and the real as its sovereign exception into one body of feminine *jouissance* based on a paradoxical singular universal.¹⁹⁶ This is how in the film, Mary is able to see despite being physically blind; she sees the gestures beyond the arbitrary differentiations (images) set up by the ruling social order that take the police brutality of Wilson as the tolerated extension of the force of law while positioning Danny's retarded body, his impotent outburst of sovereign violence on the side of feminized lawlessness. For her, the two men are equally worthy of forgiveness regardless whether the particular life-enjoyment they are caught up in is sanctioned by an immunized community or marked as its abnormal excess to be destroyed. This is why one should not all too hastily dismiss the film's final turn to Christian ideology as sentimental Hollywood kitsch. Mary's prayer for her dead brother has a utopian connotation directed against the perverse death drive of noir's sovereign masculinities, identified here as sin: "Father, hear my prayer. Forgive him. As you have forgiven all your children who have sinned. Don't turn your face from him. He didn't know what he was doing. Bring him at last to rest in your peace . . . which he could never have found . . . here." This plea to the *symbolic* father function of the masculine

¹⁹⁵ see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hutley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 240-62.

¹⁹⁶ see Alenka Zupancic, "The Case of the Perforated Sheet," in *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 289-90.

regime not to look away from the *jouissance* exclusively included in it performatively turns the entire apparatus of sovereign power inoperative, making possible, as Agamben would put it, another use of the law¹⁹⁷ through the deactivation of its (auto)immunizing topology, thereby also suspending capital's masculine dialectic of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.

It's worth comparing the close-up of Mary's face during her prayer to the shot of Kansas's ecstasy at the end of *Phantom Lady*. On the one hand, to paraphrase Lacan's assertion about Bernini's Ecstasy of St. Teresa, "[the viewer] immediately understand[s] that [Kansas] is coming,"¹⁹⁸ that is, she is getting off on the inoperative "signifierness" of language. By contrast, Mary's face has the small twitches and contortions that betray her resentment of the phallic regime that made her powerless, that treats her like a subject supposed to believe (the policemen don't tell her the details of Danny's death, making her believe his fall into the abyss was an act of God). We could say that resentment is how feminine *jouissance* appears to the masculine regime that misidentifies it as the affect of what Nietzsche called slave morality, a trick the weak play on their masters by claiming that their impotence expressed through humility and compassion makes them morally superior.¹⁹⁹ On the final images, however, resentment disappears from Mary's face as she embraces the returning Wilson, a man she cannot see and therefore cannot glorify as a figure of patriarchal authority like noir's nurturing woman but whom she can love as the non-phallic (inoperative, castrated) Other.

If *On Dangerous Ground*'s snowy utopia intervened into the noir canon by hijacking its centrifugal movement and suspending the efficacy of its phallic dialectic, an earlier, no less paradigmatic snow noir from the classical era, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), follows the opposite

¹⁹⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. K. Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 64.

¹⁹⁸ Lacan, *Encore*, 76.

¹⁹⁹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967)

logic. Here it's the explosion of the noir formula that temporarily erases the anti-capitalist enclave of the small town of Bedford Falls, a menacing force standing in for capital's centripetal momentum that threatens the countryside with its gravitational pull towards the urban center, a direction that, according to Dimendberg, dominated American architectural planning as well as noir films between 1939 and 1949.²⁰⁰ This should be added to Kaja Silverman's critique of the film that emphasizes how it conforms to the era's "dominant fiction" by rejecting the male hero's youthful dreams about international travel and big city life in favour of the established reality of a small town bourgeois family.²⁰¹ These official layers of the symbolic law at the time, including the sanctity of heterosexual marriage and the petit-bourgeois family business should be understood rather as presupposed elements of genre games against which the superego pressure to abandon these very norms could be posited. Therefore, the fact that George Bailey expresses his desire to flee to the city and live as a bachelor several times yet never manages to realize his plan in fact goes against the dominant ideology. His inability to leave, of course, frustrates him; he considers himself the victim of a rather outdated patriarchal social order where his given word to his father to take over his loan business, much like the company's commitment to finance the local community's housing needs regardless of solvency, offers little to no profit, undermining his chance of a real manly adventure. The patriarchy dominant in the film is therefore strangely asexual, detaching itself from its libidinal support, forming a homosocial community markedly different from the hyperphallic lynch mob in *On Dangerous Ground*. As Silverman notes, it is filled with "castrated men" and "weak fathers" such as the George himself or his forgetful Uncle

²⁰⁰ Dimendberg, *Film Noir*, 86-119.

²⁰¹ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 92.

Billy who loses a company cheque of 8000 dollars while walking around with a crow on his shoulder (even Potter, the town's capitalist tycoon is a cripple).²⁰²

The specter of real (marketplace) manhood appears only as an external force intruding from the city, for instance in the phone call that Mary, George's soon to be wife receives from Sam, their common childhood acquaintance, now finance capitalist and the girl's official suitor. Mary is rather indifferent to the man's advances and utilizes the event instead to divert the attention of her own inept love interest (George) from his travel plans using her feminine charms. On the one hand, the shot of Sam on the phone in his office in New York is styled after typical noir imagery: the dark city with neon lights in the background half covered by venetian blinds, a woman wearing a fur coat holding a drink and a cigarette leaning over her man's shoulders to bite his ear while he tries to keep her away from the telephone. He jokingly expresses his jealousy about George's presence in Mary's house while at the same time offering him an investment opportunity in the city. Meanwhile, the spatial arrangement of the couple at the other end of the line is quite different; George is too disoriented, unable/unwilling to hold the phone alone so Mary steps in, the two of them having now an equal opportunity to listen and talk, both of them repeating the phrases of Sam's investment pitch with a hollow tone, taking upon themselves its form (it's signifierness) emptied of masculine *jouissance*, playfully diverting the funds towards the weird universe of Bedford Falls and their inoperative bourgeois marriage to come (Sam agrees to fund the Bailey company). They drop the receiver and start kissing, while George cries out the last vestiges of his sovereign masculine desire: "I don't want any plastics, I don't want any ground floor, and I don't want to get married-ever-to anyone ... I want to do what I want to do!" Then we immediately cut to their marriage ceremony as a possible example of

²⁰² Ibid.

what Deleuze calls masochistic humor, “the downward movement from the law to its consequences” where “the very law which forbids the satisfaction of desire under threat of subsequent punishment is converted into one which demands the punishment first and then orders that the satisfaction of the desire should necessarily follow upon the punishment.”²⁰³ Marriage is George’s “punishment”, not *for* his failure to succeed in the city as the masculine paradigm would frame it but *instead* of it—a different use of the law made possible by the suspension of the superego’s vicious circle of transgression and guilt (deteritorialization and reterritorialization). As a result, his former opposition between the territoriality of the feminine countryside and the masculine deterritorializing force of the city collapses into a new space where the two become indistinct, exemplified by the couple’s new house the interior of which Mary transforms, with the help of some props and travel posters, “into a comic condensation of all the locations George has dreamed of visiting.”²⁰⁴

Such utopia, which develops into an alternative to the capitalist mode of production through Bailey Park’s community financed non-profit housing project, nonetheless continues to be vulnerable to the return of the film’s primordial father figure, Potter, who steals the cheque of 8000 dollars that Uncle Billy drops on his lap, hoping to put an end to the Bailey’s anomalous enterprise and get his hand on some cheap real estate. When George hears the bad news on Christmas Eve, he collapses under the suddenly returning weight of guilt to the point that he is ready to end his life by jumping off a bridge into an ice cold river. He is saved, however, by the divine intervention of his guardian angel Clarence, who, in order to convince him that his life is worth living, shows George what Bedford Falls would have become had he not been born. Not surprisingly, without the hero’s feminine gestures, the town, now called Pottersville, turns into a

²⁰³ Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 88.

²⁰⁴ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, 100.

full blown noir nightmare with lives broken by urban isolation, prostitution, and alcoholism. It is this temporary irruption of the noir impulse, the bleak vision that pushes George's masculine deterritorializing (death) drive to its logical conclusion that retroactively establishes the film's snowy Christmas noir universe as its utopian obverse. In this nightmare sequence, similarly to film noirs like *Scarlet Street*, his failure to become a real man is expressed through his comic inability to die, being forced to wander around as a living dead in the noir realm of his youthful sovereign fantasies where, since he has finally left behind the symbolic entirely, he doesn't exist, his acts can have no effect on the world. Unlike canonical noir films, however, *It's a Wonderful Life* presents this lonely place of the abandoned sovereign hero as the result of his choice between two alternative visions of the symbolic based on different uses of George's bare life. Clarence's divine intervention, what Silverman sees as the "celestial suture"²⁰⁵ saving the hero from complete self-erasure,²⁰⁶ is therefore less a taming ideological move towards the dominant fiction as it is a narrative device that reveals the disavowed feminine Other of noir's masculine fatalism. In fact George returns home when he decides to pass through, after his symbolic suicide, what Žižek calls a second death in the *real*,²⁰⁷ negating also the sovereign-masculine attachment to his idiosyncratic enjoyment. By doing this he abandons the superego's pressure to seek out a fantasmatic other space where he could discover his true manhood. As a result, he embraces not only his own nonconformity with the normative masculine ideal hitherto determining his life but, as Silverman notes, affirms lack on a more fundamental level, as constitutive of the symbolic order as such: when he enters his house, he kisses the broken bannister knob, is excited to see the fallen petals of his daughter's flower, etc.²⁰⁸ True, the last

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 93.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 102.

²⁰⁷ Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 176.

²⁰⁸ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, 102.

scene effectively reunites the heterosexual couple in front of the Christmas tree evoking the iconography of the Holy Family (with the “weak” patriarch George nonetheless in the center).²⁰⁹ But the finale perhaps more significantly also evokes another Biblical story with a more radical message, the tale of loaves and fishes, insofar as the poor local community unexpectedly comes up with more than enough donations to save George from jail and keep his non-profit organization going. As in the case of *On Dangerous Ground*, what is utopian here is not the capitalist sublation of lack into surplus (a maneuver that Silverman, after Lacan, rightly identifies as the phallic procedure par excellence),²¹⁰ but the attempt to think to two together without separating them into two distinct realms.

2.3 Conclusion

Not all of film noir’s redeeming women have utopian connotations, however. Without the reorganization of noir’s signifiers towards an alternate symbolic universe, these women tend to remain trapped in their patriarchal role as domestic opposites of the *femme fatale* like the nurturing women in *The Killers* or *Out of the Past*. The utopian potential of film noir can be realized only if the distinction between *femme fatale* and redeeming woman collapses, when the contradictory role of these two characters becomes juxtaposed—a potential always present in film noir. It can happen when the *femme fatale*’s failure to perform a sovereign decision due to her exclusion from the hegemonic biopolitical body underpinning the patriarchal law stops being marked as failure to become a man and appears instead as an autonomous relationship to the big

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 106.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 103.

Other that bypasses the masculine logic of sovereign immunization. The two snow noir films above are formal experiments in this direction. Like traditional film noirs they offer a non-generic use of the Production Code but instead of submerging into a space of meta-generic sovereignty, they take the opposite approach and shifting to Christian discourse they overidentify with the inoperativity at the heart of Hollywood's glory, offering the universal efficacy of its gestures as the truly subversive alternative to a masculine world of mandatory transgression, driven by the sovereign valorization of one's unary trait. This is how the very egalitarian symbolic excess of bourgeois marriage, untamed by homosocial immunization, can be a slippery slope to communism in *It's a Wonderful Life*, just like the prayer of *On Dangerous Ground's* blind heroine, not limited by any patriarchal church institution can blow up the biopolitical apparatus it formally evokes. By drawing up a utopian double to Hollywood's already uncanny dark mirror image, these films expose the radical contingency of film noir's fatalistic libidinal economy, challenging its masculine-sovereign totality with an antagonistic formulation of the symbolic from a feminine perspective.

The utopian program of classical snow noir does not offer a radical alternative to the dominant fictions of white supremacist bourgeois society; it merely turns their commodity producing patriarchal bias inoperative by rejecting the masculinist flight from the fetishized feminine, that is, capitalist value-dissociation. It sets up an atemporal universe outside of the forces of modernity, refusing the temporality of wage labour. By affirming all human life as valuable, this perspective comes very close to that of the Marxian proletariat, of those who have nothing but their *potential* labour power (their bare life) as opposed to those who have actualized this potential through sovereign immunization and whom in this dissertation I will refer to as the petty-bourgeoisie. In a way noir shows how the biopolitical construction of this hegemonic *bios*

occurs prior to class struggle proper *qua* antagonism between working class and bourgeoisie: the enigmatic third class of the petty-bourgeoisie (usually referred to as the “middle class” in America) groups precisely those whose life the sovereign apparatus sanctioned as productive (their potential labour power is actualized) yet they don’t own the means of production. Although they don’t belong to the ruling class in an economic sense, they subscribe to the bourgeois ideology of value: instead of the living labour all human beings are capable of, they attribute its source to various metaphysical and moral (ultimately: sovereign) phantasmagorias (the market, manifest destiny, masculinity, white supremacy, etc.). It is this bourgeois perspective that noir fatalism stands for, managing, as Paul Arthur notes, “to subsume any contradictions it raises concerning class society under issues of individual deviance and guilt.”²¹¹ In other words, film noir presents value-dissociation as the moralizing discourse that constructs the masculine petty-bourgeoisie as the hegemonic biopolitical group of value production. Noir’s petty-bourgeois white male hero emerges as the sovereign-immunizing limitation of the multitude of potential labourers, and this limitation also obfuscates the real source of capitalist value, ultimately identifying it with a self-enjoyment of white heterosexual masculinity. By contrast, snow noir offers a perspective that is indifferent to the spectacle of sovereign manhood, the phallic commodity “walking itself to the market,”²¹² viewing it only as one of many, equally valuable forms of life.

²¹¹ Paul Arthur, “The Gun in the Briefcase; or, The Inscription of Class in Film Noir,” in *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class*, ed. D. E. James and R. Berg (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press: 1996), 99.

²¹² Marx argues against some innate, metaphysical value of commodities by saying “commodities cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right.” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol. I*, trans. B. Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 178.

3 Neo-Noir and the Deterritorialization of the American Empire

3.1 The Aftermath of Fatalism: Subtractive Gestures in the Film Noirs of the 60s and 70s

3.1.1 What is Neo-Noir?

Before moving on to film noir's post-classical period, it's worth looking at a film called *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959) for its unique racial politics that is perhaps the best symbolic marker of the end of the initial noir cycle. What strikes the eye immediately is that high contrast expressionist lighting doesn't dominate the film; its sporadic presence is counterbalanced by sun lit images of a not so noir city (an elderly criminal is peacefully feeding pigeons in the park and there is even a scene at the zoo with children) and a not so idyllic countryside (the small town location of the climactic heist is surrounded by heavy industry). The trees don't have leaves but it's hard to tell whether it's fall or spring: we're somewhere in-between. While, as Andrew Spicer observes, the tendency to move away from high contrast aesthetics is common in late 50s noirs,¹ *Odds Against Tomorrow* is nonetheless unique for other reasons: next to its traditional misanthropic white loner protagonist played by Robert Ryan it adds a black central character (Harry Belafonte) with an equal amount of screen time and subjective narration. As a reflection of the ongoing civil rights struggles of the era, their story is not of friendship but extreme mistrust fuelled by white racist bigotry. Interestingly, the film ends with the mutual destruction of the black and white male sovereign: they turn on each other while running from the law; their bullets blow up the chemical plant they were hiding in a spectacular blast that lights up the noir

¹ Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (New York: Longman, 2002), 60.

night. Drawing on Julien Morphet's and Eric Lott's theory, the film can be productively read as the return of noir's primordially repressed (foreclosed) racial antagonism, where the emergence of black bodies as equal citizens desublimates their former abstraction into urban shadows, unravelling the whole libidinal economy at the core of the classical cycle. With *Odds Against Tomorrow* noir's expressionist aesthetic loses its innocence, so to speak, and the deadly bright light putting an end to it signals the return of *lumen*, as if the wrath of God were punishing the warring sovereigns for appropriating *lux* for their own glory.

This is a diversion from the classical noir universe where bright lights, although posing similar danger to criminal protagonists, tend to be associated with the authorities forcing the noir heroes to step out of the shadows and give themselves up. As such, they stand for the *lux* of the normative social order. At the end of the cycle, however, films like *Odds Against Tomorrow* introduce the threat of light at a different level, arguably that of *lumen*. The late noir *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), for instance, summarizes this threat in an iconic image of a nuclear blast that ends the film, the deadly beams of light threatening not just the protagonists but the entire noir universe.²

While America's age of anxiety, the breeding ground of noir, arguably continues after the 50s due to intensifying cold war paranoia and internal political turmoil, most critics agree that the initial noir cycle runs itself out by the end of the decade: as middle class women are forced back into the household, the cinematic *femme fatale* gradually loses her central role,³ and crime narratives move to the suburbs (as well as to the preferred medium of their inhabitants: TV)⁴

² Meanwhile snow noir, as I argued in Chapter 1, reverses this tendency and associates brightness with redemption.

³ Jack Boozer, "The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition," *Journal of Film and Video* 51, no. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 1999/2000): 23.

⁴ Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," in *Perspectives on Film Noir*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), 108.

where the ideological restoration of the white patriarchal family is taking place, building a new society of petty-bourgeois conformism. After the late classical noirs like *Odds Against Tomorrow* or *Kiss Me Deadly* openly indict America's nihilistic (autoimmune) biopolitics, the question of sovereignty, the founding violence of the post-war consensus, becomes buried under a new generic displacement of the noir formula. A good example of this shift is former noir director Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), a film that depicts the consequences of atypical noir violence (rape) against its *femme fatale*-esque heroine in a small town holiday resort—a countryside already transformed by capital's centrifugal expansion. Contrary to classical noir, the film recounts the events from the perspective of the local community rather than sticking with the point of view of the male perpetrator—a failed sovereign in noir terms (he didn't finish the job), who is nonetheless shot dead by the victim's jealous and revengeful husband at the beginning of the film. The plot is then not about the rapist's but the murderer's trial and eventual acquittal by the town jury (an outcome unthinkable for the classical noir criminal): they rule "temporary insanity" because evidence shows him regularly beating his wife in raging fits of jealousy as the woman is known for her loose behaviour with tourists in the local bar. What is reconstructed in court is a "noir" world underneath the quotidian small town life where housewives turn into sex crazed "*femmes fatale*" while their husbands are desperately trying to reassign them to their proper place through misogynist violence.

Unlike in classical noir, however, this violence is not arbitrary (driven by the subject's inoperative *jouissance*) but ritualized; it is explicitly supported by members of the male homosocial community either by actively participating in it (rape) or looking the other way: the rapist's bartender employee covers for his boss while the man takes his victim for a ride, the defense attorney helps his client to hide the traces of domestic violence, etc. The trial itself is no

exception from this paradigm. Instead of exposing the injustices underpinning the town's masculine biopolitical body (a goal pursued only by the outsider district attorney's unbending application of the penal code), the community, in an act of patriarchal self-immunization, decides to cover them up by designating the murdered rapist, essentially no different from any one of them, as a scapegoat to divert attention from systemic abuse. Their act recalls Freud's tale about the sons' collective murder of the primordial father that grounds "civilized" patriarchy,⁵ except that here women play along as well: the rape victim protagonist agrees to domesticate (desexualize) her appearance during the trial, readily accepting the social persona the community assigns to her like no noir *femme fatale* ever would. As a result, her brute husband goes free, likely to continue beating her up from time to time when she slips out to get drunk with tourists in the local bar to escape the prison of her bourgeois home (when we see her after the trial she is back in her tight seductress outfit flirting with the defense attorney). In other words, we move from the death driven equality of bodies in the noir zone of indistinction to their playfully performed inequality in a generic community.

Elements of the former noir universe similarly come to signify the repressed libidinal excess of suburban bourgeois life in a series of early 60s films of various genres that also exhibit some of noir's stylistic traits (black and white photography, deep focus, chiaroscuro lighting, hallucination and dream sequences, etc.), without venturing into the territory of noir sovereignty proper. In *Cape Fear* (1962), an ex-con sex offender, Cady (played by noir icon Robert Mitchum) is terrorizing the family of the small town prosecutor who once put him in jail, threatening to rape both his wife and teenage daughter as revenge. Significantly, this resurfacing of the noir threat in the figure of the intruder (following thriller conventions) merely gives body

⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: Routledge, 1950)

to that diffuse sense of anxiety the female members of the lawyer's family have already been feeling in their domestic confinement. One emblematic scene shows the young daughter, Nancy, exiting her school with a group of girls, about to be driven home by her mother whose car is parked right outside. As the children walk towards the gate, the camera moves down from high angle and settles behind the bars of the school fence, giving the momentary impression that the girls are locked in a cage. Once they leave the premises, all of them quickly enter the cars of their parents and leave, except for Nancy whose mother is late running errands while leaving her car by the school. When the girl realizes she is alone on the street without protection, she anxiously looks around for a potential threat. However, it's only after she takes refuge in the car that a reverse shot finally shows Cady approaching in the distance, emphasizing how the intruder is a fantasmatic correlate to feminine spaces of confinement.

At the end of the film, it is the family and the town officials' collective effort that traps and murders the ex-convict, projecting on him, much like in *Anatomy*, the role of the sovereign he was careful to avoid playing all along (always sticking to the letter of the law in public). They lure him into the swamplands outside the town limits, pushing him to reveal his true nature while he thinks he is not being watched by representatives of the symbolic order. And when he does they kill him, repressing their own community's founding sovereign violence he came to stand for, allowing it to continue in a sublimated, "civilized" form through the everyday devaluation (*and* fetishization) of feminine life. Significantly, the lawyer protagonist asks his wife to give him the final go-ahead for Cady's extermination, offering her what Lacan called a forced choice between "the Father—or worse,"⁶ between the voluntary confinement in the patriarchal bourgeois family led by her husband or the exposure to sovereign violence that underpins it. The

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Television*, trans. D. Hollier, et al. (New York: Norton, 1990), 46.

third, utopian alternative, the permanent dislocation of her and Cady's bare life from the sphere of bourgeois society—a potential once present in film noir—is missing here entirely.

Moreover, *Cape Fear*'s turn to high contrast aesthetic and its choice of a white *homme fatale* to serve as the amalgamation of contemporary threats to the suburban bourgeois family while setting the plot in the Deep South is also a *conscious* repetition of the classical cycle's erasure of African-American presence. The desire to repress the sovereign crime of the classical noir hero (a role associated with Robert Mitchum) is realized through his lynching as a stand in for southern blacks the civil rights movement is now threatening to desegregate. This means that contrary to classical noir where arbitrary terror against the formally equal *femme fatale* could be seen as a substitute for a foreclosed systemic racism,⁷ here there is a double repression in place which reframes sovereign violence as the community's immunological reaction to an outsider. We move back from the order of the drive to the order of desire, or in Deleuzian terms, from the time-image to the movement-image: voice-overs and flashbacks are not used anymore, the linear progress of the Classical Hollywood Narrative is restored, subordinating cinematic time to its forward momentum.

This shift is also visible in spatial relations. The classical noir narrative's fatalistic trajectory worked as a one way street for its criminal male protagonist, leading him into the lonely room of sovereign abandonment where he was left to die or condemned to solitude by the homosocial community he helped to create by taking the unspeakable and unforgivable sins of its founding violence on himself.⁸ By contrast, what I propose to call "post-noir films" offer a

⁷ See Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland, *Film Noir: Hard Boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalization* (New York, Routledge, 2010), 165.

⁸ There are, of course, numerous examples of the male protagonist's redemption in classical noir (*Gilda*, 1946; *Dark Passage*, 1947) but even in these films that don't go all the way exploring the problem of sovereignty the male hero's noir persona is often left to die symbolically (*Gilda*'s Johnny Farrell symbolically abandons his queerness by witnessing the death of his gay lover, *Dark Passage*'s Vincent Perry gets a new face through plastic surgery, etc).

version of the Agambenian zone of indistinction that has an exit back to bourgeois normalcy. Spatially, these films position the noir camp at the margins of their narrative universe as a place of exception, supplementing ordinary suburban reality from outside of its boundaries. The seedy swampland of *Cape Fear* and the “lovers’ lane” beyond town limits in *Anatomy* where sexual violence or even murder is permitted for otherwise upstanding white male citizens find their equivalent in *Shock Corridor*’s (1963) lunatic asylum, and *The Naked Kiss*’s (1964) brothel or the children’s hospital run by the town’s pedophile millionaire. All these spaces fall into the category of what Foucault calls heterotopias, counter-sites to the normative social order, embodying its ideal or, in this case, inverted mirror image, its excess separated by a border that can be crossed only under exceptional circumstances, following special regulations. The function of heterotopias, Foucault argues, should be understood “in relation to all the space that remains,”⁹ which here means that after a short dwelling in them subjects can return to their normal habitat rejuvenated, with the balance of their life restored. In other words, to refer to Altman’s theory, post-noir’s heterotopias are generic in nature; they help to immunize communities by offering sites for ritualistic temporary violations of social norms, whereas the classical noir universe emerged out of an autoimmune destruction of the generic as such.

As a rule, the acceptable generic transgressions in these films are pitted against the sovereign excess of the very same heterotopic spaces embodied by a masculine scapegoat figure who on the outside resembles “normal” members of the community but who carries the system’s incurable, autoimmune pathology that drives him too far in the exercise of homosocial violence. What gets lost in these post-noir renderings of sovereignty as only quantitatively different from sanctioned ways of blowing off steam is the fundamentally arbitrary, radically free nature of the

⁹ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. J. Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 26.

noir hero's decision whereby he abuses and devalues feminine life. Qualifying the sovereign as a sexual deviant as in *Anatomy*, *Cape Fear*, *The Naked Kiss*, and *Shock Corridor* suppresses the noir scandal about an ordinary, "innocent" man committing heinous crimes—what Hannah Arendt referred to as the banality of evil.¹⁰ Post-noir films, instead of addressing the nihilism and fascism of modern biopower (the crimes of sovereignty), tend to limit their critique to the hypocrisy of post-war America's repressed conformism *within the white community*,¹¹ the norms of which men regularly violate through the vices of immunization. As a result, they themselves often end with a moralistic condemnation of feminine sexuality as a cause of male transgression (sanctioned and unsanctioned alike), contributing to the repression they set out to expose. For instance, in *Anatomy* there is a clear blame-the-victim narrative constructed around the rape that triggers the murder on trial, similarly to *The Naked Kiss* where the former prostitute heroine is cast out of the small town community in the end despite her changing her ways (becoming a nurse) and exposing the local pedophile. Even *Shock Corridor*'s exotic dancer is indirectly blamed for causing her boyfriend's mental collapse as the man ends up identifying with the cover story he fabricated to get inside an asylum as an embedded journalist: he really starts to feel pathological incestuous jealousy for his "sister" impersonated by his girlfriend. While these moralistic conclusions should be understood as obligatory closing panels of genre games, it is telling that the transgressive pleasures offered to women in these films still have to do with patriarchal confinement: in *Anatomy* it's flirting with strangers while married, in *The Naked Kiss* it's having a sexually promiscuous past while working as a nurse in a hospital owned by a rich man, in *Cape Fear* it's enjoying the voyeuristic gaze of a male sex offender while being protected by one's husband/father, and in *Shock Corridor* it's appearing in an incestuous

¹⁰ See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006)

¹¹ *Shock Corridor* reproduces this paradigm of color blindness while also ingeniously critiquing it, featuring a black mental patient who believes he is general Nathan Bedford Forrest, the founder of the KKK.

hallucination of one's boyfriend. In other words, although sexually promiscuous women don't have to die in post-noir films like in classical noir as long as they accept Oedipal repression, their autonomy is even more undermined insofar as they are trapped in a closed totality made up of the patriarchal norm and its no less male controlled inherent transgression, without a utopian line of flight.

Many film noir canons either gloss over the cluster of films above or mention them dismissively as sporadic aftereffects of the classical noir cycle that don't develop into a movement proper.¹² The reason for this approach might be that they don't signal their contemporariness through colour, and they also don't fit into the paradigm of nostalgic self-reflexivity and/or modernist genre revisionism that, most critics agree, mark the emergence of neo-noir proper in films like *Harper* (1966), *Point Blank* (1967) or the later *Chinatown* (1974).¹³ According to Neale, neo-noir is the product of Hollywood's retrospective glance at its own noir past, finally creating a genre proper out of the self-conscious deliberation on its loss. This genre producing noir nostalgia, he argues, much like the French critics' original application of the term relies more on fantasy than historical facts and it very well could be a "nostalgia for something that never existed."¹⁴ According to Leighton Grist, neo-noirs themselves perform a

¹² For examples of the latter approach see Spicer, *Film Noir*, 131.; Jason Holt, "A Darker Shade: Realism in Neo-Noir," in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conrad (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 23-41.; Nicholas Christopher's *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (Emeryville: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006), 232.; and Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), 15.

¹³ For texts that emphasize the nostalgic factor in neo-noir's emergence see Todd Erickson, "Kill Me Again: Movement Becomes Genre," in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. A. Silver and J. Ursini (New York: Continuum, 1996), 307-29., and Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 142-68.; For ones that focus on modernist formal revisionism see Leighton Grist, "Moving Targets and Black Widows: Film Noir in Modern Hollywood," in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. I. Cameron (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 267-85., and Edward Gallafent, "Echo Park Film Noir in the 'Seventies," in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. I. Cameron (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 254-66.

¹⁴ Naremore quoted in Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 165.

“demystification” of the classical noir canon.¹⁵ By contrast, what I have called the post-noir films of the late 50s and early 60s should be understood as the repression of the very much existing sovereign violence and systematic racism that classical noir eventually laid out in the open. This means that Hollywood’s nostalgic deconstruction of its noir past is accompanied by the will *not* to see what was so traumatic about it, that the desire to remember is also the desire to forget.¹⁶

For this reason, I suggest to divide post-classical noir into two subcategories and consider whether films from this period that appear to be noirs follow *Odds Against Tomorrow* in critiquing meta-generic sovereignty or repress it and withdraw to the level of generic immunization like *Anatomy* or *Cape Fear*.¹⁷ I have argued above that the category of post-noir should be used to describe the latter group, which also can be counted as a genre on its own: it creates a generic community by repressing the scandal of noir sovereignty, turning misogyny from an arbitrary biopolitical decision of an isolated individual into what philosopher Wilfrid Sellars called a “we-intention,” a self-evident matter of how those who are inside a community conduct their daily lives, separating themselves from outsiders.¹⁸ Conversely, I will use the term neo-noir only for films that, building on the tradition of classical noir, map out the subjectivity and space of sovereignty in their own historical situation that is markedly different from the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. In other words, in my usage neo-noir, just like

¹⁵ Grist, “Moving Targets,” 267.

¹⁶ Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter but one should also consider here noir parodies already present in the 40s (*Ride the Pink Horse*, 1947; *The Big Steal*, 1949) and the whole problem of whether or not classical noir directors’ were conscious of the cinematic movement they were part of and what that reflexivity entailed. See William Park, *What is Film Noir?* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 31-37.

¹⁷ It’s important to emphasize here that repression should not be understood according to what Foucault labeled “the repressive hypothesis,” that is to say, as if its aim was the elimination of libidinal excess all together. On the contrary, as I have argued in the previous chapter, for Foucault and Lacan it is only through Oedipal-disciplinary repression that spaces of modern sexuality start to proliferate by resisting and thereby stabilizing the repressive apparatus.

¹⁸ See Wilfrid Sellars, *Imperatives, Intentions, and the Logic of ‘Ought’* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963)

classical noir itself, does not designate a genre but a meta-genre. This duality evokes but doesn't fully overlap with Alan Silver's distinction between neo-noir and retro-noir, the latter of which standing for noirs made after the classical period that are set in the 40s and 50s and, the author maintains, tend to be more conservative in their gender as well as racial politics than the contemporary and more progressive neo-noirs.¹⁹ By and large this may be true, but this categorization is too rigid to distinguish between the generic (repressive) and meta-generic (traumatic) heritage of noir: there are films of the post-noir genre that are not retro-noirs (see above) as well as neo-noirs with a classical setting (*Chinatown*—more on this below). This chapter and the remaining part of the dissertation will focus on the problem of sovereignty in neo-noirs in the narrow, meta-generic sense.

3.1.2 Decreating the Sovereign-Image in Early Neo-Noir

Where, then, does neo-noir proper begin? First of all, contrary to the US where the mass production of noir declines after the late 50s, other film industries of the world, most notably France and Japan, continued providing a steady supply of film noirs throughout the 60s incorporating the American noir heritage into their local visions of “pulp modernism.”²⁰ Furthermore, as Kovacs notes, the initial noir cycle also had a significant influence on the development of modern European art cinema, the representative auteurs of which often applied and deconstructed the noir form in their early films like Visconti in *Ossessione* (1943), Antonioni in *The Story of a Love Affair* (1950), Godard in *Breathless* (1960), or Truffaut in

¹⁹ Alan Silver and Elizabeth Ward, *Film Noir: The Encyclopedia* (New York: Overlook Books, 2010), 350.

²⁰ The term pulp modernism for noir comes from Paula Rabinowitz, *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)

Shoot the Piano Player (1960).²¹ While the limited scope of this chapter doesn't allow for the exploration of neo-noir as an international phenomenon, this connection to European modernism is relevant here because it went both ways: it also helped to jump start the second cycle of American noir as part of the so called Hollywood Renaissance when studios, lacking any other profitable creative input, temporarily invested in auteur driven productions inspired by the modernist experiments overseas, leading to the critical revision of genre traditions. According to Spicer, this stage of neo-noir started in 1967 with *Point Blank*, John Boorman's colour adaptation of Richard Stark's hardboiled novel *The Hunter* in the style of Alan Resnais's oneiric French new wave film *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961), and lasted until 1976's *Taxi Driver*, in which Martin Scorsese exhausted noir's modernist impulse in a definitive vision of urban apocalypse.²²

Theorists who subscribe to a similar periodization emphasize how revisionist noir's critical self-reflexivity pushes the modernist tendencies of its classical predecessors to the next level by using Brechtian techniques of alienation to defamiliarize audiences with Hollywood conventions, making them think by undermining the position of a rational, masculine subject in epistemic control over the narrative, and by offering a dark mirror to American society in an open state of crisis after the Eisenhower-era's suburban conformism, corporate capitalism, and sexual as well as political repression. The 60s and 70s bring the crisis of Keynesian welfare state capitalism (the abandonment of the gold standard in 1971, the 1973 oil crisis), escalation of racial and gendered tensions (of the civil rights movement and second wave feminism), a mass anti-war movement due to the failure in Vietnam, and the rise of counterculture and alternative life-styles as a result of a general disillusionment from the government, escalated by scandals of

²¹ Andras Balint Kovacs, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 247.

²² Spicer, *Film Noir*, 130-48

political conspiracy (Kennedy assassinations, Watergate).²³ Hollywood Renaissance noirs are therefore full of disaffected anti-heroes and outlaws withdrawn to the system's margins—which at first sight is not that different from the role and place of the classical noir protagonist. The real question is, then, whether the revised spaces of exception continue to support noir's conservative agenda of patriarchal sovereignty or they problematize their male subject's fatalistic biopolitical support of the American Empire's status quo and initiate instead a utopian departure from it.

The main problem with marking 1967 as the emergence of neo-noir is that it obfuscates how the strongest distinguishing feature of the new cycle, what after Alain Badiou I call "the ethics of subtraction," evolves historically as a critical response to classical noir's fatalism. *Subtraction* is Badiou's name for the "affirmative part of negation" which he opposes to *destruction*, the "negative part of negation."²⁴ The aim of destruction, he argues, is to obliterate a given situation the subject finds herself in in order to seek out some authentic real kernel hidden beneath it. In reality, all this procedure can ever do is keep peeling off newer and newer layers of the false while chasing the phantom of truth:

There exists a passion for the real that is obsessed with identity: to grasp real identity, to unmask its copies, to discredit fakes. It is a passion for the authentic, and authenticity is in fact a category that belongs to Heidegger as well as to Sartre. This passion can only be fulfilled as destruction. Herein lies its strength – after all, many things deserve to be

²³ Ibid., 133-35.; See also Richard Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 63-90., and Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 95-125.

²⁴ Alain Badiou, "Destruction, Negation, Subtraction: On Pier Paolo Pasolini," *lacan.com*, accessed July 15, 2015, <http://www.lacan.com/badpas.htm>

destroyed. But this is also its limit, because purification is a process doomed to incompleteness, a figure of the bad infinite.²⁵

By contrast, as Sergei Prozorov explains, “the subtractive procedure, presented by Badiou as the true source of novelty and thus the ‘affirmative’ element in every negation, consists in the production of something that is indiscernible *within* the negated situation, that cannot be rendered positive in its terms and thus avoids any engagement or incorporation in this situation instead of destroying it.”²⁶ While destruction’s negative dialectic remains forever tied to the regime it tries to purify, subtraction, on the contrary, is able to break free by becoming indifferent to the question of its authenticity.²⁷ Translating this binary into the terms used in Chapter 1, we could say that subtraction suspends the (auto)immune (purifying) dynamic of the patriarchal law that leads to a sovereign-image conjoining men’s bare life with an organic-fascist community. By negating this masculine negativity of immunization, subtraction opens up a utopian gateway to different, feminine symbolic order based on gestures rather than images, affirming the principle of universal equality without the limitations imposed on it by the law of the male homosocial *bios*. By contrast, destruction is the sovereign violence that is inextricably linked to the immunized life of a particular imagined community insofar as it can keep negating the inauthentic forms of life not worth living only by opposing them to a normative (masculine) biopolitical body it presupposes and perpetuates while operating in a state of exception from its laws. For example, in the finale of *Double Indemnity* Phyllis Dietrichson’s sudden loss of interest in her destructive plot turns her (briefly before she is killed) into an autonomous feminine subject of subtraction, while her transformation and its utopian potential goes unnoticed by Walter

²⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. A. Toscano (Malden: Polity, 2007), 56.

²⁶ Sergei Prozorov, “Giorgio Agamben and the End of History: Inoperative Praxis and the Interruption of the Dialectic,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 12, no. 4 (2009): 534. My italics.

²⁷ Alain Badiou, “Destruction, Negation, Subtraction: On Pier Paolo Pasolini,” *lacan.com*, accessed July 15, 2015, <http://www.lacan.com/badpas.htm>

Neff's blind fatalism which ends up destroying her, only seeing her as duplicitous and inauthentic. What is not to be missed, as Elizabeth Bronfen stresses, is that Phyllis is not simply a victim of masculine violence but should be understood as an agent of her own fate,²⁸ even if her choice is prepared by her objective exclusion from the hegemonic (masculine) biopolitical body of her time. Subtraction, therefore, is the opposite existential decision to sovereignty, avowing the freedom to break with the status quo instead of closing off any opening out of it. Put in the terms of Agamben's film-philosophy, subtraction decreates the image, redeeming thereby its gestural dimension. As the next sections will show, the new element introduced by neo-noir into this equation is a male protagonist in the position of autonomous subtraction with all the "castrating" and potentially self-annihilating consequences the classical *femme fatale* had to face.

To my knowledge the first post-classical film noir that questions the predetermined necessity of the male hero's sovereign support for a fascistic biopolitical regime is *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), a cold war paranoia thriller with a remarkable conspiracy narrative that exposes its fanatical right wing senator (a McCarthy caricature) as a Soviet agent working against genuine leftist transformation and in the US. He plans to kill his democrat rival in the presidential race using an American soldier, Ray, brainwashed in a North Korean prison camp by agents from the Soviet "Pavlov Institute." In the climactic scene of the assassination we see the target through the conditioned killer's sniper scope. The image is blurred, however, indicating that small inconsistency in the reigning symbolic order that has to be made up for arbitrarily through sovereign violence. Yet, Ray, after carefully locking in on his target, suddenly breaks with his preprogrammed behaviour; the crosshairs of his rifle shift to the conspirators in

²⁸ Elizabeth Bronfen, "Femme Fatale—Negotiations of Tragic Desire," *New Literary History* 35, no. 1 (2004): 105.

the room and with two quick, instinctive shots he kills both of them.²⁹ As the camera moves into the maintenance shaft he is hiding in it briefly shows the word NO written on the door—with the rest of the sign (ENTRY) erased, making the signifier inoperative. When his friend, Ben finds him, Ray speaks to him with a fatalistic yet autonomous voice “You couldn’t have stopped them. The army couldn’t have stopped them. So I had to.”—close-up of the friend’s clueless expression, reverse shot back to the killer, his face betraying frustration over not being understood: “Oh, God, Ben!” —he utters as he turns the rifle against himself and pulls the trigger. The final scene shows the surviving friend desperately trying to make sense of the events, reading Ray’s diary about the horrendous acts he was forced to do in Korea. He then improvises a eulogy exonerating him that, however, includes a major contradiction: if he was *made* to commit all those heinous crimes before, how could he have acted freely in the end? When Ben realizes that the story doesn’t add up, his voice falters; he sighs and cries out “Hell!” while turning away from the camera, undercutting the viewer’s suture with the diegetic space.

The Manchurian Candidate already displays what would become the defining feature of the revisionist noir cycle, what I will call the subtraction-image: the severing of the fatalistic link between the sovereign male individual and his biopolitical community through the hero’s suicidal no to the homosocial pact undergirding the status quo, emphasizing instead a direct connection between the withdrawn subject and the universality of the symbolic (after the shooting, the assassin puts on his war medal in a gesture now emptied out of masculine glory before he kills himself). This allows for a step back from classical noir’s masculine conspiracy narrative as fated (inevitable), and maps the contours of a more abstract system of control in the background at which level the United States and the Soviet Union pursue the same goals. We

²⁹ It’s interesting to consider this since then commonplace element of many action narratives as the conflict between the individual’s freedom (autonomy) and sovereignty.

could say that in neo-noir conspiracy becomes increasingly deterritorialized, detached from the American male identity. This tendency will culminate in the paranoia noirs of the 70s (*The Conversation*, 1974; *Parallax View*, 1974), in what Jameson called their attempt to allegorically represent the unrepresentable totality of global capitalism itself as a conspiracy.³⁰ What a 60s genealogy of Jameson's ambiguous (potentially both critical *and* fatalistic) concept helps to clarify is that this move towards an abstract, global "conspiracy" initially has an anti-obscurantist aim: it helps to demystify the hostile biopolitical apparatus of capital by suggesting that it needs the sovereign consent of its masculine subjects to function, something that can be freely revoked any time.

An important step in this direction is perhaps the first full blown American neo-noir, Orson Welles's adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial* (1962). Welles represents the modern apparatus of the Law as an abstract and chaotic machine which no one is in charge of (just like in the novel, we never learn what the protagonist K. is accused of and why). At one level, in a series of long shots the director makes use of the exterior of the newly built, empty, modernist housing blocks and city squares of Zagreb³¹ to emphasize not only K.'s noir alienation but also his insignificance, the fact that no one is really watching him in these abandoned public spaces (these scenes are often shot from low angle, overhead shots are missing entirely). By contrast, inside the densely populated labyrinthine buildings of the law that conform to a baroque aesthetic, a complex interplay of gazes unfolds with voyeuristic connotations: here, everybody is watching everybody. The apparent chaos of the legal apparatus is caused by the fact that

³⁰ See Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 9-87. Jameson doesn't make a distinction between noirs and generic paranoia films but most of his sample are not neo-noirs proper but conspiracy thrillers with post-noir elements (*Three Days of the Condor*, 1975; *All the President's Men*, 1976).

³¹ This use of communist space here, much like in *The Manchurian Candidate*, suggests that the system of biopolitical control the modern Law stands for is global.

representatives of the law and people on trial alike are sidetracked by the pursuit of private sexual pleasures. Prostitutes seem to be holding the system together in inexplicable ways, judges read dirty magazines during trials, and legal aids are spying on everyone through the cracks and interstices of courtrooms, hallways, and bedrooms—all somehow connected into an unmappable megastructure of the law's obscene underside. This dialectic of public and private spaces is then supplemented with the noir place of sovereign exception, making use of Kafka's famous parable about "the door of the Law" that frames the film. As Žižek notes, Welles makes here significant changes to the novel which, I propose, can also be read as a shift away from the classical noir narrative:

In the film, we hear [the parable] twice: at the very beginning, it serves as a kind of prologue, read and accompanied by (faked) ancient engravings projected from lantern-slides; then, shortly before the end, it is told to Josef K., not by the priest (as in the novel) but by K.'s lawyer (played by Welles himself), who unexpectedly joins the priest and K. in the Cathedral. The action now takes a strange turn and diverges from Kafka's novel – even before the lawyer warms to his narrative, K. cuts him short: 'I've heard it. We've heard it all. The door was meant only for him.' What ensues is a painful dialogue between K. and the lawyer in which the lawyer advises K. to 'plead insanity' by claiming that he is persecuted by the idea of being the victim of the diabolical plot of a mysterious State agency. K., however, rejects the role of the victim offered to him by the lawyer: 'I don't pretend to be a martyr.' 'Not even a victim of society?' 'No, I'm not a victim, I'm a member of society . . .'. In his final outburst, K. then asserts that the true conspiracy (of Power) consists in the very attempt to persuade the subjects that they are victims of irrational impenetrable forces, that everything is crazy, that the world is absurd and

meaningless. When K. thereupon leaves the Cathedral, two plainclothes policemen are already waiting for him; they take him to an abandoned building site and dynamite him. In the Welles version, the reason K. is killed is therefore the exact opposite of the reason implied in the novel – *he presents a threat to power the moment he unmasks, ‘sees through’, the fiction upon which the social link of the existing power structure is founded.*³²

Contrary to the classical noir hero, K. refuses to perform the sovereign act that would make him a co-conspirator by actively presupposing the legal apparatus through identifying as a victim of it.³³

A no less Kafkaesque neo-noir, clearly inspired by Welles’s film is John Frankenheimer’s (*The Manchurian Candidate*) other 60s classic *Seconds* (1966) about a depressed suburban bank manager and talentless painter who is initiated into a secret society for the bored and wealthy where after a hefty payment and a bizarre body transplant the chosen members of the bourgeoisie can live a fantasy life as someone else they always wanted to be. Contrary to contemporary post-noir narratives, however, suburban life is not presented here as a

³² Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 217-18.

³³ It is this subtractive critical gesture that is missing from Welles’s otherwise hyperreflexive classical noirs. For *Lady From Shanghai* (1941), for instance, not only did he dye Rita Hayworth’s hair blonde as a publicity stunt, pointing at her artificial transformation into a *femme fatale*, but he even made the male protagonist (played by himself) lay out the constructed nature of his fatalism by calling himself a “deliberate, intentional fool” in his voice-over. Yet, as Robert Pippin points out in his brilliant analysis, this doesn’t break the efficacy of the film’s fatalistic ideology: “In an unintended and ironic way, Michael does emerge as a diminished agent (more fated than agent), but by his own self-deceived view of himself. The pose he presents, the example of the maxim that “everybody is somebody’s fool,” is not a hypocritical attempt to deceive the audience, viewers, readers. He believes it and by believing it accepts a kind of diminished status and so *is* diminished. He reveals that he is simply incapable of registering and acknowledging his own culpability, the quite negligible difference that separates him from the sharks, and that lack is a limitation, too. His viewing himself as such a diminished agent, in other words, constitutes him as one; he becomes the diminished “object of the clever manipulation of others,” and so his own relation to his deeds becomes for him constituted by such a self-image. It would be naïve to insist that he nevertheless “could have faced” what he did more honestly. Michael is self-deceived, not hypocritical, and he is self-deceived because of what he is, and he is what he is because of what he can and cannot admit about himself.”³³ Robert B. Pippin, *Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 73.

site of repression which the hero could escape towards more pleasurable heterotopic locations offering libidinal release. Frankenheimer's use of Bergmanian extreme close-ups of the always sweating protagonist's disoriented face as he goes about his daily business with people reveals instead the man's disgust over the suffocating proximity of others' enjoyment. His flight is therefore that of an ascetic rather than of a pervert, responding to the *failure* of a properly Oedipal suburban repression (the failure of immunization). His new life as a famous painter in a California beach house, however, doesn't offer much relief either. Through the director's deadly irony, which also serves as the scathing critique of countercultural movements at the time, he is now free to do whatever he pleases *as long as he enjoys it*. He is trapped in a noir world where enjoyment turns into a duty: the organization is paying a butler and a hired neighbour/sex worker who keep monitoring his mandatory happiness. It's not long until he finds the prescribed pagan orgies and drunken debaucheries just as exhausting and suffocating as his former life and he makes arrangements to start afresh once again. To his surprise, he discovers that the people sitting by the multitude of desks in the company's maze-like office he thought were workers are in fact all clients just like him, dissatisfied with their allocated piece of paradise. But since they have already paid all their money to the organization, the only way they can get a new identity is by recommending a new customer to be duped by the pyramid scheme. It is this phone call made by the client-workers that provides the labour that keeps the company running, an allegory for the act of sovereignty perpetuating the capitalist machine. The protagonist, however, refuses to cooperate and as a result he is killed; his life is not deemed worth living anymore but his body is used to accommodate the next customer.

3.1.3 The Utopian Impulse of Light's Negative Dialectic: Dismantling the Panoptic

Apparatus

Although the hero of *Seconds* dies a gruesome death due to his insubordination, the formal elements of his final scene are worth examining for traces of utopian desire. Strapped down to an operating table, a group of surgeons start drilling his skull while he is still conscious, preparing him to serve as a body transplant for a new client. The last shot shows the strong surgical light above from his point of view, its contours slowly fading as the drilling continues, giving way to a blurred childhood memory, a man with his son and a dog walking on a sunny beach. The camera then tries to zoom in on the figures but the image gets distorted and quickly spins out of frame. If there is something utopian here, I suggest, it has to do not with the realization of the protagonist's most intimate fantasies in an authentic self but, on the contrary, with the decreation of such image, what Lacan referred to as the "traversing of the fundamental fantasy."³⁴ To understand this in relation to the noir's high contrast aesthetic of darkness and light, we have to expand here on the Lacanian theory of the gaze introduced in the previous chapter.

First of all, as I suggested, Lacan insists that the zero level of our subjectivity is not simply constituted through the voyeuristic experience of looking at something while remaining invisible, but it always already presupposes the condition of being looked at. The eye that is attached to the seeing subject is therefore supplemented by the fantasmatic entity of the gaze that makes the subject seen, acting as the external point of reference that guarantees the consistency of one's visual field. This is why Lacan also refers to the gaze as the source of light, "the

³⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 273.

instrument through which light is embodied and through which [...] I am photo-graphed.”³⁵ The gaze is the real, unattainable objectal correlate of subjectivity, an incarnation of the primordially separated object-cause of desire (*objet a*), the origin of an irreducible lack, the founding trauma constitutive of the subject. “From the moment that this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt himself to it, he becomes that punctiform object, that point of vanishing being with which the subject confuses his own failure.”³⁶ Although the inapprehensible nature of the gaze is a consequence of the subject’s structural inability to reach completeness (the fullness of enjoyment), because of her attempt to do so, the gaze enters her visual field as an object that cannot be captured through the power of vision: it appears as a stain in the picture.³⁷ There is no eye (and no I) without a stain, without a distortion of vision, a blind spot marking the inconsistency of the symbolic order. It is crucial to emphasize here the difference between the *real gaze* and the *symbolic stain*. As Žižek explains: “[the real-impossible] *objet petit a* [...] is not the stain itself but rather the gaze in the precise sense of the point of view from which the stain can be perceived in its ‘true meaning,’ the point from which, instead of the anamorphic distortion, it would be possible to discern the true contours of what the subject perceives as a formless stain.”³⁸ The fantasmatic, real gaze as *objet a* is all seeing; in the noir context it is embodied by the primordial father, the *subject supposed to know* who is falsely assumed by the hero to be able to see him completely, knowing the secrets of his unconscious without any stain to block his view and therefore command him to reveal his idiosyncratic *jouissance*. In *Seconds*, this is the role of the psychiatrist who is responsible for the protagonist’s satisfactory transformation into his ideal, fully enjoying self—ironically, the character is played by the same

³⁵ Ibid., 106.

³⁶ Ibid., 83.

³⁷ Ibid., 74.

³⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 65-66.

actor who is the head of the Pavlov Institute in *The Manchurian Candidate*. The stain, by contrast, functions similarly to the noir category of the *subject supposed to believe*, a character whose defining characteristic is the inability to see something. In the film, the hero's neighbour plays such role until the man finds out she knows more than she lets on. This real gaze of the subject supposed to know and the symbolic gaze of the subject supposed to believe, however, should not be confused with the paralyzing *imaginary* look of what Lacan calls "the evil eye" that freezes the subject's life into a gesture. As we shall see, such stoppage occurs only when the distinction between gaze and stain collapses, undoing the masculine topology of the visual field.

In a recent paper, Will Straw has suggested that the gradual disappearance of chiaroscuro lighting in neo-noir that leads to the illumination of spaces formerly covered in shadows has to do with the historical intensification of panoptic surveillance—³⁹an argument that echoes the situationist cry about total and mandatory visibility in the society of the spectacle⁴⁰ as well as Jameson's claim about the saturation of space and the disappearance of the system's outside in capitalism's global stage.⁴¹ On the surface, this reading is supported by evidence in revisionist noir narratives (as well as some late films of the classical period mentioned above) that often feature the protagonist encountering, right before his death, sources of light that are attached to police, military, or other disciplinary apparatuses of modern biopower. The hero of *Seconds* is killed under a surgical light; K. in *The Trial* is blown up in a dazzling dynamite blast; the last shot of *Point Blank* shows the island of Alcatraz with a surveillance beam after the protagonist

³⁹ Will Straw, "The Paranoid Thriller and the Limits of Expose Politics," (paper presented at FSAC 17th Graduate Colloquium, University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, February 27, 2015)

⁴⁰ "Darkness and obscurity are banished by artificial lighting, and the seasons by air conditioning. Night and summer are losing their charm and dawn is disappearing." Ivan Chtcheglov, "Formulary for a New Urbanism," in *Architecture Culture, 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology*, ed. J. Ockman and E. Eigen (New York: Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, 1993), 169.

⁴¹ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 399-418.

presumably drowned in the sea; and the hero of *Parallax View* meets his death running out of a dark room towards the light when a gunman steps into the doorway and shoots him. Yet, this apparently deadly encounter with light may have utopian connotations if we consider it as the disintegration of the sovereign-image, as a return of *lumen*, a light that cannot be owned by anyone.

Lacan himself alludes to this when in his *Seminar XI* he tells the story of his youthful endeavor to find his true self by working as a fisherman in a poor seaside town of Brittany. One day, while engaged in hard labor on a boat, one of his fellow fishermen pointed at a sardine can floating in the water: “It floated there in the sun, a witness to the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me—You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!” Lacan describes his feeling after the encounter as “rather out of place in the picture.”⁴² In what picture? In the fantasmatic one that positioned him as a manual laborer, the supposed supplier of enjoyment for the panoptic gaze of the Other that in exchange had knowledge about his real, authentic self. This fantasy scenario about (incidentally also homosocial) identification was, of course, properly unconscious until the encounter; until that point, he had been convinced that his attempt of self-discovery among common working men was a form of dis-identification from the routines of academic life, building an immunizing distance from the normative symbolic he tried to escape through exploring the sublime, raw forces of nature on that fishing boat. The light reflecting on the sardine can reveals to him the futility and ridiculousness of this enterprise insofar as the gaze of the Other appears now as the rather banal object of the fishing industry, coinciding with a stain

⁴² Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 96.

on his fantasy image.⁴³ It is this blind gleam of light that distracts the subject at the precise moment when he becomes aware that his fundamental fantasy of full enjoyment that tied him to the status quo cannot be realized. Crucially, this is not what the young Lacan had in mind when he withdrew from his ordinary bourgeois life in search of authenticity. Nonetheless, his naïvely voluntarist “No!” to his organic social position (a destructive gesture in Badiou’s terminology) was the precondition for his negative enlightenment, so to speak, insofar as his quest for self-purification had to fail first to open up a different, subtractive aspect of negativity. Much the same way as the classical noir hero’s sovereign act is the necessary historical precondition for its failure to trigger an ethical negation of sovereignty in neo-noir.

It’s worth noting that Lacan’s deployment of the figure of a blinding gleam of light in his 1964 seminar on the gaze was an implicit critique of existentialism’s notion of authenticity, a reference to Heidegger’s concept of the unconcealment of the self (*Lichtung*, “lighting” in German), and perhaps to Albert Camus’s novel *The Stranger* whose hero was also blinded by the sun while shooting an Arab in the face in French occupied Algiers in an “unmotivated,” “authentic” act—of sovereignty.⁴⁴ A cinematic equivalent of Lacan’s post-Algerian War (1954-1962) intervention into a potentially racist intellectual tradition is the 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*, which accomplishes the political, subtractive revision not only of classical noirs along the lines of *Odds Against Tomorrow*, *The Trial*, or *Seconds* but of the French critics’ initial, existentialist reading of the noir phenomenon itself. *The Battle of Algiers* can be seen as a politicization of the noir city, a revolutionary reinstatement of the disavowed non-white masses into an urban fabric considered decadent and criminal by the white colonial imaginary. This transformation is perhaps best captured in the scenes depicting the final days of the revolution.

⁴³ Ibid., 95-96.

⁴⁴ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. S. Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1946)

After a cinema verité documentary style images of violent street protests accompanied by a newscaster's voiceover commentary, we cut to a panning shot of the city by night while the inarticulate noises of the day's turmoil continue from the previous scene, without, however, the official commentary to make sense of them, showing how the political crisis goes through a repression through noir style aestheticization and abstraction in the colonizer' mind. We then cut to an overhead shot of a police cordon the next morning, placing the viewer once again on the side of the French, while the street ahead with the Algerian masses is covered in white fog lit by the rising sun. A policeman anxiously yells, "What do you want?" into his loudspeaker—the eternal noir question to which the crowd responds: "Independence! Our Pride! Our Freedom!" and they continue chanting as in a subtraction-image they emerge from what used to be an ontological void. The final shot is the close-up of a woman dancing (spinning endlessly) while waving the Algerian flag menacingly at the French authorities—a gesture of feminine *jouissance* breaking the frame of the sovereign-image that sutured together the noir universe. Significantly, the film doesn't end with a point of view shot from the revolutionaries' perspective that could introduce a (counter-)sovereign-image of Algerian nationalism. We see the autonomous colonial subjects emerge rather as the Rancierian "people," the "part of those who have no part," the uncounted *immanent* excess of the universalist colonial discourse, the Lacanian stain as its necessary blind spot supporting the coherence of its ideological self-image.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ For Ranciere, "The people is a supplementary existence that inscribes the count of the uncounted, or part of those who have no part - that is, in the last instance, the equality of speaking beings without which inequality itself is inconceivable. These expressions are to be understood not in a populist but in a structural sense. It is not the labouring and suffering populace that emerges on the terrain of political action and that identifies its name with that of the community. The 'all' of the community named by democracy is an empty, supplementary part that separates the community out from the sum of the parts of the social body. This initial separation founds politics as the action of supplementary subjects, inscribed as a surplus in relation to every count of the parts of society." Jacques Ranciere, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. S. Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 33.

While America's modernist neo-noir doesn't quite go this far politically, from *Point Blank* on its more modest version of subtractive negation is similarly about ending the hero's reliance on the controlling and knowing position of disciplinary power's panoptic gaze. Walker, the film's hitman protagonist always maps out the territory of battle from a safe and distant spot before engaging in a confrontation—a strategy that allows him to eliminate one by one the members of a powerful criminal organization that owes him money. Yet, despite still holding the higher ground in the end, he doesn't pick up the bag of cash finally offered to him as a settlement. Perhaps he suspects that it's a trap and that's why he withdraws from his place of surveillance into the shadows, but neither he nor the viewer will ever know for sure. As a result, the film ends on an ambiguous note: maybe all we saw was all just a hallucination of a dying man killed for his share of a robbery.⁴⁶ Or, alternatively, one could say that this is what a feminine, openly inconsistent narrative universe looks like: at the beginning, we see Walker being gunned down, then a moment after he stops moving the next shot shows him staggering away; when he later visits his ex-wife who once betrayed him, he witnesses the woman committing suicide, but the next morning there is no trace of her body, etc. I suggest not to read these montages simply as pure time-images in the Deleuzian sense, capturing the minimal gap between actual and virtual by endlessly repeating their collapse and differentiation. What shouldn't be missed is the antagonism between the masculine and feminine uses of these time-images driving the narrative that mobilizes the latter to move away from the former. This is why, in contrast to the shadowy zones of classical noir that were turned into territories of sovereign-fatalistic knowledge through the noir hero's confession to an all seeing gaze, *Point Blank* doesn't reveal any final truth to some imagined divine authority. In Colin MacCabe's terms, it becomes a

⁴⁶ This seems to be the canonical reading, see Spicer, *Film Noir*, 137.

revolutionary text that doesn't construct a reassuring meta-language to cover up the real of its contradictions.⁴⁷

On the other hand, this failure of the masculine panoptic gaze to constitute a sovereign-image may appear as just a failure and nothing more, the ethical rejection of sovereignty going undetected (the bad infinity of destruction appearing without its reversal into subtraction). This is in fact a strong tendency among neo-noir critics who prefer to focus on the epistemological crisis paralyzing the new noir heroes, how their inability to construct a master narrative turns them into “impotent private eyes”⁴⁸ and “losers with failed lives”⁴⁹ who are unable to restore even the illusion of a moral order.⁵⁰ As Richard Dorfman argues, “the film noir protagonist progressed from being the only one to know to the last one to find out”; he is now “jaded beyond cynicism and cannot be moved,” unable “not only to direct, but even to affect, his own fate.”⁵¹ It's also a commonplace to talk of the omnipotent corporations these new figures are facing, especially in conspiracy noirs like *The Parallax View* or *The Conversation*,⁵² missing the films' exposure of how these mysterious organizations still depend on the fundamentally arbitrary (and therefore unreliable) support of sovereign individuals. A case in point is Harry Caul, *The Conversation*'s balding loner protagonist who runs a small surveillance and wiretapping business, only caring about the quality of the recording he provides for his customers (“I don't care what they are talking about. All I want is a nice, fat recording.”) After a job well done, he is about to deliver the tapes to the client, who, however, is not present at the meeting, and Harry's rigid professional code prevents him from handing the material over to the man's assistant. This instinctive no in

⁴⁷ See Colin MacCabe, “Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses,” *Screen* 15, no. 2 (1974): 21.

⁴⁸ Spicer, *Film Noir*, 137.

⁴⁹ Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), 110.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.; Elizabeth Ward, “The Post-Noir P.I.: The Long Goodbye and Hickey and Boggs,” in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. A. Silver et al. (New York: Continuum, 1996), 237-42.

⁵¹ Richard Dorfman, “Conspiracy City,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 7, no. 4 (1980): 444.

⁵² Hirsch, *Detours*, 169.

the name of an abstract universal principle then develops into a complex ethical conundrum when he realizes, after listening to the tapes more carefully, that they might trigger a future murder. Although he is reluctant to assume responsibility, he also keeps stalling with the delivery, pushing the client's company to eventually steal the recording. As it turns out, the wiretap he did on his client's wife and her lover was used not to kill them as he feared, but on the contrary, to lure the jealous husband, the CEO of a large corporation, into a trap to be killed by the couple who could then take control of his company. Harry's mistake was that he tried to intervene based on the knowledge he gathered from what he assumed to be an omniscient panoptic position (set up by the famous opening of the film, an extreme long overhead shot of a square, the camera slowly zooming in to reveal the surveilled couple).⁵³ He ignored the fundamental undecidability at the core of the symbolic which cannot simply be eliminated through modern technology: he reconstructed what he thought was the definitive version of the couple's dialogue about the jealous husband as "he'd *kill* us if he had the chance" instead of "*he*'d kill *us* if he had the chance," which came to be proven the correct one only after the fact of the man's murder. In other words, Harry's failure is an epistemological and not an ethical one; in fact the final disintegration of his fundamental fantasy of full panoptic control—his inability to find the company's bug in his apartment even after tearing the place apart—is the necessary consequence of him doing the right thing earlier in a subtractive act. In the last scene we see him sitting in a corner, surrounded by the ruins of his apartment, playing his saxophone while the camera slowly pans around, focusing on nothing in particular, signalling perhaps that Harry finally learned to let go of his paranoid obsession with total visual domination and embraced the

⁵³ Crucially, the shot is not from Harry's perspective. It reveals rather the omniscient panoptic gaze that he imagines to be watching him while he is working, a gaze for whom his true self and purpose is constructed, a gaze that supplements his position as a fully knowing subject.

gesture of its feminine decreation (not only his playing music but the circular move of the camera itself appears here as a means without an end).⁵⁴

The revisionist neo-noirs most often associated with failed masculinities belong to the 70s cycle of “impotent” private eye films, most notably Robert Altman’s *The Long Goodbye* (1973), Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974), and Arthur Penn’s *Night Moves* (1975). These films can even be called anti-noirs due to their conscious attempt to undermine the hard-boiled detective tradition, which, of course, is a sign of nihilism only for those who prefer the sovereign authority of masculine reason. The most radical as well as the most utopian of these films is *The Long Goodbye*, a ruthless deconstruction of Raymond Chandler’s dignified petty-bourgeois moralist Philip Marlowe and his iconic cinematic representation by Humphrey Bogart in *The Big Sleep* (1946). Altman and his main actor, Elliot Gould, turn the figure of the hard-boiled sleuth into a clown, a poor, mumbling loner living with his cat who becomes the laughing stock of the police and gangsters alike, running errands for his drugged out hippie neighbours and his upper class athlete “friend” Terry Lennox who takes advantage of his blind loyalty to get away with murder. Until the very end, Marlowe stoically accepts all the abuse and slowly but steadily continues with the investigation, shrugging off the chaos and corruption around him by repeating his tagline “it’s okay with me.” In the finale, however, in a radical digression from Chandler’s novel that is comparable to Welles’s revision of *The Trial*, after finding out that he faked his suicide, he seeks out the fugitive Lennox in Mexico and puts a bullet in his head for using their friendship to cover up the cold blooded murder of his wife (he utters, for the first time: “It’s not okay with me.”)

⁵⁴ A similar post-paranoied, gestural use of playing music occurs at the end of *Mickey One* (1965) to the film’s stand-up comedian protagonist. After his anxious questioning of the hidden agency behind the spotlight directed at him on the stage of a dark underground club, the camera zooms in on the light source and we suddenly transition to an open rooftop where Mickey is now relaxed, playing the piano while the end credits are rolling.

Commentators usually emphasize the ridiculousness of Marlowe's outdated code of honour at play here,⁵⁵ taking it as the director's Brechtian gesture to expose the Hollywood artifice of a happy ending (the song under the final credits is called "Hurrah for Hollywood").⁵⁶ Altman himself seems to corroborate this reading: "I see Marlowe the way Chandler saw him, a loser. But a real loser, not the false winner that Chandler made out of him. A loser all the way."⁵⁷ As Robin Wood notes, he is like one of Antonioni's heroes, hopelessly alienated from the modern world, unable to adjust to it. Nonetheless, he argues, "the effect in *The Long Goodbye* is curious: one has the feeling that Altman despises [whom he referred to as] "Rip van Marlowe" yet is very close to him—closer, perhaps, than he would wish to acknowledge."⁵⁸ This could be because, contrary to the standard modernist interpretations, Marlowe doesn't stand for some unbending pre-modern chivalry going extinct but for the contradiction at the heart of the modern itself, for the possibility of a subtractive negation of sovereignty that activates a utopian impulse. Contrary to the classical noir hero whose disconnect from the male homosocial community put him into a feminized state of exception only to indirectly reaffirm the patriarchal status quo, Marlowe's emasculation is more definitive. First of all, like most revisionist neo-noirs, *The Long Goodbye* doesn't have a voiceover addressing an omniscient phallic authority. Instead, the protagonist mumbles to himself and to random people around him in a resigned, affectless voice that lacks the perverse *jouissance* of someone like Walter Neff, and is always fully immanent to the diegetic present rather than offering a guilt ridden confession of the hero's "dark past" hiding the truth of his manhood. Marlowe also lacks the lonely room of the sovereign that would frame

⁵⁵ Richard K. Ferncase, "Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*: Marlowe in the Me Decade," *Journal of Popular Culture* 25, no. 2 (1991): 88.

⁵⁶ Spicer, *Film Noir*, 138.

⁵⁷ Altman quoted in L. Brackett (1974) "From *The Big Sleep* to *The Long Goodbye* and More or Less How We Got There," *Take One* 1 (1974): 28.

⁵⁸ Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan... And Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 32.

the narcissistic theater of his noir isolation; he lives with his cat and practically with his crazy “lesbian” neighbours to begin with, and he is also regularly harassed in his apartment by the police and a group of gangsters who then keep following him around, not giving him much privacy. His bourgeois ego is further undermined by Altman’s uneven compositions leaving the protagonist off center, with the camera sometimes wandering off entirely to capture his neighbours dancing naked, dogs copulating on the street, etc.

Moreover, as Richard Ferncase stresses, “the [film’s] photography by Vilmos Zsigmond is unlike the heavy chiaroscuro of traditional noir. Venetian blinds cast no slatted shadows in this detective film. Instead, post-flashing technique creates a diaphanous ozone of pastel hues, blue shadows, and highlights of shimmering gossamer.”⁵⁹ Such dissemination of light that softens the style of the classical hard-boiled detective film can be read as the *lumen* of a post-sovereign world that left behind (traversed) the fantasy of a real, authentic white masculinity hidden in the shadows—the fantasy of an elixir made out of the foreclosed life African-Americans. In this context, even Marlowe’s “it’s okay with me” sounds less as a melancholic resignation than the affirmation of an imperfect (ontologically incomplete) universe without a phallic anchoring point. This is made clear in the opening scene where the hero puts cheap cat food into an empty can of his cat’s favourite brand, but the animal refuses to play the credulous gaze of the nurturing woman for him: as a stand-in for feminine *jouissance*, she sees through the trick of the phallic signifier (the brand label), and pushes the food off the table, sending Marlowe out in the middle of the night to buy her the real deal. He, however, never succeeds with his quest, getting distracted by the film’s main plotline, as a result of which his cat, the vestige of his fantasy about an all seeing noir gaze, also disappears.

⁵⁹ Ferncase, “Altman’s *The Long Goodbye*,” 88.

Like most detectives in revisionist noir Marlowe is also unable to solve the case until Terry Lennox, the film's real sovereign, reveals to him the missing pieces of the puzzle. Lennox calls him a born loser and invites him to affirm his misogynist violence with one of his stoic nods. I suggest reading Marlowe's final refusal to do this together with the neo-noir history of subtractive gestures, as a radical negation of the sovereign-masculine conspiracy he has been complicit in—a rejection that turns into an act of what Agamben after Walter Benjamin calls “divine violence.” Contrary to the violence of the sovereign exclusion, he argues, such “pure violence exposes and severs the nexus between law and violence”;⁶⁰ “it neither makes nor preserves law, but deposes it [...] and thus inaugurates a new historical epoch.”⁶¹ Divine violence, in other words, is the gesture of violence, *gesture as violence*.⁶² It is this seemingly futile and ridiculous act through which the hero, in a subtraction-image comparable in form to the one in *The Battle of Algiers*, occupies the place of the Lacanian sardine can in Lennox's (and the masculine viewer's) sovereign fantasy, finally drawing the boundaries between the utopian and the non-utopian that have been so far missing from *The Long Goodbye*. Only by striking at the white American sovereign hiding in his Mexican noir space of exception from the position of the feminine subject who, in masculine terms, is “a loser all the way” can Marlowe retroactively redeem the “failed” lives populating the film's weird universe: the alcoholic-impotent-suicidal writer, the drug addict hippie neighbours, the over talkative cellmate in jail, the Mexican favela dwellers, the patients of the mental hospital, etc. Lennox's death also breaks the endless repetition of the melancholic title song containing the last traces of Marlowe's narcissistic

⁶⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. K. Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 62.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶² Or, as Žižek puts it, “when those outside the structured social field strike ‘blindly,’ demanding and enacting immediate justice/vengeance, this is ‘divine violence.’” Slavoj Žižek, “Robespierre or the ‘Divine Violence’ of Terror,” in *Žižek Presents Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, ed. J. Ducange (New York: Verso, 2007), x.; see also Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1*, ed. M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 236-52.

enjoyment of his wounded manhood (his masculine death drive). This is why the song that then takes over during the final credits (Hurrah for Hollywood), evoking the symbolic universality, i.e. the glory of the old Production Code, should not be read cynically. It is an appropriate supplement to the final shot showing Marlowe dancing with Mexicans on the street, acknowledging the authentic utopian dimensions of classical Hollywood now dislocated from their white masculinist immunizing limitations by a feminine gesture. One could say that the Hollywood ending here has what Žižek calls a symbolic efficiency.⁶³ Its utopian program works even if the director himself didn't believe in it and wanted only push the negation of the noir tradition to the logical conclusion. The dialectical lesson of *The Long Goodbye* is precisely that a truly radical (subtractive) negation of noir's masculine logic is already at the same time the articulation of its utopian alternative, and the viewer only needs a minimal shift of perspective (the shock of divine violence) to realize this. This also means that there can be no purely disinterested gaze observing the chaos of the noir world from a neutral outside. Any withdrawal from the status quo either leads to its sovereign reassertion or the articulation of its utopian alternative.

This leaving behind the sovereign masculine ego is similarly associated with a space beyond the national borders of the United States in a series of 70s noirs. Traces of this move can be found already at the end of *Point Blank*, where the camera slowly zooms out of the location of the final showdown to pan around San Francisco Bay, only, however, to change angle and zoom in again on Alcatraz Island with a surveillance beacon on top symbolizing the death of the protagonist. The extreme zoom out here is the dialectical opposite to the opening shot of *The Conversation*, the zoom in that embodies the illusions of the masculine individual's panoptic

⁶³ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 2009), 142.

omnipotence. Later neo-noirs further this zoom out technique to evoke the complexity of late capitalist spaces surrounding the protagonist. This way, instead of using the *mise-en-scene* to express psychological states of anxiety and confusion like classical noir does, they offer an alternative to the hero's individualist, sovereign perception of space. At the end of *Dirty Harry* (1971), when the main character throws away his police badge in his disgust with the fascistic violence he had been solicited to do to protect and serve San Francisco's bourgeois citizenry, the camera zooms out to an extreme long shot to map the surrounding landscape. While throughout the film noir style chiaroscuro night scenes, close-ups, and tilted angles created an subjectivist view of the city's criminal underground from Harry's sovereign perspective, the final shot, in broad daylight, reveals a gravel mine and a highway network outside the city limits; endless supply chains as well as the signs of production that remained hidden from within the immunized bubble of San Francisco. The zoom out therefore creates what Jameson calls a "totality-effect",⁶⁴ not the image of an organic whole where everything falls into its proper place but the sense of a complex, decentered, and deterritorialized world system that emerges precisely when Harry is dislocated from his predetermined place in it captured by a sovereign-image.

Violent City (1970) uses the same technique to abruptly dislocate the viewer from the confined space of a car where the hitman protagonist, Jeff, is having a fight with his *femme fatale* girlfriend, Vanessa, accusing her of betraying him. The sudden change of scale turns the couple's car into a stain in the landscape made up of bridges, train tracks, factories, warehouses, and cargo ships anchored in the port of New Orleans. The message of leftist director Sergio Sollima's Brechtian intervention is clear: what prevent the viewer from understanding the complexity of the global capitalist world are the limitations of bourgeois individualism translating every

⁶⁴ Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 61.

conflict into the personal domain. In the subsequent scene a fight among dock workers interrupts the protagonist's revenge-rape of the *femme fatale* in a warehouse holding bags of wheat. To Vanessa's annoyed remark about the workers' intrusion, "Why is it that whenever I'm with you, I always end up in the middle of blood and violence?" Jeff responds: "Well it happens the whole city is full of blood and violence, you only see it when you're with me." This exchange suggests that the whole trip to the docks forced on her by Jeff, symbolically redoubled in the scene of sexual violence, was an attempt to shake her and the viewer out of their bourgeois ignorance, rather problematically opposing feminine short sightedness to masculine critical knowledge. Luckily, Sollima's film is more of a satire of classical noir's destructive violence than its glorification, reproducing the excesses of its male chauvinistic theater only to expose its pathos as a dead end. When Jeff eventually kills the deceitful woman with a sniper rifle (we see her collapse in slow motion), he also falls on the ground, his body freezing into a catatonic posture. Killing her (his *objet a*) means the end of his own life as well, now deprived of the masculine cause that animated it: after the murder he renounces his panoptic advantage and provokes the rookie cop arriving at the scene to kill him. The last shot of the protagonist is a close-up of his dead gaze, summarizing his incapacity to see beyond his sovereign role.

Night Moves (1975) similarly positions the late capitalist geopolitics of space against the limited perspective of its petty-bourgeois private detective, Harry Moseby, who is unable to think beyond gendered personal conflicts. This is already indicated by the fact that, like many of his colleagues in revisionist noir, he specializes on divorce cases—particularly ironic since his own wife is cheating on him. After *The Conversation*, Gene Hackman once again plays his balding loser character as the protagonist, a failed athlete turned private eye whose fading code of professionalism now resembles more of an automatism than a conviction. At some point the

woman he is investigating confronts him: “Do you ask these questions because you want to know the answer or it's just something you think a detective should do?” Jonathan Kirshner sees him as an allegory for America’s decade of failure: “post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, down a peg and directionless, with the hopes of the sixties long given way to the hollowness of the seventies, Harry is defined by disappointment and lost opportunity.”⁶⁵ Yet, it is not some kind of macho denial about his loss of power that makes him unable to grasp the nature of the conspiracy around him. In fact he admits, quite openly, his professional failure (“I didn't solve anything.”) It is rather this flaunting of his wounded manhood, which he uses to bond with the film’s two no less scarred *femmes fatale* that makes him unable to see beyond the domain of the personal, leading to the death of both women. It is *this* blind spot that the film’s international smuggling subplot hidden from Harry beneath the surface noir narrative about love, sex, and betrayal signifies. Allegorically, it suggests that getting too caught up in the crisis of the American nation as its impotent male citizen makes one miss the bigger picture, the shift from the nation state based second (imperialist) stage of capitalism to its global, multinational expansion where a local murder case becomes embedded in a complex, unmappable network of international capital.⁶⁶ This is the realization that Harry is left with at the end, lying wounded on the deck of a boat named the Point of View in the open sea south of the US border, circling around the crash site of the smugglers’ airplane that, as a Lacanian stain in his fantasy image, emerged from beyond the horizon and ruined his dream of sovereign withdrawal into the personal by killing the woman he cared for. The circular movement is an allegory for the masculine death drive of the American nation traumatized by its inevitable deterritorialization. The final bird’s eye shot then turns Harry’s boat (America’s “point of view”) itself into an insignificant stain on an endless sea

⁶⁵ Jonathan Kirshner, “*Night Moves* (1975): America at Middle Age,” *Film & History* 36, no. 1 (2006): 66.

⁶⁶ See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 399-418.

without distinguishing landmarks, the reflecting sunlight (*lux*) slowly turning into a bright blur (*lumen*) until the memory of his wounded petty-bourgeois ego is fully dissolved into an atemporal form of being. This is the perspective of a non-existent God, a non-judgmental Other indifferent to the authenticity of the protagonist. Like Coppola in *The Conversation*, director Arthur Penn thereby draws attention the unbridgeable gap separating his hero's intentional act of subtraction and its consequences. Unlike Marlowe in *The Long Goodbye*, Harry does not become a tool of divine violence deliberately. In fact he only plays that role for the viewer outside the diegesis by leaving the narrative open ended. By turning him into a blind gleam of light for the no less blinded viewer, Penn emphasizes that the real effects of his subtraction will always remain unknowable in the masculine-panoptic sense. But this is precisely why his subtraction is not an act of sovereignty.⁶⁷

3.1.4 Feminine Labour in Post-Classical Noir

The main problem with identifying a utopian impulse in seemingly nihilistic revisionist noirs is nonetheless that this almost always means congratulating lone white middle class men in their negative achievement to break from the system they used to support: as a rule, non-white and female perspectives are missing from these non-heroes of subtraction.⁶⁸ On the one hand, this shouldn't be surprising if one considers noir as a meta-generic indicator of the hegemonic biopolitical body of Hollywood. Looking at the totality of Hollywood Renaissance film production, it becomes obvious that during this period American films had empowered more

⁶⁷ *The Long Goodbye*, of course, has this very same gap expressed in the delay between Marlowe's "It's okay with me." and his final "It's not okay with me." He also does not expect to strike with divine violence, he rather finds himself in that position as a result of his former stoicism and then lets the violence happen.

⁶⁸ In terms of race, a notable exception is *Hickey and Boggs* (1975), which, however, is more of a post-noir buddy movie about the black and white protagonist's male bonding.

female and non-white subjects than ever before. The subtraction of the white male petty-bourgeoisie in revisionist noir is therefore a necessary correlate to this new consensus. On the other hand, one should avoid universalizing the masculine path to subtraction, which in these films leads through destruction, dialectically emerging out of the failure to reach a purified, authentic masculine self. The problem is that purification is the strategy of those who are already “in,” therefore it’s not applicable to the bodies of the excluded.

I will focus here on the problem of feminine autonomy in post-classical noir films in relation to the gradual liberalization of the American labour market in the 60s and 70s as a result of the feminist movement as well as the change in the capitalist apparatus towards post-Fordism where production increasingly happens outside of the factory and other centrally organized disciplinary institutions. According to Scholtz, the crucial shift occurs already in the 50s where various processes of rationalization enter the domestic sphere (new technologies of housework and control of attention like the washing machine or the television), laying the groundwork for integrating women’s hitherto devalued bodies into the regime of abstract labour and the process of capital accumulation.⁶⁹ As a result, contrary to classical noir which responded to the threat of women infiltrating masculine spaces, early neo-noirs depict the disassociated sphere of feminine activities itself becoming traversed by masculine instrumental reason. In 60s and 70s noirs women often sell their sexuality and/or perform emotional and care work: we see female prostitutes (*The Trial*, *The Naked Kiss*, *Klute*, *The Conversation*), strippers (*Shock Corridor*, *Point Blank*), stewardesses (*Seconds*), models (*Klute*), actresses (*Night Moves*), nurses (*The Naked Kiss*), psychotherapists (*Klute*), school bus drivers (*Dirty Harry*), etc. Unlike their male counterparts, all these women are moving towards the apparatuses of abstract labour not away

⁶⁹ Roswitha Scholz, “Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender without the Body (2009),” *Mediations* 27, no. 1-2 (2014), accessed December 20, 2016, <http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/patriarchy-and-commodity-society>.

from it. They have a clear stake in the sovereign feminist struggle to value their body's labour power, which once again threatens the masculine monopoly on the production of capitalist value, leading to neo-noir's male protagonist to come up with his own counter-sovereign quest for self-purification, his attempt to find the true masculine source of value. The reason why his quest now fails *as a rule* (while its failure was a rare exception in classical noir) is precisely because the real socio-economic conditions have changed, the white male petty-bourgeoisie has started to lose its biopolitical and American territorial hegemony. In other words, it's not his inner greatness but the success of his rival sovereigns (feminist and other civil rights movements as well as Third World decolonialization) that pushed the neo-noir man into subtraction, much like it was her exclusion from the hegemonic biopolitical body that made the classical *femme fatale* reach for the utopian. For this reason, although it is possible that a disempowered petty-bourgeois man losing his sovereignty meets a not yet fully autonomous woman half way, any narrative of withdrawal framing their encounter tends to remain his story, not hers.

This is in fact a common feminist criticism levelled against films like *Klute*, where the male hero's puritan moralism influences the rising *femme fatale* heroine to give up her sex work and leave with him to the countryside, to a safe distance from the corrupt capitalist metropolis that offered her emancipation.⁷⁰ *Klute*'s female protagonist, Bree, is a successful and independent prostitute in New York, who nonetheless suffers from depression and panic attacks as well as obscene phone calls from a former client now on a rampage killing hookers. By contrast, the film's eponymous male private detective is calm and asexual, with a moralizing contempt for the decadence of the urban lifestyle. It is *his* fantasy of modern sexual corruption that Bree comes to embody; it is his ideas resounding in her voice-over captured on tape during

⁷⁰ Christine Gledhill, "Klute 2: Feminism and Klute," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. A. Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), 112-28.

her psychoanalysis sessions, arguing with her female therapist that love cannot be translated to the language of instrumental rationality. As McCabe puts it, “Klute exactly guarantees that the real essence of woman can only be discovered and defined by a man.”⁷¹ No wonder that in the end, Bree is offered the same forced choice as the housewife of *Cape Fear*: the Father—or worse; she can either leave the city for an idyllic bourgeois family with the protagonist, or go back to his former pimp who beats his women and turns them into slaves. All in all, *Klute* is more of a post-noir film than a neo-noir; its ideological agenda is to punish a sexually deviant obscene father (Klute’s employer, killer of prostitutes and CEO of a large corporation) as a scapegoat, indirectly blaming the *femme fatale* for enabling his perversion, then saving her from herself by drawing her into a safe immunized bubble of the bourgeois couple.

The same can be said about *The Getaway*’s (1972) focus on the male criminal, Doc’s quest to leave behind the institutions of abstract labour (assembly line work in prison). He uses his wife, Carol to get out then punishes her for the price she had to pay for it: prostituting herself to the prison warden. The film’s scene of female “sovereign” decision is then also about a forced choice: Carol is aiming a gun at her husband after their successful heist, about to fulfill the promise she made to the warden who funded the operation, but in the last minute, instead of betraying Doc, she shoots the other man dead. What in *The Manchurian Candidate* was an act subtracting the male hero from the biopolitical status quo reaffirms here the patriarchal hierarchy of bourgeois marriage by constituting the woman as a repenting guilty subject (Doc even beats her up after the episode). The rest of the film is a long lasting test she has to pass, proving her loyalty once again to her husband. She succeeds, and as a result the couple reconciles in a post-noir site of heterotopic exception, a garbage dump, where they temporarily become social subjects

⁷¹ MacCabe, “Realism and the Cinema,” 11.

together, symbolically abandoning their former selves: Doc his imprisonment to industrial labour, Carol her emerging feminine autonomy. After a cleansing shower in a border motel they set out for a new life in Mexico, which, as the truck they buy from a local farmer indicates, will be an attempt to resurrect an agrarian idyll that the forces of modernity already destroyed in America.

The radical ethics of subtraction in revisionist neo-noirs therefore should be distinguished from the puritan masculine moralism of post-noir films that negate the excesses of capitalist sovereignty only in designated others.⁷² While subtractive ethics takes responsibility for men's complicity with the biopolitical hegemony, opening a way towards its feminine-utopian alternative, the latter finds a scapegoat to blame and thereby ultimately reaffirms the status quo. In revisionist noirs, it is the failure of the classical noir hero's epistemic complacency—the end of his perverse fatalistic assumption that he knows what an all seeing superego authority supposedly wants from him—that prepares the ground for an ethics of subtraction, the gestural decreation of the sovereign-image. In post-noirs, the male hero disavows his self-doubt and externalizes it on his female partner who can redeem herself only by regressing into a traditional regime of patriarchy where her autonomy is neutralized.

3.2 Nostalgia and Melancholy in Postmodern Neo-Noir (1974-1995)

3.2.1 Transitory Films

If *Night Moves* is the last masterpiece of noir's subtractive paradigm, a modernist film that, despite its bleakness, indirectly offers a utopian gesture through the eradication of the

⁷² See also the conservative vigilantism of the *Death Wish* films.

bourgeois ego's masculine sovereign-image, *Chinatown* (1974) is the first neo-noir that abandons this project for a post-modern reconstruction of sovereignty, turning its hero's failure into the resigned affirmation of the status quo. If *Night Moves* makes the viewer face the trauma of global capitalism's deterritorializing effects on the US, *Chinatown* invents new techniques to perpetuate the illusion of its territorial consistency. At first sight, the film is just another impotent private eye film: the protagonist, Jake Gitties is a former Chinatown cop in Los Angeles who quit the force after his negligence led to the death of an innocent woman. As a way to let go of his trauma, he is now running a detective agency specializing on divorce cases, the relative success of which made him smug and vain. His carefully constructed dandified ego, however, soon has to suffer a series of ordeals ending in a full blown return of his repressed past: he falls into a sewage canal that ruins his custom made suit; gangsters beat him up and cut his nose so he has to wear bandages for the rest of the film; his expensive car gets destroyed by gunfire after which he has to hitch rides to move around; and finally the theatrical showdown he unwittingly helps to orchestrate not only fails to solve the case he is working on, but his complacency leads to the death of another woman he wanted to save. Contrary to *The Long Goodbye* or *Night Moves*, however, the protagonist's fall from grace doesn't invite the empathy of the viewer, simply because Jake's blindness that incapacitates him is not the result of his fidelity to a universal ethical code like that of Marlowe or Moseby. Instead, his unconditional commitment is of an aesthetic nature: he is fully dedicated to upholding the image of a well-dressed private eye from the 30s, revealing director Roman Polanski's primary focus on creating a perfect simulacrum of Los Angeles from that era. We could say that the film aestheticizes Hollywood's glory formerly captured in the now discontinued Production Code—a move that, according to Agamben, always serves to cover glory's sovereign function as arbitrary and contingent, as “pure

force and domination.”⁷³ It is this shift to the aesthetic that turns *Chinatown* into what Jameson calls a “nostalgia film,” constructing a commodified, weightless pastiche image of a now lost historical period.⁷⁴ According to Jameson, such nostalgic historicism, the reification and cataloguing of dead epochs as fashion styles in fact marks today’s failure of historical imagination, the inability to see the present as historically contingent, subject to change.⁷⁵ In Baudrillard’s terms history in postmodernity turns into a hyperreal, all too perfect image that misses lack itself,⁷⁶ the fissure in reality’s ontological fabric where Lacan located the subject. What the postmodern subject loses therefore is the ability to *live* history, to assume the place of rupture in the present situation and thereby change the status quo. While Marlowe could still do this in *The Long Goodbye*, for Jake the ethico-political link to the system’s point of inconsistency disappears; he is literally stuck in a simulated world where all his actions mimic clichés of hard-boiled films and novels precisely to shut out the traumatic excess of freedom and responsibility (contained in his repressed memory of Chinatown) he cannot cope with, the blindness to which would cause his downfall once again.

This is why Stephen Docarmo accuses *Chinatown* of “postmodernist quietism.”⁷⁷ The other side of the film’s flawless 30s simulacrum is an “overdetermined” conspiracy narrative, “having more causes than necessary, more explanations than are readily manageable.”⁷⁸ For instance, the film’s primordial father, Noah Cross is not only a murderous oligarch seeking to

⁷³ “We find [...] at the hidden root of all aestheticisms, the need to cover and dignify what is in itself pure force and domination. Beauty names precisely the ‘supplementary element’ that enables one to think glory beyond the factum of sovereignty.” Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. L. Chiesa and M. Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 212.

⁷⁴ If the tacked on Production Code endings represented the typical form of glory in classical noir, in postmodern noir glory appears as nostalgia for the golden age of Hollywood.

⁷⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 16-27; 279-97.

⁷⁶ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. S. F. Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994)

⁷⁷ Stephen N. Docarmo, “Postmodernist Quietism in *Chinatown* and Mulholland Drive,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 4 (2009): 646-62.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 649.

control the city's water supply but at the same time the incestuous abuser of his daughter, Evelyn Mulwray; he therefore has at least two independently sufficient reasons to kill Hollis Mulwray, his son in law and head of the local water control board. This is why he tells Jake: "You may think you know what you're dealing with, but believe me, you don't." Of course, as I suggested in the previous chapter, overdetermined is another name for the fundamentally indeterminate, that is to say, for the inconsistent symbolic order in need of an arbitrary, sovereign decision to patch it up. If *Chinatown* is conservative, then, it's not because it allegorically represents the late capitalist system as indeterminate. Modernist conspiracy noirs accomplished this as well with a progressive outcome. As Ihab Hassan notes, other than being indeterminate, there is another predominant trait of postmodern aesthetics that sets it apart: that of immanence.⁷⁹ What is ideological in the film is the particular combination of mapping an inconsistent system while simultaneously disavowing its point of potential self-transcendence, its "inclusive exclusion," the subject as a place of radical negativity. This is most pronounced in the narrative when the protagonist, in his nostalgic identification with the pastiche image of the hardboiled private eye ends up unconsciously re-enacting noir's masculine theater of sovereignty that his modernist colleagues abandoned. Contrary to the classical noir sleuth like Sam Spade, he doesn't do it out of fatalistic self-subordination to the Law but out of narcissistic complacency about his masculine self-image. In a denouement resembling that of *Out of the Past*, instead of letting the victimized Evelyn quietly slip away to Mexico, he draws all the main characters into a confrontation in front of her hideout in Chinatown by informing Cross and the police about her whereabouts. On the spot, the police arrest Jake for obstructing justice ignoring his explanations,

⁷⁹ Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1987)

while the terrified Evelyn pulls a gun on his father who is trying to take their daughter away, to which the police respond by shooting her dead.

Polanski presents here the fatalistic, self-castrating theater of the classical noir hero as an unintended but necessary consequence of Jake's simulated life, a return of his repressed primal scene he is doomed to repeat unconsciously. This suggests that fatalism and nostalgia about patriarchy lead to the same results: to the disempowerment of the feminine subject and the perpetuation of the masculinist status quo. The difference is that while the classical noir hero openly identified with the impotent *homo sacer* in the system's point of undecidability, becoming a victim of the patriarchal law to ensure that there could be no escape from it, *Chinatown's* postmodern male protagonist does the opposite—he starts from a nostalgic identification with a hyperreal image of a lost patriarchal epoch, which then guarantees his impotence to change anything in the present *as a byproduct*. Like fatalism, then, nostalgia also implies a primordial father (like Noah Cross) in the position of absolute knowledge, with the subject unconsciously repeating a repressed fantasy scene of self-castration as a definitive answer to what this all-knowing superego wants from him, eliminating the radical undecidability of that question (of what the Other wants, what to do with the lack in the symbolic order the subject stands for). This is why the location of this castration fantasy, LA's Chinatown—the structuring absence to the film's hyperreal texture until the very end, a place which characters keep referring to as a zone without law and order that nobody understands—is not an allegory for the contradictions of late capitalism but rather a fetish that covers them up. It is not a zone of indistinction proper but, as John Belton observes, a site of “absolute Otherness”⁸⁰ supplementing the absolutely familiar hyperreal—two faces of the inoperativity that the sovereign apparatus

⁸⁰ John Belton, “Language, Oedipus, and Chinatown,” *MLN* 106, no. 5 (1991): 949.

divides and quaranteens in separate domains so their free use is prohibited. As a result, the only operative form of life that remains available for the postmodern subject is a nostalgic one without a horizon of a different future. This is the resigned wisdom captured in the film's famous closing lines: "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown." As the mellow saxophone score and the soft neon-lights indicate in the final overhead shot of Jake and his colleagues walking away from the crime scene, disappearing into the darkness of the Chinatown night, nostalgia and trauma, simulacrum and rupture can coexist in an eclectic mix now that the hero's ambitions to change the world are finally abandoned. Ironically, this new postmodern immanence, the protagonist's abandonment of the transcendental place of subtraction coincides with turning the viewer into a Hegelian beautiful soul, a detached observer to whom "anything goes."

The space of Chinatown is therefore sublime in Lyotard's sense of the term: it can be conceived of (named) but its idea cannot be properly represented.⁸¹ For Lyotard the production of the sublime sentiment, a pleasure derived from the pain caused by the breakdown of the faculty of imagination is at the center of both modern and postmodern aesthetics. The difference is that modernism "allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure."⁸² The increasingly more abstract forms invented by modern art to negate the reigning academic ideals of beauty turned into a universalist counter-aesthetics on their own; as such they couldn't present the sublime, they could merely allude to it as the excess missing from the current politico-aesthetic paradigm, but which could perhaps be found in the future (Lacan called this *objet a*—the object sought by Badiouian destruction). We arrive to postmodernism proper, Lyotard suggests, when even this negative reference to a point in the

⁸¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 77.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 81.

future when society's ills and frictions would be resolved—which for him is nothing but the nostalgia for an impossible lost unity in the past—is eliminated and the sublime loses its temporal dimension, falling back on the present, putting forward the rupture of the “unpresentable in presentation itself.” Postmodern is “that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable.”⁸³ For Lyotard, this postmodern sublime should serve as an ethical testimony to the irresolvable inconsistency of all human discourse against the totalitarian terror of reconciliation attempted by modern ideologies.⁸⁴

The Lacanian question here is which “totalitarianism” does Lyotard aim to eliminate, the masculine or the feminine one? The self-purifying sovereign quest for the real exception (what he calls the modernist sublime) or the utopian project for a real universalism of form (the normativity of the beautiful as purposiveness without a purpose, means without and end)?⁸⁵ Destruction or subtraction, sovereign-image or utopian gesture? The answer is: both. What he aims to undermine is the particular configuration in which these two, supposedly, mutually support each other towards totalitarian ends. Yet, Lacan's point about sexual difference is precisely that there can never be a situation in which the masculine and the feminine totalities come together in a higher unity; they remain two irreconcilable, antagonistic attempts to come to terms with the lack in the symbolic order, to cope with reality's fundamental incompleteness. As film noir demonstrates, the very basis of the masculine-sovereign quest for *objet a* (the authentic self) is the biopolitical *limitation* of the scope of universal symbolic norms, while the feminine embracing of an open universality comes at the price of abandoning the self-purifying sovereign

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 81-82.

⁸⁵ Agamben links the Kantian definition of the beautiful as “purposiveness without purpose” to his notion of “means without and end.” See Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), 59.

project. Lyotard's ethics therefore prohibits something that is strictly speaking impossible, which effectively creates the illusion that without such prohibition totalitarian harmony (a sovereign self that is somehow also fully universal) *would* be possible. In other words, Lyotard's postmodern "ethics" of the sublime is a fetish just like Chinatown in Polanski's film: it's a screen through which a properly nostalgic longing for the beautiful *as lost* becomes possible,⁸⁶ not only giving the impression that a perfectly harmonious, unchanging past (some kind of organic fascism) once existed, but that without the perpetual return to the sublime rupture it would spill over to the present. In psychoanalytic terms, this stance is fundamentally melancholic, complicit in creating the conditions it pledges to push away. As Agamben argues: "[Melancholy is] the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost. If the libido behaves *as if* a loss had occurred although nothing has in fact been lost, this is because the libido stages a simulation where what cannot be lost because it has never been possessed appears as lost, and what could never be possessed because it had never perhaps existed may be appropriated insofar as it is lost."⁸⁷ Lyotard's melancholic renunciation of closure, just like *Chinatown's*, is therefore the very sovereign suture (the political alternative to revisionist subtraction) through which a "totalitarian" aesthetic comes to be perpetuated in the background. Postmodern melancholy (i.e. the "ethics" of the sublime) and the nostalgia for the hyperreal are two sides of the same coin, building blocks of a new postmodern apparatus of sovereignty. By constructing an image of lost coherence it effectively reterritorializes the American identity decentered by processes of globalization (including the US normalizing trade relations with China in 1972), mediating

⁸⁶ As Žižek puts it, "at its most fundamental, the fetish is a screen concealing the liminal experience of the Other's impotence." Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 103.

⁸⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. R. L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 20.

anxiety over political-economic deterritorialization through the fetishistic containment of the sublime rupture it brings forward.

We find the same dialectic in *Taxi Driver* (1976), which, although it starts out as a modernist film, soon shifts into the postmodern register. The protagonist, Travis Bickle, is a nighttime taxi driver in New York and writer of petty-bourgeois diatribes during the day, fantasizing about cleaning “the scum off the streets” of the fallen city. Yet, what is often missed by critics reading him as a working class reactionary⁸⁸ is that initially, he also has a strangely affirmative attachment to the corrupt metropolis that echoes Marlowe’s stoicism from *The Long Goodbye*: “I go all over. I take people to the Bronx, Brooklyn, Harlem. I don’t care. Don’t make no difference to me.” Like a classical noir hero, he lives in a lonely room, isolated from the meaningful communication with others. As a result, he often has trouble expressing himself when he interacts with other characters. His discourse is schizophrenically split between mimicking the most obscene inherent transgressions of the white liberal bourgeoisie (racism, moral panic against pornography and drugs, condoning fascistic disciplinary measures), and a utopianism that presumes the innocence of the very same forms of life he judged earlier (he naively chooses a porn film for a first date). He therefore exists in a zone of indistinction between the sovereign and the utopian, purification and subtraction, but the trajectory of the narrative pushes him towards the former through the device of nostalgia.

What tips the balance is his falling for the idea of classical noir’s redemptive woman, now appearing as a commodified cliché-image from the past even wearing a white dress as a contrast to Travis’s nightly journeys through urban filth. It is after the porn cinema incident—

⁸⁸ See for instance Matthew J. Iannucci, “Postmodern Antihero: Capitalism and Heroism in *Taxi Driver*,” *Bright Lights Film Journal*, January 31, 2005, Accessed May 11, 2015. <http://brightlightsfilm.com/postmodern-antihero-capitalism-and-heroism-in-taxi-driver/>.

when the woman, Betsy, doesn't want to see him anymore—that he, as a good sovereign, finally internalizes the repressed norms of the bourgeoisie that rejected him.⁸⁹ He becomes a vigilante, kills a black man who is robbing a liquor store, and formulates a plan to assassinate a democratic senator whose slogan is “We are the People.” Even at this point, however, his position is ambiguous: is he about to commit an act of fascistic violence against the underprivileged by killing their symbolic representative, or is he, like Marlowe, planning to strike at a false master with divine violence precisely from the place of the socially excluded? This contradiction is also visible in his Mohawk haircut and his US army jacket, identifying him both with victims and the victors of American imperialism (while enigmatically wearing a “We are the People” pin). Yet, this (class) antagonism within Travis's character is never activated; much like Jake in *Chinatown*, he unconsciously sets himself up for failure when he starts a conversation with the senator's body guard while casing the location for the assassination. When he later comes back to execute his plan, the same member of the security team spots him and drives him off.

It is only after his potentially successful divine violence is reduced by the filmmakers to a vulgar Freudian theater of unconsciously determined failure that Travis can move on to commit an unequivocally fascistic act. Escalating the post-noir discourse of saving women's bodies from their liberation through work, he “rescues” a child prostitute by massacring his pimp and his crew, delivering the girl back to her home in Pittsburgh she once ran away from. It is her family that finally responds to Travis's inconsistent “notes from the underground,”⁹⁰ answering the hero's lonely voice-over with formulaic gratitude and commitment to discipline their prodigal

⁸⁹ For this reason, although screenwriter Paul Schrader intended his film to be a noir remake of John Ford's *The Searchers*, the narrative trajectory of the two films' protagonists is the exact opposite one. While John Wayne's Ethan in *The Searchers* gets cured out of his racism and misogyny by the end, Travis, on the contrary, is initiated into the obscene rituals of the patriarchal bourgeoisie.

⁹⁰ The title of the Dostoyevsky novel that influenced Schrader's script.

daughter. As Lacan would say, the letter always arrives at its destination,⁹¹ in phallic symbolic regimes the ambiguities of the message are always cleared up retroactively—in this case by erasing its utopian potential. Unlike in Production Code noirs, here the sovereign suture doesn't even have to be hidden anymore, and as a result, the hero also doesn't have to die. As screenwriter Paul Schrader points out, Travis is in a way even cheated out of the death he wanted when he finds no more bullets in his gun to kill himself with.⁹² After he collapses out of fatigue, an overhead shot scans the site of his massacre in the pimp's apartment, cataloguing the gruesome details of disfigured bodies and blood splattered walls, slowly tracking back through the hallway to the street to frame the people gathering outside. This tracking shot links the two spheres, the everyday and its sublime rupture, into a new postmodern sovereign-image, in which the recovering madman Travis can be glorified as a media celebrity for defending the status quo of neoconservative values.⁹³ In other words, the two aspects of sovereignty, biopolitical violence and glory that were separated in classical noir can now be conjoined through their aestheticization as two aspects of one and the same subject. In this new consensus, the hero doesn't need an *actual* traditional feminine figure to redeem him from urban chaos like his classical predecessor did. When Betsy, the woman he used to be obsessed with comes to take a ride in his cab to see the hero from the news, Travis keeps his distance, limiting their small talk to the minimum. As she wants to pay for the fare, he just smiles and says "so long." The car moves on, and we see the *image* of the woman on the sidewalk getting smaller and smaller from Travis's point of view (looking into the rear view mirror). Then the credits start rolling with Bernard Hermann's nostalgic jazz score and a montage sequence of the city by night, with

⁹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 30.

⁹² Richard Thompson, "Paul Schrader/Richard Thompson Interview," *filmcomment.com*, accessed May 11, 2015. <http://www.filmcomment.com/article/paul-schrader-richard-thompson-interview>.

⁹³ The overhead shot of the street functions very similarly to the one at the end of *Chinatown*.

different views from Travis's cab juxtaposed and mirrored onto each other like in a kaleidoscope. Turning the actual woman into a simulated image of lost perfection, her becoming a crystal image of nostalgia is fixed here by the aesthetic of the sublime.

In classical noir the pure time-image was mobilized to restore what Deleuze called the action-image (a component of the order of the movement-image in which cinematic time is subordinated to the progress of the narrative). The noir hero of the 40s and 50s, standing in the rupture of time that his death drive brought about, had to arbitrarily link his present state of disconnect to the past and the future of the patriarchal law, thereby guaranteeing its temporal continuity (as I argued in Chapter 1, it is the protagonist's illicit sovereign act that effectively restores the functionality of the police in films like *The Maltese Falcon*, *Gun Crazy*, or *Out of the Past*). In nostalgic neo-noirs like *Chinatown* or *Taxi Driver*, by contrast, the sovereign loop only works between the past and the present and the phallic apparatus's capacity to inscribe itself into the future remains suspended. This means that masculine identity is saved, paradoxically, through its very loss, through the fetishization of the breakdown of the action image. This is the condition that Jameson identified as the postmodern loss of the future and of historical consciousness proper.

If *Taxi Driver* turns the modernist formula postmodern, smoothing out its contradictions, *Sorcerer* (1977)⁹⁴ does the opposite, reactivating the antagonisms of capitalism within a postmodern universe. It continues where the great revisionist noirs left off and displaces the location of its fall and redemption narrative, with the exception of the exposition, entirely to South America. Its four international protagonists are postmodern embodiments of crime film clichés: a Mexican hitman, a Palestinian terrorist, an American robber, and a French embezzler.

⁹⁴ William Friedkin's remake of the French film noir *The Wages of Fear* (1953).

They all went too far with their generic transgressions, and running from the consequences they take refuge in the rainforest of a country with no name where their identity and the value of their life becomes suspended; they turn into one of many faceless workers building an oil pipeline for an American corporation. On the one hand, the jungle functions as an absolutely other sublime space, the hell or perhaps purgatory men are thrown into as a punishment for their sins (even the local bar is operated by an ex-Wehrmacht commander)—a place from where they can reminisce with nostalgia about the lives they had lost. Yet, at the same time, the stories of their personal repentance are traversed by the geopolitical conflicts of late capitalism. The company's oil well is blown up by local rebels fighting against American imperialism and the four men are offered "the deal of the devil" to restore the international supply chain: they are to drive trucks full of highly combustible nitroglycerin through the bumpy mountain paths of the jungle to deliver the TNT necessary to put the oil fire out by blowing up the well. In exchange, they get a new passport and enough money to leave the country. For them, the trip becomes a mythical rite of passage, a test and redemption of their manhood, a ritual repetition of the old colonizer's conquering the green inferno. This is why in the eyes of their corporate masters selecting them for the job they are superior to the local proletariat: they have a spiritual attachment to the western *oikonomia* industrial labour, a commitment to carefully take apart and put together their trucks piece by piece, an ability to drive them with a steady hand for hours without a break. They are focused because they are guilty and they want to repent, unlike members of the native population they encounter on the road who seem to be living as part of nature, care free, making fun of the foreigners concentrated efforts.

In a critical move, director William Friedkin makes the fetishistic, spectral dimension of the colonial-industrial machinery one of the referents of the film's ambiguous title: Sorcerer is

the name of the main protagonist's truck that even has teeth in the front. On the other hand, sorcerer is nature itself as a magical entity trying to prevent the men from succeeding with torrential rainfalls, corroded wooden bridges, or gigantic trees blocking the road (there is even a sorcerer totem by the jungle road that resembles the face of the truck). This way, instead of isolating the sublime as the immanent Other space to the late capitalist world of the simulacra, a point of mythical rupture that prevents its "totalizing" closure like in *Chinatown* or *Taxi Driver*, *Sorcerer's* title refers to the capitalist world system in its totality, revealing the Hegelian identity of its culturally opposed, seemingly incommensurable Northern and Southern territories, the fact that they are part of the same global economic network.⁹⁵ It is only through such totalizing, Jameson suggests, that the critical potential of the postmodern sublime can come to the fore, by becoming an allegory for the impossible (unrepresentable) totality of multinational capitalism itself.⁹⁶ He calls this new critical geopolitical aesthetic cognitive mapping, a method that exposes the hidden class conflicts of late capitalism through identifying antagonisms in its all-encompassing space.⁹⁷

To clearly separate this totalizing critique from Lyotard's postmodern ethics of the sublime, one should recall Jameson's distinction between antinomy and contradiction. While the former is an arrested, frozen form of binaries as they appear irresolvable, outside possibilities of historical change, the latter is the dialectical-historical interpretation of an antinomy that brings out the living and progressing antagonism the binary both expresses and obfuscates.⁹⁸ For

⁹⁵ The name *Chinatown*, insofar as it elevates one aspect of globalization into place of sublime Otherness, that of the US opening trade relations with China under Nixon, creates a fetish screen that prevents its totalizing understanding.

⁹⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 38.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 415. This also means that Jameson accepts Lyotard's diagnosis about the postmodern end of modernist (utopian) temporality, himself referring to it as the spatialization of time. It's just that instead of focusing on the end of ideologies (metanarratives) this supposedly brings, he emphasizes rather the new modes of cognitive mapping (that is, class consciousness) and spatial utopias it opens up. See *Ibid.*, 154-81.

⁹⁸ There is a "difference between [the] binary opposition, and what ordinarily . . . would be more properly described as a contradiction. The former is a static antithesis; it does not lead out of itself as does the latter" Fredric Jameson,

instance, *Chinatown*'s and *Taxi Driver*'s opposition between the hyperreal and the sublime forms an antinomy, so does the initial binary between modern industrial civilization and the pre-modern "magic" of the South American rainforest in *Sorcerer*. Yet, Friedkin's film overcomes this paralyzing antinomy in two steps. First by exposing how the two sides always already share their supposedly essential qualities with one another other: magic becomes the quality of the machine, its drivers with western instrumental reason regress into raging machete wielding tribesmen while the natives turn into organized rebels with machine guns. Second, when the binary is thereby deconstructed, he nonetheless undermines the illusion of a third, neutral position: the detached postmodern perspective of the beautiful soul. When Scanlon, the only surviving driver (the former robber from America) is about to receive his reward from the oil company representative for completing the mission, he suddenly loses interest in returning to his old petty-bourgeois self. Hearing the man's suggestion to find work at other western companies in the region, perhaps in Managua, now that he has proved himself, he simply answers: "Managua? Shit, there is no way I can go to Managua... No, Managua is not good for me." These lines are a reference to an earlier conversation he had with Nilo, the Mexican hitman, who, already dying, asked Scanlon to go to a whorehouse in Managua for him once he received his money for the job. It is this homosocial pact, the obscene underside of western imperialism that he refuses instinctively with his enigmatic no.⁹⁹ After a blank stare into the camera for a few seconds something like smile appears on his face. He excuses himself for a couple of minutes and asks the local barmaid for a dance. The camera frames them from the outside through the

The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 36.; "the unmasking of antinomy as contradiction [...] constitutes truly dialectical thinking as such." Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2009), 43.

⁹⁹ His resistance is a sign of his fidelity to the real universal potential inherent to the apparatus of Fordist labour that becomes visible after the subtraction of its male homosocial and imperialist limitations. What he refuses is the new post-Fordist (neoliberal) subjectivity of the freelance entrepreneur, serving the American Empire while pretending to be autonomous.

window, then it tracks back just like in *Taxi Driver*, settling to show the daily life of the shanty town in a static overhead shot. Soon a car arrives with the gangsters from New York Scanlon ran away from. As they enter the bar, a truck full of soldiers drives by; the army of the country's US backed dictator. Then we hear a gunshot from the bar and immediately cut to the final credits with the ominous electronic soundtrack by Tangerine Dream. While the similar final overhead shots in *Chinatown* and *Taxi Driver* also had an implicit dialectical tension in them, they remained at the level of an antinomy, framing an ahistorical, static opposition of essentialized qualities conveniently without taking a side. *Sorcerer's* final subtraction-image, by contrast, works as a cognitive mapping of the concrete historical antagonism between US imperialism and the South American resistance to it precisely because it takes an engaged position in this geopolitical class struggle.

3.2.2 Postmodern Noir

Critics who separate the history of neo-noir into different periods usually mark the early 80s as the beginning of its second, postmodern cycle.¹⁰⁰ According to Spicer, after the revisionist trend reaches its apogee in the mid-70s, American film noir is revitalized again in 1981 with the erotic noir-thrillers *Body Heat* (a distant remake of *Double Indemnity*), and the remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. He sees these films as the first to shift the direction of generic self-reflection away from modernist criticism towards a “more commodified reworking of classical noir whose seductive, instantly recognizable look—known in the trade as ‘noir lite’—forms part of a knowing, highly allusive postmodern culture.”¹⁰¹ In the new paradigm, the previous two decades’ abstract minimalism turns into neon-lit excess, asexual male heroes

¹⁰⁰ Spicer, *Film Noir*, 149-53.; Martin, *Mean Streets*, 63-90

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

become promiscuous again, and the *femme fatale* returns with a vengeance, finally, making use of the abolishment of the Production Code, not as a victim of patriarchy but as the embodiment of phallic power, using her naked body as a weapon. Although the new noir form tends to fill in the blanks left by censorship, offering to reveal everything that was merely alluded to in its predecessor, the gender politics of these 80s erotic thrillers has a lot in common with that of the classical noir cycle. On the one hand, they positively incorporate the breakthroughs of second wave feminism: female characters get more screen time and agency,¹⁰² and, as in *Body Heat* the *femme fatale* can even get away with crime unpunished. At the same time, these narratives also express a backlash against the newly empowered, independent working woman by presenting her dangerous sexuality as a threat to the emasculated protagonist who often comes to stand for the conservative family values of the Reagan years (*Fatal Attraction*, 1987)¹⁰³ nostalgic of the post-war bourgeois consensus.

Ironically, as Boozer notes, the excessive greed and sexual appetite the postmodern *femme fatale* was blamed for was nothing but the expression of the decade's official ideology of pursuing one's economic self-interest.¹⁰⁴ Or, to be more precise, the "gender war"¹⁰⁵ of 80s erotic noirs was a result of the inconsistency between the two dominant bourgeois ideologies of the era, neoconservatism and neoliberalism. While the former vowed to protect the immunized communities of nation and family from alien intruders (communists, gays, ethnic minorities, career women, as well as foreign corporations), the latter encouraged individuals precisely to blow up these boundaries and turn their life into a successful business venture on its own (for instance, in Gary Becker's notorious neoliberal economic model, family members were to

¹⁰² Hirsch, *Detours*, 56.

¹⁰³ Gates, *Investigating Crisis*, 98-123.

¹⁰⁴ Boozer, *The Lethal Femme Fatale*, 27.

¹⁰⁵ Gates, *Detecting Men*, 98.

calculate cost-benefit ratios while investing in each other).¹⁰⁶ One could say that the moral panics and new militarism/nationalism of Reagan-era neoconservatives were scapegoating tactics to steer the blame away from their own neoliberal policies of globalization devastating the (Fordist, centralized and localized) social institutions of the post-war welfare state.¹⁰⁷ This means that for the first time in noir history, the *femme fatale* of 80s erotic noir thrillers could stand not for the devalued life to be dissociated from the masculine biopolitical body of commodity producing patriarchy, but for the very sovereign agent grounding capitalism's new post-Fordist impetus. While in classical noir the *femme fatale*'s death driven narrative trajectory served as a cautionary tale about the impossibility of non-patriarchal self-valorization, in neo-noir she returns as an entrepreneur of herself, representing the vanguard of the new economic paradigm precisely because of her subversion of now outdated Oedipal patriarchy.

In the new consensus, sexual difference appears *within* the dialectic of capital: neoliberal deterritorialization is gendered feminine while its neoconservative reterritorialization is gendered masculine. This is not to say, however, that the *femme fatale* now stops being fetishized by the masculine gaze. Rather it is the strict Marxian separation between value and fetish itself that increasingly collapses in neoliberalism where the source of profit is less and less the apparatus of abstract labour but what David Harvey called "accumulation by dispossession," a perverse redistribution of wealth to the top 1% in a blatant abuse of arbitrary sovereign power.¹⁰⁸

This new role of the *femme fatale* is in fact the major difference between the early postmodern neo-noirs of the 70s and the 80s erotic noir thrillers. As I have suggested, the sovereign agent in films like *Chinatown* and *Taxi Driver* is the masculine unconscious, setting up

¹⁰⁶ See Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981)

¹⁰⁷ On the historical emergence of neoliberalism see David Harvey, *The Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

¹⁰⁸ See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 137-83. For a closer analysis of the neoliberal political economy see Chapter 3.

a nostalgic fantasy scene that prevents the male hero from changing the status quo, while the *femme fatale* is only present in these films as a passive victim. This changes in *Body Heat* where it is the *femme fatale* herself who actively orchestrates the scene of nostalgia for the male gaze, constructing herself as a fetish-image, decapitating her male rival by exploiting his investment in patriarchal stereotypes of women. The film's denouement reproduces the final scene of *Taxi Driver* but with a twist: when the male protagonist, Ned, already knows that his lover, Matty, is planning to kill him with some explosives rigged to the door of a boathouse, he asks her to prove her love to him by opening the door herself. The woman calls his bluff and starts walking towards the building while the camera remains static, giving us Ned's point of view—the perspective of the naive observer. Before she disappears into the darkness, she stops and turns back for a moment; her white dress and blonde hair is lit up by the moonlight she is while uttering with a soft voice “Ned, no matter what you think, I do love you!” Once her nostalgia-image fades into black, a reverse shot shows the growing doubt on Ned's face. He starts running after her, but it's too late: the boathouse goes up in flames. We then cut to Ned in prison a few months after, yet again suspicious about the woman real intentions: now that she has helped him lose his freedom (gave him an excuse to stay in his place) he can go on blaming her for it. He manages to get a copy of her high school yearbook that proves she stole the identity of one of her classmates after most likely murdering her. Matty's real name is Mary, nicknamed “The Vamp” by her fellow students, a serial homecoming queen whose declared ambition was “to be rich and to live in an exotic island.” The close-up on her yearbook photo then transitions into Matty lying on the beach of an actual tropical island, but instead of satisfaction her face is fraught with melancholy. The native man lying next to her asks “Is this what you've been waiting for?” referring to the cocktail just arrived for her. “What?” she asks without looking, “It's hot.” he

says, to which the distracted woman answers “Yes...” with an empty tone. The camera tilts up from her profile, settling on the clouds covering the blue sky while the credits start rolling.

This new *femme fatale* both differs from and fundamentally resembles her classical predecessor. On the one hand, as a neoliberal entrepreneur of herself she now manages to outmaneuver the patriarchal gaze by consciously masquerading as the stereotypical spider woman fetishized by noir’s male protagonist. By performing her femininity for a symbolic (part blind) rather than a real (all seeing) gaze, she tames the classical noir *femme fatale*’s death drive and avoids being discarded as the devalued double of the male hero, who excludes now only an empty shell of patriarchal femininity—a simulation that is not lived anymore in its classical, dissociated and devalued form. Yet, as Žižek maintains, despite the transparency of this trick, the *femme fatale*’s enigma prevails.¹⁰⁹ At the end of *Body Heat*, the viewer doesn’t learn what Matty really wanted. Her desire is clearly beyond what she had accomplished by duping Ned and escaping to the other side of the capitalist world, having a non-white manslave handing her drinks. The disturbing possibility of her wanting nothing that American imperialist money can buy, emphasized by the last shot of the empty sky, keeps a utopian impulse open through the deterritorializing negativity of her feminine desire. It is only a masculinist (sovereign) reduction of this indeterminacy that would identify the object of her desire with that of Ned’s nostalgia, as in the film’s use of continuity editing to suture Matty’s *jouissance* together with the image of the man she pushed away remaining obsessed with her *femme fatale* persona. Judith Butler calls this phenomenon “stubborn attachment”, arguing that subjects would rather maintain their subordination to a power apparatus in an unhappy consciousness than have no attachment at all,

¹⁰⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch’s Lost Highway* (Seattle: The Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, 2000), 10-11.

which leads them to desire unfreedom even when their masters are gone.¹¹⁰ Moreover, she sees a melancholic stubborn attachment, an inability/unwillingness to mourn a lost libidinal cathexis at the core of *all* gender identities.¹¹¹ While she focuses on the child's affections for the same sex parent that are ungrievable in heteronormative societies, her theoretical framework can be extended to the relations of subjectivation and subjection involved in *Body Heat*'s neoliberal identity politics where the mourning (letting go) of the white male patriarch would leave the *femme fatale*'s entrepreneurial scheme without an anchoring point to direct itself against.

This way, the film offers a dialectical sovereign-image of neoliberalism where the immobile man (Ned stuck in prison) and the feminine nomadic subject (Matty travelling alone for pleasure) are conjoined in a unity, allegorizing the mutual dependence of the Oedipal law and the feminine flight from it, the Fordist and the post-Fordist logic of capital, its deterritorialization and reterritorialization. In a temporal synthesis of past and present, America's mid-century regime of patriarchal discipline is pushed away but also evoked with nostalgia. As Fredric Jameson observes, "Everything in the film [...] conspires to blur its official contemporaneity and make it possible for the viewer to receive the narrative as though it were set in some eternal thirties, beyond real historical time. This approach to the present by way of the art language of the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical past, endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage."¹¹² It is this nostalgic tone of the film that links Matty's *jouissance* to Oedipal patriarchy as a zero institution of neoliberal entrepreneurship, valorizing it only as the melancholy she feels over leaving men behind.

¹¹⁰ See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 31-63.

¹¹¹ 132-51.

¹¹² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 20.

We find a similar structure in *Blade Runner* (1982), where both Decard, the male headhunter protagonist, and his target Rachel turn out to be “replicants,” human shaped synthetic machines with their memories artificially implanted (they also look like simulations of classical noir heroes: he has a trench coat, she is wearing the attire of Joan Crawford from *Mildred Pierce*). The fact that Decard knows from the beginning that Rachel is not a real human doesn’t help him cope with the enigma of her feminine melancholy. He falls in love with her, and instead of killing her he rescues her from the dystopian nightmare of Los Angeles, taking her to the countryside where the trees are still green. Like in *Body Heat*, this offering of images of pure nature as what the *femme fatale* would supposedly really want should be understood as a strictly masculine fantasy, the reduction of feminine desire to masculine nostalgia.¹¹³

The ultimate example of this formula is perhaps David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986), a film that explicitly opposes the masculine nostalgic fantasy of an ideal small town life to the chaos and disruption unleashed by the enigma of feminine desire. The collision starts when Jeffrey, an ordinary college student back to his hometown, Lumberton to visit his sick uncle, finds a severed human ear on the ground that no one seems to be missing. His curiosity soon turns him into an amateur detective, uncovering a surreal plot about a night club singer, Dorothy, being terrorized by a local hoodlum, Frank, who had kidnapped the woman’s husband and son to blackmail her into a becoming his sex slave. Curiously, although Frank holds total power over Dorothy, he doesn’t really know what to do with his position. He regularly visits her apartment demanding newer and newer favours from her to prop up his manhood (to make him a drink, to call him daddy instead of sir, etc.), then he performs exaggerated gestures of simulated sex instead of actually having intercourse with her. Jeffrey, turned into a voyeur, witnesses this while hiding in Dorothy’s closet, but when the woman discovers him he also cannot account for what

¹¹³ No wonder that Ridley Scott omitted this final scene from the director’s cut of his film.

he is doing there, what he wants from her. As Todd McGowan suggests, the space of the Dorothy's apartment stands for the breakdown of any fantasy frame that would make one's desire meaningful.¹¹⁴ It represents a pure negativity which the various male heroes in the film set out to domesticate, resulting in a bizarre homosocial bond between Jeffrey and Frank: the criminal and his gang forces Jeffrey through a violent hazing ritual to make him symbolically one of them (Frank even kisses him on the mouth at the end).¹¹⁵ Significantly, the film's performances of tough guy masculinity are fully exposed as pop cultural clichés of the past (of 50s and 60s rock and roll culture, TV crime shows, etc.), re-enacted with postmodern quotation marks capturing their glorious inoperativity: much like the normal social order of Lumberton where the grass is always green and everyone is always smiling, homosocial transgressions in the film are nothing but nostalgic simulations. In other words, the modern distinction between symbolic and imaginary, universal Oedipal norm and its immunizing transgression collapses into the hyperreal which is then opposed to a sublime force of absolute otherness (the real). As Žižek puts it, "in Lynch's universe, the psychological unity of a person disintegrates into, on the one hand, a series of clichés, of uncannily ritualized behavior, and, on the other hand, outbursts of the 'raw,' brutal, desublimated Real of an unbearably intensive, (self)destructive, psychic energy."¹¹⁶ The masculine quest of the narrative, then, is to tame this feminine real by providing a cure for Dorothy's depression, stop her from becoming the self-enclosed neoliberal *femme fatale* by reuniting her with her son.¹¹⁷ As McGowan summarizes, "[w]hen Dorothy evinces maternal concern for her son, she indicates that she has left the terrain of pure desire and entered

¹¹⁴ Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 99.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹¹⁶ Žižek, *Ridiculous Sublime*, 35.

¹¹⁷ As Michel Chion suggests, Frank's true aim is to prevent Dorothy "from becoming depressed and slipping into the void ... by beating her, kidnapping her child and husband and then cutting off the man's ear." Chion quoted in McGowan, *Impossible David Lynch*, 101.

the world of fantasy. As a mother, she is on male turf: the image of the maternal plenitude is a male fantasy.”¹¹⁸ Yet, the elimination of feminine negativity doesn’t simply return us to the aseptic simulation of *Lumberton*. Much like *Chinatown*, *Taxi Driver*, or *Body Heat*, the film ends instead with the juxtaposition of the two registers, of what Žižek refers to as the ridiculous and the sublime:¹¹⁹ on the one hand, the restored idyll at Jeffrey’s family home is pushed to a point of kitsch when a robin, the film’s symbol of love, settles on the ledge of the kitchen window. A closer look, however, reveals the bird holding a crawling insect in its beak. After a brief moment of disgust, the characters nonetheless continue smiling and Jeffrey’s girlfriend simply says “It’s a strange world.” (a variation for “Forget it Jake, it’s Chinatown.”) The 50s pastiche song “The Mysteries of Love” keeps playing while we cut to the nostalgia montage of small town life that started the film, now ending with a scene of Dorothy playing with her son in a park. Here the soundtrack changes to her singing “Blue Velvet,” and when the camera tilts up to show the blue sky, the image morphs into the actual fabric of blue velvet she used to be wearing for Frank, suggesting that as a mother, she is trapped within the same masculine imaginary that used to fetishize her as a *femme fatale*, that the crystal image short circuiting the sublime and the ridiculous, the melancholic and the nostalgic imprisons the feminine *jouissance* expressed in her voice.

What *Blue Velvet*, more than *Body Heat*, makes explicit is that feminine melancholy is not a real alternative to masculine nostalgia, but is rather the very form of sovereignty grounding it. The infantilized male subjects supposed to believe for whose eyes the new *femme fatale* puts on the mask of noir stereotypes are not merely her patsies; their (Frank’s, Jeffrey’s, and even Dorothy’s son’s) naively nostalgic gaze is the *objet a* that gives the female protagonist’s

¹¹⁸ McGowan, *Impossible David Lynch*, 101-02.

¹¹⁹ See Žižek, *Ridiculous Sublime*

enigmatic desire a structure, tying it to the lost apparatus of Oedipal masculinity. As an allegory, the new *femme fatale* can mediate American anxiety over losing its territorial groundedness through globalization by constructing a figure of the naive observer whose desire points back to the country's lost golden age. At the same time, the fact that she can go unpunished and thus survive as a symptom of patriarchy nonetheless signals that a classical era return to the action image, a full reterritorialization of the noir state of exception is not possible anymore: the crisis of the American Empire can only be managed but not resolved. While classical noir's fascistic scapegoating of the *femme fatale* founded the organic unity of a patriarchal *bios*, in postmodern neo-noir the white male community remains split from within by the female protagonist (it is their different approach to Dorothy's enigmatic melancholy that break up the homosocial bond between Frank and Jeffrey in *Blue Velvet*, and it's the void of Matty's desire that turns Ned against his male friends and makes him kill the woman's husband).

3.2.3 From the *Homme Fatale* to the Cynic

The melancholic *femme fatale* nevertheless is an image that neo-noir's men don't fully control, which explains the tendency at the end of the 80s to replace her with a more reliable agent of patriarchal sovereignty: the *homme fatale*. As Margaret Cohen argues, the Freudian obscene father returns in postmodern neo-noir as defense reaction against the growing female equality on the job market where more and more women are occupying a phallic position. The specter of the non-castrated man is conjured up as a guarantee that real power will remain with those who not only have the symbolic phallus but also an actual penis.¹²⁰ This new figure often appears as a perverse representative of Oedipal law like the sexually overpotent

¹²⁰ Margaret Cohen, "'The 'Homme Fatal', the Phallic Father, and the New Man,'" *Cultural Critique* no. 23 (Winter, 1992-1993): 111-36.

policeman/godfather in *Internal Affairs* (1990) or Hannibal Lecter's cannibal psychiatrist in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), but he doesn't reach protagonist status until the mid-90s.

An early example of the *homme fatale* instead of *femme fatale* formula that also reveals the cycle's anti-feminist ideological stakes is Michael Mann's *Manhunter* (1986), a neo-noir about FBI profiler Will Graham's unconventional pursuit of a serial killer, the "Tooth Fairy" through (over)identifying with him. Like in *Taxi Driver*, the status of the killer's violence is ambiguous: are his repeated massacres of suburban white bourgeois families the expression of divine justice or is he simply praying on the vulnerable? As Graham is drawn into the vortex of the man's sovereign madness, he is faced with the same undecidability: maybe his growing alienation from his own family connects him with a darker truth compared to which the idyllic images of family life he keeps dreaming about are nothing but simulations. The problem is that for the Tooth Fairy, murdering the innocent doesn't prevent the fetishization of their idealized image, on the contrary, he kills in order to preserve their essence on video tape as eternal and uncorruptible. The other, utopian potential of his character appears only in a subplot when he falls in love with a blind woman who, much like Mary in *On Dangerous Ground*, doesn't judge him for his masculine perversions. When the killer "shows" her the home videos he stole from the murdered families, she just smiles, touches his face and kisses him, probably assuming that the man is watching porn to get in the mood before they have sex. It is the gesture of this non-judgmental touch of the blind woman that stands for the Lacanian feminine *jouissance* (we also see her caressing a sedated tiger in another scene) that deconstructs the image through a tactile relationship to the cinema, while, as Kendall R. Phillips notes, masculine enjoyment in the film

follows the logic of the Mulveyian voyeurism.¹²¹ It is the latter that breaks their short utopian relationship, him misreading the sight of a friendly chat between the woman and her co-worker as a scene of seduction, to which he responds by trying to kill both of them. Once the feminine plotline is sidelined, the film returns to the central doppelganger conflict between Graham and the Tooth Fairy, of which Mann shoots two different endings. While the killer is eliminated in both, the first one shows the profiler reunited with his family in their idyllic California beach house, reproducing the imagery of his dreams he had while working on the case. In the second, “director’s cut” version Graham visits during the night the family that the Tooth Fairy was planning to kill next, not really knowing how to account for his presence when they open the door (“I just stopped by to see you” he utters awkwardly). The Hegelian identity of these two seemingly opposite endings, a crystal-image connecting two modalities of the masculine gaze—one nostalgic (locked on the lost beautiful), the other melancholic (sublime)—can appear against the backdrop of the feminine *jouissance* they both disavow.

It is this utopian potential present even in sovereign noir femininities that gradually disappears from erotic noir thrillers in the early 90s through the elimination of feminine melancholy. While *Basic Instinct*’s (1992) *femme fatale* thrill killer still has an enigmatic lack of satisfaction on her face at the end of the film, hesitating whether to murder her detective lover she successfully manipulated or let him live a little longer, *Last Seduction* (1994) offers a vulgar capitalist heroine, Bridget, who appears to be fully content with the money she gets at the end. When we last see her, driving away with her prize in a limousine, her facial expression lacks any ambiguity or melancholy: she fully identifies with the masculine ethos of yuppie success without a feminine remainder. Incidentally, the price of her symbolic transformation into a man is that

¹²¹ Kendall R. Phillips, “Redeeming the Visual: Aesthetic Questions in Michael Mann’s *Manhunter*,” *Literature Film Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2003): 11.

the film has to introduce a second *femme fatale*, a male to female transgender woman left behind by the male protagonist when he found out about her sex change. In this way, the film exposes the conservative biopolitical baggage of liberal ideologies of gender performativity that became mainstream in the 90s:¹²² true, if gender is discursively produced and lacks an essence, women can now reach the status of powerful men simply by putting on the same social mask they are wearing, that of the neoliberal yuppie who doesn't share his success with anyone. On the other hand, this means that their female body has to be fully instrumentalized, that is, it has to be abandoned in its dissociated, devalued form, which in turn is projected on disenfranchised others who cannot hide their inoperative baggage of femininity (such as lower class, non-white, or transsexual women). It is this excess of the feminine bare life supplementing the *femme fatale*'s masculine transformation that appears in *Last Seduction*, paradoxically, through the body of the transgender "other woman," more *real* than the female protagonist precisely because of her inability to fully perform the gender mask she had chosen.¹²³

The next reactionary move to eliminate the potentially utopian remainders of the sovereign female body is then to revoke her sovereign privileges all together and return femininity into its classical noir status as a mask put on by the male sovereign. This is accomplished in *The Usual Suspects* (1995) whose protagonist, while exemplifying (as Keyser Söze) the trend towards the returning uncastrated father, also represents a new paradigm. He mobilizes the image of demonic masculinity ("Keyser Söze is the Devil!" – cries one of his victims) as a device of capital accumulation, a game of masquerade that is part of a neoliberal

¹²² See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990)

¹²³ The underlying assumption is that while one can fully become a man if he/she acts like one for long enough, becoming a woman remains an unfinished project, with the feminine body always bearing a mark of castration (in this case, ironically, the penis itself).

“abilities-machine”¹²⁴ attached to the body of *ordinary* (Oedipalized) white men. It is the return of this ordinary manhood as an index of a now hybrid and neoliberal patriarchal power that provides the final twist of the film, as if the earlier female driven neo-noir’s unconscious stubborn attachment suddenly came back to life, breaking from his quarantine as an impotent remainder of a past regime of production. Verbal is a cynic, not a melancholic because, contrary to *Body Heat’s femme fatale* whose stubborn attachment to the Oedipal power apparatus remained unconscious, contradicting her open resistance to it, he can openly affirm himself not only through his masquerade but also as a part of the biopolitical body of white patriarchy, now elevated from the remainder of the Fordist past to the condition of possibility for post-Fordist entrepreneurship in the present.

This way, perhaps for the first time in the history of film noir, *The Usual Suspects* manages to reconcile the tension between the subject’s singular *jouissance* and the biopolitical apparatus needed for its valorization. It finds a way to represent the individual’s unique form of life as productive without letting it slip into death driven madness (the problem with classical noir), or normalizing it as unhappy consciousness (the shortcoming of melancholic neo-noir). It is the image of this reconciliation that could be called the film noir theory of neoliberalism. This theory reveals that entrepreneurial self-affirmation is not an ideologically neutral category but is overdetermined by the biopolitical status quo (white patriarchy in the case of the US). From the perspective of film noir, the key to efficient neoliberal subjecthood isn’t self-exhibition but self-splitting (self-castration); not the re-appropriation of one’s *objet a* to reach an authentic, complete self, but the installation of a bar between the subject’s entrepreneurial performances of

¹²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France (1978-79)*, trans. M. Senellart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 226.

always shifting social masks and the *jouissance* of belonging to an unchanging biopolitical community. For the noir subject, the entrepreneurial selfhood of neoliberalism means the flexibilization of white patriarchy, its non-death driven enjoyment as a zero institution of capital accumulation.

The Usual Suspects exposes the deadlock of postmodern identity politics by revealing its unconscious ideological fantasy: the fetish of a white heterosexual *homme fatale* at the center of Oedipal disciplinary power, the transhistorical *essence* of evil against which all other identities are *constructed* through melancholic resistance. The postmodern *femme fatale* draws her power from such melancholic identity politics, her melancholy ultimately being a temporal form of resistance, immunization from a patriarchal past that continues to fascinate from the distance. It is the very paradigm of identity politics (that is, postmodern melancholy) that makes the white male body exceptional: his identity masks are posited against himself as superego, making his performance *cynical*. Cynicism in the *The Usual Suspects* is the form of appearance of western white heterosexual male identity politics, the symptom/truth of neoliberal identity politics in general, in other words: its sovereign-image.

The real novelty of the film's form is then that the arbitrary short circuit between the *classical* hegemonic biopolitical body of America's capitalist patriarchy and the subject in the place of a sovereign exception to it is openly assumed through what could be called a cynicism-image. Now an exceptionally versatile and flexible, but nonetheless white heterosexual male individual can embody the glory of neoliberalism's sovereign power against all *generic* identities, without having to use the detour of nostalgia for a lost golden age it destroyed (deterritorialized). This development should be read alongside the contemporary western conviction, articulated most famously by Francis Fukuyama, that after the fall of the Soviet

Union, humanity has reached a post-historical and post-ideological era where liberal capitalism remains the only game in town.¹²⁵ It is because America had won the Cold War and remained the only surviving superpower that its crisis ridden patriarchy can now once again be reterritorialized—this time not against globalization like in the Reagan-era but as a synonym for it. For the new American sovereign exceptionalism inaugurated by the Bushes and the Clintons there is no difference between the neoliberal deterritorialization of the country (deregulation, deindustrialization, financialization) and the territorial advancement of US interest over the globe (NATO expansion, interventionism, “free trade” agreements). For the loyal subjects of the newly expanded American Empire, neoliberal capitalism can now appear as the natural state of things without any real alternative—an ideology that Mark Fisher calls capitalist realism, which, as I will show in the next chapters, is grounded in the sovereign-image of cynicism.¹²⁶ While there may be alternative forms of life, they are simply not worth investing into: for cynics, the status quo is the most profitable of all possible worlds; its maintenance is the true purpose of all resistances. As I will argue, cynicism narrowly understood is the name of a new triumphalist form of sovereignty that collapses the old-new hegemonic bios of the US with the increasingly more abstract global regime of production, aiming to turn the globalized world into the playground of a the white western male bourgeoisie.

3.3 Anti-Utopianism in Postmodern Snow Noir

Since the cynical turn in neo-noir marks an attempt to eliminate the films’ remaining utopian impulses (feminine resistances not looped back to patriarchal biopower), it’s worth considering here what happens to the utopian *programs* of snow noirs in this post-historical

¹²⁵ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992)

¹²⁶ See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley: Zero Books, 2009)

context. First of all, while in the classical period noir's tendency to sublimate itself towards snowy utopias was limited to a few isolated cases, such films return in the mid-90s as a distinct cycle. It is after the financial success of the Coen Brothers' 1996 *Fargo*, a "white noir"¹²⁷ hailed by critics for its anti-noir reflexivity, that the autonomous qualities of snow noir are considered by Hollywood worthy enough to build a trend around them. This is how Altman's investment scheme theory of genre cycles¹²⁸ would explain the emergence of the still ongoing movement of snow noirs that followed *Fargo* with films like *Affliction* (1997), *Smilla's Sense of Snow* (1997), *A Simple Plan* (1998), *The Pledge* (2001), *Insomnia* (2002), *Narc* (2002), *A Little Trip to Heaven* (2004), *The Ice Harvest* (2005), *Transsiberian* (2008), *Max Payne* (2008), *Frozen River* (2008), *Whiteout* (2009), *Winter's Bone* (2010), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), *Deadfall* (2012), *Fargo* the TV series (2014-) etc. While the theory about the industry milking its cash cow is certainly persuasive enough, it's interesting to consider that after decades of hiatus, there were at least two other snow noir releases in 1996, that is, before *Fargo* could have made an impact, both of them box office flops: Barbet Schroeder's *Before and After*, a distant remake of the noir classic *Reckless Moment* (1949), and Renny Harlin's action packed *Long Kiss Goodnight*, written by aspiring Christmas noir specialist Shane Black (*Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, 2005). A further explanation for the snowbound noir cycle could be the growing global influence of Scandinavian crime fiction which, however, had its impact on Hollywood only later (partially through the international co-production *Smilla's Sense of Snow* in 1997, but mainly with remakes like *Insomnia*, 2002 and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, 2011).¹²⁹

¹²⁷ William Luhr, "Fargo: 'Far Removed from the Stereotypes of . . .'," in *The Cohen Brothers' Fargo*, ed. William Luhr (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 93.

¹²⁸ see Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), 49-62.

¹²⁹ Although Harlin himself is from Finland and the Coens did emphasize the Swedish-inflected accent of the small Minnesota community of Nordic descent in *Fargo*.

Besides these factors, then, it's important to position snow noir's return within the discursive history of American neo-noir as well as in relation to contemporary shifts in the capitalist mode of production to answer the question whether there is a utopian program present in these postmodern films comparable to the classical examples discussed in the previous chapter. At first sight, the three 1996 films digress from the mainstream of the classical noir canon in a similar way as *On Dangerous Ground* or *It's a Wonderful Life* did. They share the anti-noir aesthetic of a snowy terrain that derails the well-conceived plans of male criminals, autonomous maternal protagonists with a sense of justice instead of *femme fatales* embodying male anxieties; weak, morally corruptible male protagonists; small town locations instead of urban centers but no less depraved than the noir city, showing the entanglement of local and (inter)national capital. Where the three films differ from the classics is their biopolitical ultra-reflexivity:¹³⁰ they all depict a corrupt male homosocial network, connecting agents from the countryside as well as the city, representatives of the official symbolic law as well as its criminal transgressors, in a conspiracy to kidnap a woman (*Fargo*), cover up the murder of a woman (*Before and After*) or kidnap a daughter in order to kill her and her mother together (*Long Kiss Goodnight*). Yet, in the end, contrary to classical snow noir, although the maternal agent successfully intervenes and sabotages the full realization of the conspiracy, she is unable to promise an alternative, feminine form of life. The utopian potential of her actions regresses into an unconvincing re-enchantment of the bourgeois family unit through rural-agrarian fantasies—a simulated idyll in the countryside.

The Cohen brothers seem to be the most aware of this problem when in a rather cynical move they have Marge, the pregnant sheriff of Fargo, naively lecture to the freshly apprehended

¹³⁰ They are, of course, also full of postmodern allusions to the noir canon (the private detective in *Long Kiss Goodnight* is driving Marlowe's car from *The Long Goodbye*, *Before and After* steals the storyline from *The Reckless Moment*, *A Simple Plan* restages the Mexican standoff from *Nightfall*, etc.).

sadistic kidnapper/murderer: “There is more to life than a little money, you know.” Not only do these words fall on deaf ears in the diegetic reality, they also betray the female hero’s grotesque inability to understand the very events she just uncovered with her otherwise superior deduction skills (“I just don’t understand it!” she keeps repeating). In Jamesonian terms, what she is unable to cognitively map is the totality of the late capitalist condition allegorized by the vast frozen landscape—the complex network of power relations that derailed the apparently foolproof plan of Jerry, the film’s unfortunate used car salesman protagonist who orchestrated a “nonviolent” kidnapping of his own wife to extort money from his father-in-law. His operation soon turned into a bloodbath ostensibly because of unforeseen federal regulations of license plates on newly purchased vehicles that got his hired thugs from out of town into trouble with the local police. For this reason, Marge’s final words addressed to her manchild husband while watching TV in their king size bed: “Heck, Norm, we’re doing pretty good!” can’t but resound with the directors’ resignation; the idyllic infantile naiveté of the film’s poor in spirit is quickly countered by the heavy pathos of the violin score during the final credits—a knowing wink addressed to the audience, inviting them to disidentify from this caricature of an anti-capitalist utopia.

The other films display a similar ambiguity about their ultimately conservative, post-noir project to rehabilitate the ideal of the nuclear family as a counterforce to noir decadence. *Long Kiss Goodnight* features an amnesiac CIA assassin who after a head injury identifies with her cover and becomes a small town primary school teacher, gets married and even has a daughter. Years later her past starts to haunt her, temporarily reactivating her former *femme fatale* self, but only as an instrument to save her family and lead them symbolically out of the winter that has now corrupted even ordinary small town life, into a sunny pastoral idyll in an undisclosed and rather unrealistic location in the middle of a desert. A similar change of seasons signaling the

reunification of the family appears in *Before and After*, operating with ideal images of a holiday space instead of evoking the sturdiness of the family home which has lost its innocence forever when the father found his murderer son's bloodstained gloves in the garage (a moment equivalent to the home wrecking scenes in the other two films, involving an axe in *Fargo* and several machine guns in *Long Kiss Goodnight*). Perhaps the definitive version of the snow noir family's deadlock occurs in the later *A Simple Plan* where the protagonist, after murdering his own brother for a bag of a million dollars, burns the money in his living room fireplace in front of his pregnant but no less greedy wife who suffers a hysterical outbreak while watching her husband's futile attempt to save the empty ideal of their family.

The idea of bourgeois harmony appears here as a performatively constructed fantasmatic supplement to a post-apocalyptic present, a noble feminine lie offering a bit of fake warmth amidst the harsh realities of the frozen world that had already corrupted men into a nihilistic, self-destructive conspiracy. With their family obsessed maternal protagonists these films are at the tail end of a larger anti-feminist backlash in neo-noir against the recently empowered career woman of the 80s. The re-emergence of snow noir in the mid-90s is paralleled by the already mentioned decline of the erotic noir thriller cycle¹³¹ as well as the appearance of the postfeminist noir heroine, "the savvy woman," as Linda Mizejewski puts it, "who no longer needs political commitment, who enjoys feminine consumerist choices, and whose preoccupations are likely to involve romance, career choices, and hair gels" (*Out of Sight*, 1998; *Taking Lives*, 2004).¹³² The postmodern snow noirs above, I claim, offer the genealogy of this new postfeminist heroine,

¹³¹ As David Andrews observes, in the early 90s erotic thrillers became increasingly dissociated from noir iconography that used to legitimized sex in mainstream films like *Body Heat* or *Fatal Attraction*, leading to a new cycle of more sexually explicit softcore thrillers produced mainly for the home video market. See David Andrews, "Sex Is Dangerous, So Satisfy Your Wife: The Softcore Thriller in its Contexts," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 59-89.

¹³² Linda Mizejewski, "Dressed to Kill: Postfeminist Noir," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (Winter, 2005): 122.

revealing the price she had to pay for her ironic, post-ideological consciousness. They show that by embracing a performatively constructed new traditionalist idyll made out of commodified simulacra of a deactivated history, she not only renounces the postmodern *femme fatale*'s phallic-sovereign quest for power but also her still present utopian potential formulated as an emancipatory program in classical snow noir. Snow in postmodern noir is not the symbol of the utopian outside of capital's dialectic (of the universality of *lumen*), but stands for the sublime, deterritorializing force of neoliberalism that has reached a global scale (for a kind of globalized *lux*), pushing reterritorialization into the imaginary. 90s snow noir is interesting because, unlike the triumphalist narrative of cynical neo-noirs, it exposes the gap between the abstract forces of global capitalism and the masculine *bios*, the fact that men are not in control of the processes of deterritorialization and they need the ideological support of women, their nostalgia for a lost feminine essence to make their chaotic world minimally livable.¹³³

And while the films' final resignation contributes to contemporary capitalist realism by suggesting that globalization cannot really be stopped, only escaped in fantasy, this move also reveals itself as a performatively constructed anti-utopianism that, in order to be effective, first has to evoke the very emancipatory potential of the classical snow noir universe to then disavow it and mark it as impossible.¹³⁴ In *Before and After*, the mother of the teenage murderer, after some hesitation, does intervene and break the obscene masculine pact between her husband, son, and the family's lawyer to cover up the murder the son committed against the film's young *femme fatale*. It is only at the end that she capitulates in front of the powerful image of an idyllic

¹³³ This way, the new snow noir reverses the gender hierarchy of the postmodern films where men played the designated naive believers for *femmes fatales*.

¹³⁴ On such ambiguous relationship of Hollywood to utopian desire see Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* no. 1 (1979): 130-48.

family reunion *pretending* that life can go on like nothing happened.¹³⁵ In *Fargo*, Marge's relentless commitment to justice initially also positions her as the representative of a maternal law beyond phallic exceptions "that renounces violence and demands nurturance of life."¹³⁶ It is only when she encounters the real consequences of her universal love challenging the sanctity of her bourgeois marriage that she abandons classical snow noir's feminine ideal. The scene that underscores this change of heart the most is her meeting with a former high school class mate who used to have a crush on her and whose life is now in ruins after a bad divorce. The proximity of this man's miserable life, his disturbing *jouissance* she interprets as a sexual advance induces her sudden panic, making her shift from the friendly tone of the conversation to the official language of a police procedure—a tone overshadowing her "affectionate" words to her husband at the end. And finally, *Long Kiss Goodnight* experiments with a different use of the postmodern *femme fatale*'s phallic skill-set, dislocating it from its former function in the neoliberal competition through the device of the assassin protagonist's amnesia, turning it into Agambenian means without end, the symbolic alternative to the film's masculine conspiracy that used to exploit the heroine herself as a weapon. When in the final scene we see her withdrawing into an agrarian idyll with her family, she still has the ability to playfully throw a knife into a block of wood, displacing therefore its military purpose. Yet, the price of her post-phallic use of this object is now at the same time its return to use as a kitchen knife, serving an old-new purpose the postfeminist heroine is now perfecting with a knowing wink.

¹³⁵ Interestingly, her former sovereign agency is then displaced onto the critical but powerless voiceover of her young daughter who melancholically recognizes the irresolvable loss of the former harmony as well as the family's inability to articulate it. This can be read as the juxtaposition of the old nostalgic-melancholic and the new cynical paradigms, indication that the previously dominant female sovereign is reduced to a minor position.

¹³⁶ Pamela Grace, "Motherhood, Homicide, and Swedish Meatballs: The Quiet Triumph of the Maternal in *Fargo*," in *The Cohen Brothers' Fargo*, ed. William Luhr (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 51.

3.4 Conclusion

The utopian spaces of films like *It's a Wonderful Life* and *On Dangerous Ground* were temporarily suspended autonomous zones outside capital's constant flux of deterritorialization and reterritorialization within America, made possible by the incompleteness of its modernizing historical trajectory. By the 60s and 70s the modernizing drive of the United States starts to spread across the globe, reaching what Arrighi calls a signal crisis of imperialist capital accumulation due to the limits of national infrastructure. Revisionist noir reflects on this crisis by reframing utopian territoriality as inoperative national-patriarchal sovereignty. In the Reagan-era when the dialectic of national and global is rebalanced through the marriage of neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies, postmodern neo-noir exchanges the revisionist utopias of failed masculinity for nostalgia for an irredeemably lost organic (pre-globalization) patriarchal order. Finally, in the age of global American unilateralism, cynical noir resurrects the Father from his living dead status as the object of melancholic desire and returns him to his former glory as the representative of the symbolic law *and* the agent of its sovereign subversion.

Like the cynical films, 90s snow noirs reflect on the global capitalist fulfillment of American modernity's project that has entirely saturated its former outside. This means that while the frozen landscape of classical snow noirs had a redemptive function, in the new films it starts to signify a dystopian, worldless terrain beyond American patriarchal control, offering a cognitive map of the meaningless chaos of neoliberal deterritorialization. For this reason, however, this cycle has a potential to critique contemporary cynical noir's identification of western masculine *bios* with neoliberal capitalism as such.¹³⁷ As an imaginary representation of

¹³⁷ In fact not all contemporary snow noir utopias end up simply failing. For instance, *Smilla's Sense of Snow* (1997), *Frozen River* (2008), *Winter's Bone* (2010), or *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) all produce a

global deterritorialization, snow noir is a background against which noir's cynical paradigm is exposed as just a particular form of reterritorialization, nothing but the identity politics of western white men blown up to imperial proportions. As the next chapters will show, snow noir continues to haunt its cynical counterpart and has to be disavowed for global capitalism's deterritorializing and reterritorializing impetus to coincide in the hybrid hegemonic body of the cynical sovereign.

strengthened feminine consciousness that promises not the imaginary escape from but the real negation of the late capitalist status quo. More on the latter in Chapter 6.

4 Sovereign Life in a Deterritorialized Empire: Danny Boyle and the Noir of the Digital

4.1 Introduction

A quick glance at Danny Boyle's biggest international successes reveals a versatile director who is hard to pin down: his breakthrough *Trainspotting* (1996) was a dark comedy/drama about Scottish heroin addicts, but he is also well known for his post-apocalyptic zombie horror *28 Days Later* (2002), his Oscar winning oriental love story *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), as well as the opening ceremony he directed for the 2012 London Olympics with the theme "This is for Everyone." On the one hand, most of his work is territorially and thematically rooted in the postcolonial domain of the former British Empire with films made in/about Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, the United States, or India.¹ On the other hand, he is not primarily interested in these countries' local heritage of the colonial past; his music video and new media influenced aesthetic channels rather transcultural affects of today's global network society, looking to create a cinema for a generic postcolonial humanity living in the digital age. Perhaps this is why despite the occasional backing of Hollywood studios he never settled down in Los Angeles, preferring an international career somewhere between independent and mainstream filmmaking ("indiestream" as one critic put it.)² This way, Boyle suggests, he can have both the creative freedom and enough money to make intelligent but emphatically popular films, not unlike the Coen brothers or Quentin Tarantino.³ Along these lines, the two book length

¹ With the exception of *The Beach* (2000) which was shot in Thailand.

² Simon Hattenstone, "Sink or Swim," in *Danny Boyle: Interviews*, ed. B. Dunham (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 51.

³ Monika Maurer, "Trainspotters," in *Danny Boyle: Interviews*, ed. B. Dunham (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 23.

studies of his career celebrate him as a director of the people whose stories are about “ordinary heroes”⁴ with a “lust for life”⁵—or as he insists, regardless of genre, “[he tries] to put an energy in [his] films that’s life-affirming, that’s redemptive.”⁶

As I will show, this indeed is the gist of Boyle’s recipe for breaking into the international market: combining the hip, youthful aesthetic of the digital age (a certain accelerationist vitalism) with a transgeneric narrative formula capturing something like a lowest common denominator of humanity transformed by global capitalism, that is, how ordinary people worldwide cope with the increasing pressures of neoliberal competition. While populism and the push towards a happy ending are principles Boyle shares with classical Hollywood,⁷ the American film industry has always had something that he lacks: it is organically situated in a country that has been successfully expanding its political, economic, and cultural hegemony over the world since the Second World War. To state the obvious, Hollywood doesn’t have to try hard to find universality because it has long been part of the apparatus of US imperialism that kept positioning various forms of American life as universal, crushing and coopting local differences elsewhere for the purposes of its culture industry—a process that, as I have argued in the previous chapter, has intensified since the collapse of the USSR. It is for this reason, as Fredric Jameson notes, that what we call globalization has to a large extent been the Americanization of

⁴ See Edwin Page, *Ordinary Heroes: The Films of Danny Boyle* (London: Empiricus Books, 2009)

⁵ See Mark Browning, *Danny Boyle: Lust for Life* (Gosport: Chaplin Books, 2011)

⁶ Jeffrey Overstreet, “Danny Boyle: The Looking Closer Interview,” in *Danny Boyle: Interviews*, ed. B. Dunham (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 86.

⁷ It’s worth noting that Edwin Page’s use of the term ordinary to describe Boyle’s heroes evokes British Marxist’s historian E. P. Thompson’s category “ordinary people,” referring to the working classes, which is consistent with Boyle’s own socialist views. By contrast, the populism of Hollywood is that of the middle class, a term which in its unique American usage does partially overlap with the category of wage labourers, yet in Hollywood films it’s determined in the last instance by bourgeois values of entrepreneurship, property ownership, and white patriarchy. See Robin Wood, “Ideology, Genre, Auteur,” *Film Comment* 13, no. 1 (1977): 46-51.

the planet.⁸ Ernesto Laclau calls this hegemony through incarnation where a particular element directly stands in for the universal, becoming indistinguishable from it.⁹ Boyle's relation to postmodern American exceptionalism is interesting because neither did he simply sell out to Hollywood, nor did he hold on to an idea of British (or Irish, Scottish, Indian, etc.) national cinema resisting Americanization. His wager instead is that globalization is a deterritorializing phenomenon that eventually eradicates the identity not only of colonized but also of colonizers. It's an ultimately liberating process that neither the British, nor the Americans can control. This is why, I will argue, his films follow the logic of sovereign exception. If they have a transnational appeal it's not because they exemplify either traditional Britishness (Irishness, Scottishness, etc.) or classical Hollywood generic formulas so well, but because they enter what in the previous chapters I called the meta-generic domain of film noir where heroes are ordinary insofar as they are "men without qualities," purified of their cultural baggage and shared identity markers to the point where they lust for nothing but bare life (*zoe*), driven by their own unique brand of surplus enjoyment. The hypothesis that Boyle's films put forward is that such noir isolation today is not merely an exception to generic, shared forms of life but the new global norm regulating the neoliberal production, fetishization, and exploitation of sovereign affect all over the world. Reflexive of their director's own position, these films can tell us something about the subjectivity required to successfully connect to the global capitalist network insofar as it has become increasingly abstract and semi-autonomous, detached from the center of the British and American Empire that facilitated its emergence. At the same time, I will argue, his

⁸ Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. F. Jameson and M. Miyoshi (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 54-81.

⁹ Such an idea goes back to the European universalism of the 19th century, where, he argues, "there was no way to distinguish between European particularism and the universal functions it was supposed to incarnate, given that European universalism had constructed its identity through the cancellation of the logic of incarnation and, as a result, of the universalization of its own particularism." Ernesto Laclau, "Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity," *October* 61, no. 3 (1992): 86.

accelerationist enthusiasm for the neoliberal transformation is also symptomatic of Boyle's white Anglo-Saxon masculine position, of a biopolitics that remains at the core of the new deterritorialized Empire still controlled by the US and its allies.

4.2 “There is no such thing as society”: Boyle’s Cynical Glorification of Neoliberal Autoimmunity

4.2.1 *Elephant* as the Autoimmune Endgame of the British Empire

The basics of Boyle's auteurial project can be already detected in his early collaboration with his idol Alan Clarke on the man's penultimate film *Elephant* (1989). As a young producer for the BBC, Boyle approached Clarke to direct a film about one of the last great decolonizing struggles against the British Empire, the ethno-religious violence in Northern Ireland known as the The Troubles. As he explains on the DVD commentary, he was interested in the political killings that were not reported by the media on the mainland because the victims were ordinary people instead of figures of symbolic authority.¹⁰ After developing the idea together, they shot the film in Belfast, without, however, adding any dialogue or subtitles to explain the link between the 18 executions that constitute the plot. Scenes of seemingly random shootings follow one another in a mechanical fashion, inducing a state of indifference in the viewer towards any ideological cause behind them. Urban space is also abstract, abandoned and lifeless except for the perpetrators and their victims, resembling noir's desolate zones of indistinction where the value of human life becomes suspended. Unlike noir proper, however, Clarke and Boyle's film never moves beyond the point of undecidability with regards to which life should be valued and

¹⁰ *The Firm/Elephant*, directed by Alan Clarke (1989; West Hollywood, CA: Blue Underground, 2006), DVD.

which shouldn't. The killers are all white British men of different ages and classes, exactly the same as the ones they kill. It is the repetitive structure of the film that links these isolated and enigmatic scenes of violence into something like a ritual, a code of human behaviour with a certain timing and rhythm that can be reproduced (modulated) in different situations with small variations:¹¹ almost all the segments involve the camera with wide angle lens tracking a man walking, stopping for a moment when the shooting occurs, then following the killer again for a while as he walks away, ending the sequence with a static shot of the dead body. It is this abstract geometrical pattern that, like what network theory calls a protocol, connects isolated members of the executioners' tribe, but it also separates them from one another: as the film progresses, the roles become increasingly confused; men tracked by the camera at the beginning of a sequence end up as the ones getting shot, etc.¹² The biopolitical community evoked is therefore simply the totality of white men of the British Empire without any other distinctions;¹³ their violence, an allegory for the decline of imperial glory, is shown as entirely autoimmune, self-annihilating, without the successful stabilization of a group's boundaries through the sovereign exclusion of an other's bare life.

On the DVD commentary Boyle takes issue with this hopeless nihilism of the film, indicating that this was Clarke's idea, he would have ended it on a more upbeat note. Yet, it is precisely this apparent nihilism, the construction of a viewer who is indifferent to the masculine theater of sovereign violence—rather than fatalistically or melancholically accepting it as

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari call this the refrain, a rhythmic operation that marks the basic difference between any stable, territorialized order and chaos. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987), 310-50.

¹² As Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker argue, "protocols are all the conventional rules and standards that govern relationships within networks." "[P]rotocol facilitates relationships between interconnected, but autonomous, entities." It is "less about power (confinement, discipline, normativity) and more about control (modulation, distribution, flexibility)." Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, "Protocol, Control, and Networks," *Grey Room* 17 (2004): 8-10.

¹³ The only spoken word is "shite" pronounced with an Irish accent, but we never learn which faction of the conflict the person belongs to.

necessary—that carries the utopian connotations of *Elephant*. It is only the masculine quest for the real, men's the murderous yet banal attempt to perform something like an authentic ritual of walking, that is exposed as tedious, never ending, and self-destructive. What is hopeful about the film is precisely the lack of any female as well as non-white perspective *within* the diegesis (the Empire's female and/or non-white subjects are absent entirely); instead, they are situated outside of the white masculine universe in the extradiegetic gaze of the viewer who is not libidinally invested in this quest for the real phallus, subtracting from its nihilistic regime. The film therefore decreates the sovereign-image of imperial masculinity by repeating it to the point of abstraction, collapsing the sovereign act grounding it into an empty gesture, liberating the inoperativity at the heart of glory from the power apparatus it used to belong to. This is why, I will argue, Boyle's reintroduction of hope and redemption into the field of sovereign power struggle in his later work is a fundamentally anti-utopian move, a cynical affirmation of sovereign biopolitics as a dead end that nonetheless lacks any alternative.

4.2.2 Normalization through Noir Cynicism: *Shallow Grave* as Boyle's Answer to the Empire's Autoimmune Crisis

Boyle's first theatrical release as a director, *Shallow Grave* (1994) can be considered his amendment to his earlier project with Clarke, a shift back into the territory of noir sovereignty. Similarly to classical noirs like *D.O.A.* (1950) or *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), it opens with the voice-over narration of a protagonist who is already dead, setting up the whole film as a flashback to the events that led to his demise. The difference is that Boyle doesn't let the viewer know that this is what the first shot is about until the very end. At first, we only see the close-up of David's face while lying in bed, lit with strong, warm light, the camera rotating around the vertical axis

as he shares his ostensibly life affirming philosophy with us: “I'm not ashamed. I've known love. I've known rejection. I'm not afraid to declare my feelings. Take trust, for instance, or friendship. These are the important things in life. These are the things that matter, that help you on your way. If you can't trust your friends, well what then? What then?” These lines promise a film about the strength of friendship, yet, when we return to this sequence at the very end, their meaning changes to the opposite retrospectively. By then, David is murdered by his so called friends and it becomes clear that the sheets he is lying on belong to a table in the morgue. Although his face is now lit with a feeble and cold light, his voice doesn't change from its earlier balance between detachment and enthusiasm; he continues his monologue where he left off: “Oh, yes, I believe in friends. I believe we need them. But if one day you find you just can't trust them anymore, what then? What then?” Like the voice of Verbal in *The Usual Suspects*, David's enigmatic tone also marks him as an unknowable, post-classical character whose identity can change based on the narrative situation, that is to say, a character who at his core is fundamentally inoperative, lacks an essence.¹⁴ The difference is that, contrary to Verbal, he is unable to make use of this post-classical existence; he becomes rather the victim of it.

Right after the opening voice-over we cut to an accelerated ground level tracking shot (using the wide angle technique Boyle admits borrowing from Clarke)¹⁵ running through the streets of Edinburgh with the pulsating electronic soundtrack of Leftfield in the background, then spiraling up the dark staircase of an old tenement building following an unidentified man with a paper bag in his hand from low angle. He rings the doorbell of the apartment on top, but instead of shooting the person who opens like in *Elephant's* porch killing scenes, a reverse shot of the

¹⁴ See J. P. Telotte, “Rounding up ‘The Usual Suspects’: The Comforts of Character and Neo-Noir,” *Film Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1998):17.

¹⁵ See the DVD commentary on *The Firm/Elephant*, directed by Alan Clarke (1989; West Hollywood, CA: Blue Underground, 2006), DVD.

man's face reveals a harmless looking young redhead with a bottle of wine who then eagerly announces that he is "here for the room." The looming threat of sovereign violence is averted with this gag and we enter generic territories: a subsequent shot frames the three young professional protagonists (David, Juliet, and Alex) sitting next to each other like an exam committee, facing the interviewed candidate who wants to be their new roommate. They handle the numerous applicants with an irony and sarcasm pushed to the point of sociopathic sadism: first they make them want the apartment, then they point out their personal flaws (mocking their body, religion, or relationship status), demand impossible skills of them (from knowledge of highly specific pop cultural trivia to details of corporate finance), and finally they let them know that they have failed to live up to their expectations and laugh hysterically after they leave. As an obvious metaphor for the neoliberal era job interview,¹⁶ the scene immunizes the life of the three roommates as if they were part of a cruel business venture built on their shared misanthropic disdain for others who are naive enough to believe in the idea of community (naive enough to show up). This way their selection ritual puts the famous neoliberal dictum "there is no such thing as society" coined by their contemporary, Margaret Thatcher into practice.

These scenes also show an interesting parallel with what Jeffrey Sconce in the American context called "smart cinema,"¹⁷ where the generic allegiance of filmmakers, viewers, and characters is created through ironic disengagement from social norms presumed to be taken seriously by others (as in films of Wes Anderson, Todd Solondz, or David O. Russell).

To speak in an ironic tone," he argues, "is instantly to bifurcate one's audience into those who 'get it' and those who do not. The entire point of ironic address is to ally oneself with sympathetic peers and to distance oneself from the vast 'other' audience however defined,

¹⁶ Boyle depicts actual job interviews in his next film in a similar way.

¹⁷ It's worth noting that "smart," of course, is a popular neoliberal buzzword.

which is often the target of the speaker's or artist's derision. If I think you are an idiot, I can use irony to insult you without getting punched in the face. If I think you are like-minded, we can use irony to laugh at, or express our disengagement from those around us.¹⁸

In the sense that I used the term after Rick Altman in Chapter 1, genres as such are ironic constructs, "smart" insofar as they presuppose the Metzian naive observer ignorant of the transgressive pleasures offered to those playing their game. Smart films, however, go further insofar as they also draw attention to their irony through what Sconce calls a blank style that dampens the effects of narrative events (in *Shallow Grave* David's flat voiceover or the stylization of the roommates' cartoonish discursive violence are examples of this).¹⁹ We could say that smart films are self-aware of what constructing a generic community entails (the exclusion of other, "stupid" forms of life), and they make precisely this self-awareness the basis of their own obscene generic game posited against traditional genre games that lack such open "position-taking."²⁰ This means that contrary to classical genres that exclude (limit) an abstract universal that is open to any form of life, smart films limit something that is already limited, excluding generic communities that themselves already were the product of their own logic of biopolitical exclusion. The applicants mocked by the three roommates in *Shallow Grave* are members of subcultures (like the Goth or the Catholic girl) or represent stereotypes (the manchild geek, the middle aged divorced man, etc.). The smart film is therefore the paradox of a

¹⁸ Jeffrey Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism and the New American Smart Film," *Screen* 43, no. 4 (2002): 351-52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 359.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 353. Participants in traditional genre games also know what they are doing, but the rules of the game prohibit them from articulating their perverse pleasures in public. They enjoy insofar as the Other doesn't know they do. Participants in the smart discourse, on the contrary, openly lay out their perversion assuming there is no Other to understand it anymore.

meta-generic genre, performing the genre system's autoimmune self-destruction to an infinite regress, without, however, entering the noir suspension of the generic as such.

This is how what Sconce identifies as a typical smart film device, the static tableau shot²¹ is used in *Shallow Grave*'s interview scene. After they have finished abusing an interviewee, two of the main characters sit next to her on the couch while the third takes pictures with a disposable camera for laughs later. These acts break the former division of space and temporarily align the protagonists with the person they were laughing at by pretending they are friends. This community, lacking any indexical link to an actually shared life, only exists on the photograph, which therefore, despite being technically taken by an analogue device, has the ontology of a digital image. It's a snapshot that decreates the image it takes, drawing attention to the gestural dimension of human life for a moment before it gets discarded with mockery. To put it differently, the smart discourse overwrites generic forms of life with their deliberately inauthentic (gestural) simulations, while at the same time trying to make the very knowledge (laughter) about this inauthenticity the suturing point of a new community. No wonder that Hugo, the man the three roommates finally accept to live with them is someone who doesn't have an identity. He is an enigmatic *homme fatale* claiming to be a writer but changing details in his story as if he was playing a game, quite possibly lying about never having killed a man (the supposedly witty exam question David asks him).²²

What the three sociopaths don't realize is that he is their ideal roommate precisely because he doesn't actually want to become one: the morning after he moves in, they find him dead in his room, lying naked on his bed with a bag of money underneath. The tableau shot of his corpse, frozen into the position of Christ in Michelangelo's *Pieta*, breaks with the earlier

²¹ See *Ibid.*, 360.

²² The moment he says no we cut to scene of two gangsters torturing and killing someone.

series of simulated images, introducing the radical cut of the *real* (the postmodern sublime) into the narrative. It literally puts an end to the protagonists' genre game: when, amused by the possibility of their new friend playing with them, they break into his locked room and discover the scene of suicide, the sudden shock silences their juvenile laughter. They are faced with the autoimmune nature of their imaginary smart collective, a realization that disrupts the illusion of shared life, throwing them as three individuals into a sovereign zone of indistinction where they are forced into a zero sum competition over the value of their lives symbolized by the bag of money. We could therefore call this scene an irruption of the noir impulse,²³ having a similar function as the recurring cuts to the parallel storyline of two gangsters torturing various people to death in search of the stolen cash. Although initially repressed, these noir sequences keep occurring with higher and higher intensity as the narrative progresses, mirroring the protagonists' increasing isolation and distrust of one another. For instance, when the roommates finally have to deal with the decomposing body of Hugo, they visit a hardware store to purchase tools for the burial. While Alex's voiceover is talking about the practical benefits of chopping the body into pieces (harder to identify), the camera pans through the various drills and saws on display creating the impression of a consumer catalogue. This morbid irony of the smart film, however, disappears during the actual burial scene, shot at night with expressionist low key lighting, an ominous soundtrack, and with facial close-ups giving a realistic account of the characters' emotional state instead of hiding them behind tableau-style quotation marks.

This stylistic inconsistency of the film also marks out two spatially separate domains. As David becomes the group's designated sovereign after an unlucky draw of straws (he has to chop

²³ Analogously to what Adam Lowenstein calls the "irruption of the documentary impulse" in fiction films. See Adam Lowenstein, "Beyond Las Hurdes: Horrific Eruptions of the Documentary Impulse in Late Buñuel," (paper presented the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, Sheraton Seattle Hotel, Seattle, WA, March 19, 2014)

up the body), he starts to inhabit a noir world on his own, eventually moving up to the attic with the bag of money he vows to protect at any cost. Meanwhile, Juliet and Alex, taking from the stash without telling David, go on a shopping spree to push their ironic hedonism to the next level. Dressed in drag and surrounded by open boxes of consumer goods, they videotape their drunken rampage in their apartment and watch it over and over again, laughing hysterically—this time at their own video image. This shows that the generic smart discourse of the roommates here has already turned self-referential (autoimmune), pushing the formerly stable boundaries of their home and their bodies towards noir deterritorialization. It is when David finds them regressed into an infantile state rolling around on the floor that he prohibits any further spending and hides the money upstairs. Yet, his sovereign attempt to impose some kind of imaginary order on the household from above would only lead to himself lying dead on the floor a few days later when the two spheres collapse into each other. At the end (when the credits start to roll), all that is left of their shared life is a VHS footage of the three of them laughing without sound, a scene from their former, now destroyed life preserved in its inoperativity by a machine without their living voice.

If laughter symbolizes communality in the film, water is a correlate of noir isolation, standing for the excess of *jouissance* in someone's bare life. The two gangsters looking for the money drown a man they torture in a bathtub; Alex pushes the dead writer's car into a lake; and most significantly, David hides the bag of cash in the water tank in the attic. By contrast, the bathtub in which Alex and Juliet end up in while messing around drunk is dry, signalling that their relationship is sexually unconsummated. In Lacanian terms, sharing a smart discourse offers Juliet and Alex the *imaginary* pleasures of irony but not the *real* of enjoyment (desire but not drive). Meanwhile, David is stuck with the death driven excess of enjoyment in his panoptic

noir space without being able to share it with anyone: he seals the bag he is guarding with duct tape and hides it under water; then he becomes a voyeur, drilling holes into the ceiling and spying on Juliet. Boyle's Lacanian insight here (appropriate from an Irish Catholic) is that the very ascetic renunciation of ordinary pleasures leads to a "surplus enjoyment" unavailable for those simply embracing a culture of hedonism.²⁴

The twist he nonetheless introduces to this wisdom is that in his film, the discourses of hedonism and asceticism eventually become intertwined: towards the end, Juliet leaves her ironic position by Alex's side and switches over to David's zone of indistinction, the two of them turning into a noir couple of the male sovereign and the *femme fatale*. Juliet seduces David to gain access to the money (*jouissance*), and David lets himself be seduced to make his bare life valued as masculine. They promise to run away with the money together, but David becomes suspicious when he finds a plane ticket to Rio on Juliet's name alone. As a digression from both the classical and the postmodern noir narrative, Alex then steps in *pretending* that it was him who bought the ticket for Juliet, putting on the mask of the noir victim duped by the illusion of love as a deception to push David to take the money and leave. He wants to get rid of him because in fact he had already switched the contents of the suitcase for piles of newspaper and hid the money for himself. In other words, if David is openly distrusting Juliet while she keeps trying to deceive him by pretending to be impressed by his masculinity, Alex's triple cross involves occupying the position of the naive believer for *both* of them, acting like the dupe who takes their performances at face value: he pretends to be intimidated by David's machismo and be in love with Juliet. It is precisely by acting like the idiots excluded by the roommates' earlier smart discourse that he is able to fool David and Juliet into underestimating him, not unlike the

²⁴ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008), 89.

way his always suspicious colleagues ignored Verbal because he had been playing the designated loser in *The Usual Suspects*.

This doesn't mean that Alex has found some hyper-ironic meta-level of existence from which he could safely wait for the storm around him to pass while he remains unaffected by any of it. On the contrary, he exploits the fact that, as Žižek puts it after Lacan: "*les non-dupes errent*: those who do not let themselves be caught in the symbolic deception/fiction and continue to believe [only] their eyes are the ones who err most."²⁵ When upon leaving, David, not falling for her deception, punches Juliet in the face to get her out of the way, Alex cannot help but intervene ("You shouldn't have hit her," he says), getting caught in the role he only pretended to play, thereby actually making it more convincing. A brawl ensues between the three, ending with David nailing Alex to the floor with a kitchen knife, then Juliet stabbing David to death before he could kill Alex, but leaving with what she assumes is the money since she doesn't want to share it with Alex either. The finale shows all three of them in a state of distress but with Alex winning the game of triple cross. The police discover him still alive because he called them just before the fight, which makes him the successor of classical noir's sovereign heroes of self-implication (like Jeff in *Out of the Past*), except that there is nothing there to implicate him: we can assume that just like Verbal at the end of *The Usual Suspects*, he will be officially exculpated. He can get away with the crime of sovereignty because he is a cynic in Žižek's definition of the term: instead of seeking an ironic distance from the social order like participants in the smart discourse, he "fakes a belief that he privately mocks,"²⁶ realizing the importance of symbolic appearances (the glorious rituals of sovereign power), ready to even temporarily get caught up in them when necessary. By contrast, David is more like the ironist who ends up "[taking] things

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, "With or Without Passion: What's Wrong with Fundamentalism?" *lacan.com*, accessed September 6, 2015, <http://www.lacan.com/zizpassion.htm>.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 88.

more seriously than he appears to—he secretly believes in what he publicly mocks.”²⁷ A person like that keeps believing, Žižek suggests, through a proxy that remains his blind spot. What David doesn’t see is that he can only purge himself of the belief in Juliet’s love for him by externalizing it onto Alex; this is why he is so invested in believing the story that Alex bought the plane ticket for Juliet, making him blind to the man’s real agenda. As for Juliet, Edwin Page is right that she is like an empty vessel in the film, oscillating between the two extremes represented by the male protagonists, “her behaviour and mood echoing that of whomever she is spending time with as if she is merely an extension of them.”²⁸

When the police find Alex they take his picture as he is lying on the floor still bleeding—a stylization that links the scene back to the smart cinema aesthetic once again as well as to classical noir sovereign-images in films like *Gun Crazy* or *Out of the Past*. Crucially, he smiles but he cannot laugh as he has no one to share his *jouissance* with (the camera pans downward, revealing the money hidden underneath the floorboards marked by Alex’s dripping blood). Meanwhile, Juliet is having a hysterical fit in her car after looking into the suitcase (homage to the ending of the 1961 British noir *Payroll*). And then we have the already mentioned cut to David in the morgue, framing the film with his flat voiceover. It is as if the roommates’ formerly

²⁷ Ibid. It is worth mentioning here that such a distinction between the cynic and the ironist is not yet present in Žižek’s earlier, more well known theory of cynicism that had a significant influence on Lacanian cultural studies. For instance, in his first English language book he argues: “Cynical distance is just one way - one of many ways - to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them.” Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 30. Here cynicism is basically identified with the postmodern irony of the smart discourse. Yet, in the very same book he also talks about cynicism as post-ironic meta-position: “Cynicism [...] recognizes, it takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but it still finds reasons to retain the mask. This cynicism is not a direct position of immorality, it is more like morality itself put in the service of immorality - the model of cynical wisdom is to conceive probity, integrity, as a supreme form of dishonesty, and morals as a supreme form of profligacy, the truth as the most effective form of a lie. This cynicism is therefore a kind of perverted 'negation of the negation' of the official ideology: confronted with illegal enrichment, with robbery, the cynical reaction consists in saying that legal enrichment is a lot more effective and, moreover, protected by the law.” Ibid. 26. I will use the term cynicism in this second, narrower sense, following the distinction Žižek himself made in his later work.

²⁸ Page, *Ordinary Heroes*, 48.

shared laughter had split into three isolated components, reconnecting only through the artificial prosthesis provided by the extradiegetic soundtrack, the song *Happy Heart* by Andy Williams glorifying neoliberal sovereign power. Each of their lives end up in a short circuit between the self-destructive sociopathic irony of the smart film and noir's sovereign self-affirmation, but only one of their techniques of sovereignty actually works. David gets to narrate his story while dead like the classical noir hero but he cannot conjure up any homosocial community he sacrificed himself for, while Juliet travels to Rio alone like a postmodern *femme fatale* but she doesn't get to be melancholic on the beach since she didn't get the money. It is Alex who can have everything after surviving his knife wound, the scar of castration that symbolizes the loss of his friends. His silent smirk is redoubled in the voiceless (inoperative) VHS laughter sequence during the final credits, emphasizing how sovereign enjoyment is now captured in a new, machinic apparatus instead of a traditional biopolitical community of shared life, an apparatus now openly exploiting the naked gestures of human sociality without an apparent preference for a particular imaginary identity. As Christian Marazzi insists, neoliberalism should be understood as a contemporary form of primitive accumulation exploiting the common social-symbolic substance of humanity not yet under capitalist control: "Originary or primitive accumulation, as shown by Sandro Mezzadra, i.e., the salarization and proletarianization of millions of people through the expulsion from their own land, is thus a process that historically reemerges every time the expansion of capital clashes with the common produced by social relations and cooperations free from the laws of capitalist exploitation."²⁹ This Marxist notion of "social relations and cooperations free from the laws of capitalist exploitation" is precisely what Agamben called the gestural, inoperative dimension of human life, the one that sovereignty folds

²⁹ Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Finance Capitalism*, trans. K. Lebedeva (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 42.

into its apparatus of power. The primitive accumulation *of value* is therefore nothing but the Marxist name for the arbitrary sovereign violence that occurs prior to the implementation of the law of abstract labour but which simultaneously stands as the condition of possibility of work and its exploitation.

In this context, cynicism appears as Boyle's answer to the autoimmune deadlock presented in *Elephant* initiating a new cycle of capital accumulation and sovereign immunization. Far from being simply the opposite of naive ideological belief, cynicism is rather the calculated attempt to resurrect it by grounding it in bodily gestures of pure sociality. It's a contemporary application of Pascal's motto "kneel down and pray [...] and belief will come by itself"³⁰ with the aim to put an end to the bad infinity of postmodern irony through a practice of self-glorification.³¹ Cynicism is what remains of irony after its neoliberal privatization (we could even say: primitive accumulation), detachment from the life of a community (*bios*) for an anchoring in the body (*zoe*) of the individual. What distinguishes Alex from his rivals is that Juliet and David remain caught in a discourse of ironic resistance to their official social-symbolic position. She is a doctor and he is a chartered accountant, both well respected in their profession, but both feeling also bored with it after the bag of money falls on their lap (we see Juliet distracted during her work in the hospital and David's boss actually commends him for being a boring but reliable employee, which he doesn't take well). In other words, like noir heroes before them, they seek sovereignty by suspending their work, looking for an autonomous sphere of

³⁰ Pascal quoted in Slavoj Žižek, "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large," in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan: (but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. S. Žižek (New York: Verso, 1992), 213.

³¹ This should be added to Todd McGowan's otherwise excellent analysis of cynical reason. He claims: "the cynic wants to avoid being naïve, being one of the duped, especially when it comes to the Other's enjoyment." [...] "Cynicism stems from the belief that one sees through the functioning of power, that one knows fully how the system works." Todd McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 121; 126. What is crucial here is that the Other's enjoyment and the system the cynic claims to know so well represent an autoimmune paradigm of power he overcomes precisely by embracing a certain non-knowledge, a blind faith in the status quo.

existence where they are not being watched by the gaze of disciplinary power. Alex, by contrast, is a journalist who already has some autonomy in his job. This is highlighted in the scene where, although his office space at the newspaper has the same panoptic structure as that of his roommates, the gazes he exchanges with his colleagues are not work related but sexual: instead of being reminded of his duties like Juliet and David are, a couple of women are flirting with him. His position at work remains exceptional even when his boss eventually does give him an assignment: he has to cover the story of the mutilated body in the woods he himself put in there, linking once again his quest for sovereign enjoyment with his job. And finally, not only does he symbolically use his profession when he puts stacks of newspaper into the suitcase to steal the money; he also applies his journalist skills quite literally to make up the story that would fool David and Juliet. In other words, he is successful *because he never stops working*, because for him the difference between the time of labour and free time disappears, just like the spatial boundary between workspace and home. No wonder that he is never planning to leave; for someone like him, exiting the capitalist apparatus is meaningless.

This brings us back to the Jamesonian claim that today's global capitalism is a total economic system with no outside.³² As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest, capital expansion now becomes intensive rather than extensive, which leads to an unprecedented technological revolution establishing new digital systems of control to both intensify and extend the working day beyond its previously set limits, allowing for a hitherto unheard of exploitation of people's cognitive and affective capacities through immaterial labour.³³ This means, on the one hand, that the immaterial (informational and cultural) content of *all* commodities increases as even industrial workers are required now to use computers during the production process and

³² See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 399-418.

³³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 272; 338.

companies spend more on advertising.³⁴ On the other hand, new types of fully immaterial commodities are emerging. Ordinary people are now encouraged to play the stock market or develop business ideas (profit making algorithms) in a startup that can be later sold to large corporations. Social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter provide IT companies with hundreds of millions of (mostly) unpaid “prosumers,” creating data unwittingly for corporate profit while working on their virtual selves to put on display, with smart phones collecting fragments of their attention by ensuring permanent connectivity. Franco Berardi calls this new regime semio-capitalism as, contrary to Fordism, it is less and less “about the production of material goods, but about the production of psychic stimulation.”³⁵ It captures the minds and bodies of workers in apparatuses of financialized, digital, networked capital, producing semiotic flows as the main source of profit.³⁶ It is to mobilize and exploit even the inner life and unproductive bodily gestures of late capitalist subjects 24/7, Hardt and Negri argue, that power evolves from its former disciplinary model into what after the late Deleuze they call a society of control:

Disciplinary fixed individuals within institutions but did not succeed in consuming them completely in the rhythm of productive practices and productive socialization; it did not reach the point of permeating entirely the consciousnesses and bodies of individuals, the point of treating and organizing them in the totality of their activities. In disciplinary society, then, the relationship between power and the individual remained a static one: the disciplinary invasion of power corresponded to the resistance of the individual.³⁷

³⁴ See Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labour,” in *Radical Thought in Italy*, ed. P. Virno and M. Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1996), 133.

³⁵ Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*, trans. A. Bove et al. (London: Minor Compositions, 2009), 45.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 24.

In biopolitical terms, as I have suggested in the previous chapters, disciplinary societies allowed for immunized spaces of common resistance to and sovereign sites of individual exception from panoptic technologies of power that only had a limited scope, thereby introducing a split into the modern subject (public/private, conscious/unconscious, normative/transgressive, etc.). Precisely because bare life (enjoyment) was not *directly* regulated by apparatuses of instrumental reason, sovereignty could appear as a form of resistance to the universal, abstract power of some centralized, authoritarian institution (ultimately the capitalist apparatus of abstract labour).

By contrast, when power becomes entirely biopolitical, the whole social body is comprised by power's machine and developed in its virtuality. This relationship is open, qualitative, and affective. Society, subsumed within a power that reaches down to the ganglia of the social structure and its processes of development, reacts like a single body. Power is thus expressed as a control that extends throughout the depths of the consciousnesses and bodies of the population—and at the same time across the entirety of social relations.³⁸

In this new regime...

[r]esistances are no longer marginal but active in the center of a society that opens up in networks; the individual points are singularized in a thousand plateaus. [...] [This is the] the paradox of a power that, while it unifies and envelops within itself every element of social life (thus losing its capacity effectively to mediate different social forces), at that very moment reveals a new context, a new milieu of maximum plurality and uncontainable singularization.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 25.

The global society of control integrates the *bios* (the “social life”) of various identity groups of the planetary population (without a residue of shared resistance outside the system) into a now decentralized, non-hierarchical production process, forming a single biocapitalist body out of the mutated remains of former immunized communities Hardt and Negri call *Empire*. On the one hand, lacking the visible symbolic authority to immunize themselves against, forms of life become increasingly fragmented and isolated; on the other they are (often invisibly) reconnected through standardized protocols such as the Internet into a single network that make the global control and exploitation of immaterial labour possible.⁴⁰ As Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker emphasize, as a new technology of biopolitical governance “protocol facilitates relationships between interconnected, but autonomous entities”; it’s “less about power (confinement, discipline, normativity) and more about control (modulation, distribution, flexibility).”⁴¹ This means that while in disciplinary societies, as Foucault notoriously suggested,⁴² subjects became docile servants of power insofar as they believed their life to be repressed and began to resist which in turn stabilized (immunized) the status quo, the apparatuses of control, on the contrary, capture subjects insofar they believe to be free and autonomous. Yet, Hardt and Negri argue, this monstrous biopolitical machine cannot fully contain the creative forces of the *multitude* it “liberates”; just like Capital itself in Marx’s narrative it’s more like a vampire “sucking off the blood of the living.”⁴³

From an Agambenian perspective the question is, then, what the arbitrary sovereign decision is that links the bare life (*zoe*) of the multitude to the new *bios* of Empire, allowing its

⁴⁰ As Wendy Chun argues, “[d]igital language makes control systems invisible: we no longer experience the visible yet unverifiable gaze but a network of nonvisualizable digital control.” Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2006), 9.

⁴¹ Galloway and Thacker, “Protocol, Control, and Networks,” 8.; 10.

⁴² See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 15-36.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 62.

vitality to be captured in the digital apparatuses of production. It is this decision that I described in *Shallow Grave* as cynicism, one that glorifies the regime of endless immaterial labour. And what life does this sovereignty devalue as one that is not worth living? It excludes precisely those who are still caught resisting the old apparatus of disciplinary power. In the film, these are David and Juliet who represent historically outdated (classical and postmodern) forms of noir sovereignty, ones that now have some utopian connotations precisely because they don't work anymore. On the one hand, David's flat affirmation of friendship fails to conjure up a living, immunized community, but as a gesture still evokes the principle of universal equality that such community used to limit, for which reason it's an example of subtraction. On the other hand, Juliet's hysteric outbreak stands for the pure (always unsatisfied) desire of the 80s *femme fatale* without its sovereign reduction to nostalgia—a case of what Badiou would call purifying destruction. By contrast, Alex gets to keep the suitcase of cash because he is a good capitalist realist: his passion for the real is neither subtractive, nor destructive but a kind of synthesis between the two, folding them together into two aspects of the neoliberal status quo that has no alternative.

4.3 The Subalterns Who Walked Themselves to the Neoliberal Market: The Post-Imperial Cynicism of *Trainspotting* and *Slumdog Millionaire*

To further map the historical context of cynical sovereignty in Boyle's work, let's look at two of his films, *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), that deal with the shift from the old British Empire to the Empire of global, networked capital. I will argue that the

narrative trajectory of the two films is in fact so similar that despite their apparent differences, the latter can even be considered the unofficial remake of former. At the core both films is a social outcast's emancipation—that of a working class Scottish heroin addict and of a young Mumbai orphan from the untouchable caste—in the midst of a large scale socio-economic transformation of their postcolonial environment due to the rise of global capitalism. While *Slumdog Millionaire*'s life affirming fairy tale seems to counter the sociopathic opportunism that dominates *Trainspotting*, on a deeper level both films explore the consequences of gaining individual autonomy by cutting one's ties to the organic community he was born into, becoming a free floating neoliberal subject of a global multitude who is not pulled down by the gravity of his designated role in any outdated social hierarchy. The rapid pace and the poppy, heavily stylized imagery of both films are examples of Boyle's accelerationist vitalism, what Manohla Darghis called his "better to swim than to sink" worldview⁴⁴ identifying with deterritorialized capital which the director seems to be both enthusiastic and critical about. While the two films represent two different affective extremes of this ambiguity, I argue that they should be read together as two sides of the same coin to critique neoliberalism's emancipatory make-over of the body and its glorious deactivation of the disciplinary colonial power of the past.

Using Lacan's theory of subject formation, I will map the quest of Boyle's heroes in overcoming their alienation within a traditional, rigidly hierarchical society that condemns them to the state of a passive existence at the bottom, to serve as the abjected correlate to bourgeois discourses of identity that externalize on their exclusively included other (the *homo sacer*) both the naive belief in and the surplus enjoyment of their own ruling ideology, in other words, the fundamental inoperativity of their social symbolic order. Boyle places this dialectical

⁴⁴ Manohla Dargis, "Orphan's Lifeline Out of Hell Could Be A Gameshow in Mumbai," *New York Times*, November 11, 2008, accessed September 6, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/12/movies/12slum.html>.

relationship into a postcolonial setting both in the literal sense by mapping Scotland's and India's complex dependency on the remains of the British Empire, as well as an allegory for the global shift from the disciplinary logic of power to neoliberal societies of control that solicit rather than suppress their subjects' desire for autonomy. He makes his subalterns speak, tell their own story as a device to free them from its weight, to disidentify from the biopolitical stereotypes they were for their old masters. Mapping the ambiguity of the colonial discourse put forward by Homi Bhabha diachronically as a historical antagonism between the old and new forms of colonial domination, Boyle shows that his heroes can be successful in subverting the social hierarchies of a now bygone era, but only by exchanging the burden of their oppression by disciplinary power for the cynical glorification of neoliberalism through their self-commodification, or, as Berardi puts it, their "connective mutation," their enslavement to the digital rhythm of global capital.⁴⁵

4.3.1 Fixed into an Object

At the beginning of both films, the protagonists are positioned as social objects. The hero of *Trainspotting*, Renton is a heroin junkie in a poverty stricken neighborhood of Edinburgh newly devastated by Thatcher's neoliberal reforms; he is surrounded by a zombified group of working class family members and friends, most of them unemployed and addicts themselves. Although he has made attempts from time to time to relinquish the drugs, he never quite succeeded; the socially more acceptable alternative of a dead end life in misery, only occasionally brightened by the pathetic illusions of Scottish nationalism (such as overinvestment

⁴⁵ Franco Berardi, "Biopolitics and Connective Mutation," *Culture Machine* 7 (2005), accessed April 27, 2014. <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/viewArticle/27/34>.

in local football teams)⁴⁶ simply cannot compare to the disconnected *jouissance* of intravenous heroin injection.⁴⁷ His excessive gain of enjoyment, however, is only part of the story as he also plays a significant role supporting the identity of various members of the “normal” society constantly pressuring him to change his ways and take responsibility for himself. Despite their ostensible postcolonial pride, this group of people ironically acts as the voluntary policemen of the periphery, channeling the neoliberal discourses of individual autonomy and entrepreneurship⁴⁸ from Empire’s center as if they were demands for discipline from the old masters of British imperialism. One of them is his friend Begbie, an ultra-violent, alcoholic homophobic macho who calls drugs “shite,” hypocritically opposing the despicable habits of the junkies to his supposedly more reputable ways of blowing off steam. As Renton, the narrator, comments sarcastically: “Begbie didn't do drugs, he did people, that's what he got off on.” He sums up his mother’s valium addiction in a similar way: “My mother, who is, in her own domestic and socially acceptable way, also a drug addict.” What Renton is confronted with here is not simply the arbitrariness of drawing a line that separates a respectable (ultimately English bourgeois) subject’s life from the subaltern’s unacceptable transgressions (of the colonized “scum” of Scotland, as he bitterly puts it) but the fact that those norms already include a set of immunized practices that violate them in *the proper way*; practices of inherent transgression that the junkie is unable to perform.⁴⁹ One way to understand the social management of this boundary

⁴⁶ Grant Farred, “Wankerdome: Trainspotting As a Rejection of the Postcolonial?” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 1 (2004): 207.

⁴⁷ As Franco Berardi argues, in a neoliberal economy demanding increasing affective participation from ordinary people, “[h]eroin allows for a switching-off, a disconnection from the circuit of uninterrupted over-excitement, a kind of attenuation of tension.” Berardi, “Connective Mutation”

⁴⁸ As Foucault puts it, the proper subject of neoliberalism is the “Homo oeconomicus as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings.” Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France (1978-79)*, trans. M. Senellart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 226.

⁴⁹ On this notion of inherent transgression see Slavoj Žižek, “The Inherent Transgression,” *Cultural Values*, 2:1 (1998): 1-17.

in Boyle's film is by turning to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection that explains how the stable limits of one's self are created through the expulsion of a scatological object (symbolized by saliva, feces, vomit, etc.), the subject's internal excess bearing an inherent ambiguity standing simultaneously for sameness and otherness, being both intimately connected to the body and utterly alien to it.⁵⁰ When the excess of the abject is projected onto someone else, the illusory unity of the self is strengthened. The junkie, not unlike the classical noir hero, thus stabilizes his "normal" counterpart by identifying with the surplus of that subject, by becoming, as Žižek puts it, someone "who consumes himself utterly, to his very death [drive], in his unbound *jouissance*."⁵¹ Boyle's emphasis on the postcolonial setting is crucial here as it frames the neoliberal norms of self-management as imposed on the imagined Scottish community from the outside as a foreign excess to which the locals have an ambiguous relationship, oscillating between partial incorporation and refusal (abjection). For instance, similarly to his mates and parents, Diane, Renton's underage "girlfriend" constantly bombards her misfit lover with injunctions to reinvent himself and adapt to the constantly changing flux of new opportunities while in reality she keeps seeking him out to get high with him (but only on soft drugs), thereby gaining a minimal distance to the ruling ideology colonizing her mind. The junkie, in his socially designated role of the ultimate transgressor comparable to classical noir *femme fatale*, enters here to resolve the contradiction, performing a more radical withdrawal of belief in the social-symbolic norms partially swallowed by the majority while at the same time and for that precise reason also serving as the perfect embodiment of the foreignness they carry.

⁵⁰ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

⁵¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), 44.

That is to say, upon closer look, Renton's anti-sovereign choice of the "wanker's" abject body⁵² (*zoe*) over the shared *bios* of Scottish citizenry becomes more ambiguous. Isn't his position not also that of what Žižek calls the *subject supposed to believe*, similar to the supposedly ignorant child for whose sake his parents pretend that Santa Claus exists?⁵³ The child here is fixed into the role of the one who *really* believes as opposed to his parents merely pretending, even though, as Žižek points out, for the ritual to work and produce an effective fiction, no one actually has to believe in Santa Claus; it is enough if everyone plays their role *as if* they did. In other words, children's blindness to the inexistence of Santa is not an epistemological one but is rather a matter of their position in the symbolic order, the consequence of their exclusion from socially sanctioned performances of disbelief, for which the sharing of skeptical rumors with one another doesn't qualify. I would argue that at the beginning of *Trainspotting*, Renton finds himself in a similar position to that of the skeptical child, which can be seen already in his opening lines, voiced sarcastically just after shooting a dose of heroin: "Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments... Choose sitting on a couch watching spirit-crushing game shows..." These are the words of someone who observes the spectacle of late capitalist bourgeois life from a distance without seeing the appeal of it (the narration goes on: "I chose not to choose life. I chose something else.") For Renton, from the point of view of the junkie who (supposedly) fully enjoys, the choices his mother, Begbie or Diane have made are empty; they represent the symbolic order as a mere façade, hypocrisy, a site of neocolonial alienation and death. But in fact it is him who is

⁵² See Farred, "Wankerdom"

⁵³ Slavoj Žižek, *How To Read Lacan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 30.

alienated in a more primordial sense because he cannot master the secret of the (masculine) symbolic: its inherent transgression, for which reason he imagines that there really is a big Other (like the British Empire) wanting him and everyone else to follow its norms. It is only in the eyes of someone like him that these “choices” he cites are conjoined into a consistent image, an ideology he passively believes in from the outside, *instead of* those who are living it. As such, he is like the noir *femme fatale* who has identified with the masculine fantasy about her: he imagines possessing the real phallus that completes the symbolic order, unable to see that in fact he is standing in the place of its fundamental inconsistency (lack).

In the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of child development this subject position is linked to the stage of alienation (the mirror stage), which, as Bruce Fink explains, comes about through the child’s encounter with the Other’s desire (the lack in the Other), which he interprets as his parents’ demand to conform to a socially valued image.⁵⁴ This image, of course, can never fully represent the child as it prohibits, first and foremost, the masturbatory (inoperative) enjoyment in the genitals which leads to the child’s first lost battle with the Other: if he wants to be the object of his parent’s desire, he has to give up part of himself, he has to see himself as fundamentally lacking something.⁵⁵ This encounter forces the subject into an alienated, imaginary form of *being* in the Other *qua* social symbolic order, completely lost behind the signifier.⁵⁶ His *ex-istence* in turn is annulled; it becomes nothing but a lack in the Other, the lack standing for the socially negated excess of enjoyment that Renton embodies and from which place he inadvertently

⁵⁴ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 52.

⁵⁵ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 136.

⁵⁶ For Lacan, “[b]eing...is the being of signifierness.” Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, trans. B. Fink (New York, W.W. Norton, 1998), 71.

believes in the completeness of the image that negated him as enjoyment.⁵⁷ The subject's supposed enjoyment and supposed belief are thus interconnected modalities of the alienated subject as lack: his lack as ex-istence (his *in itself*, outside of the symbolic order) is his *jouissance*, while his lack as being (what he is *for the Other* in the symbolic) is his belief. The link between these two modalities is his gaze (or in Renton's case his voice), simultaneously expressing a naïve belief in the imaginary completeness of the social symbolic order, and a secret knowledge about the enjoyment that lies beyond it—an ambiguity that makes his blindness opaque and mysterious. It is this duality that the feminist critics of film noir identified in the opposition between the all too naive “nurturing woman” and the duplicitous and transgressive “spider woman.”⁵⁸ However, in classical noir's masculine regime this was an antinomic (either-or) relation that only occasionally developed into a contradiction within one and the same female figure, opening up utopian possibilities (played out, for instance, in snow noir). By contrast, in Boyle's protagonist this contradiction is present from the very beginning, serving as the main driving force of the narrative—the difference is that, as we will see, its resolution isn't a utopian one.

The hero of *Slumdog Millionaire*, Jamal, is also a social abject, a Dalit (untouchable)⁵⁹ slum dweller from a Mumbai shanty town, even more alienated from the bourgeois life of the emerging global metropolis around him than Renton from English middle class life. There is a scene early in the film where he is sitting in an outdoor toilet when a famous Bollywood movie star arrives to visit his fans in the slum. Jamal has a picture of him he'd like the actor to sign, but

⁵⁷ As Lacan suggests, “[t]here is in effect something radically unassimilable to the signifier. It's quite simply the subject's singular existence.” Jacques Lacan, *The Psychosis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III*, trans. R. Grigg (New York: Routledge, 1993), 179.

⁵⁸ Janey Place, “Women in Film Noir,” in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), 35-67.

⁵⁹ His untouchable status is both implied and disavowed in the film. See Meena Varma, “India's Elephant in the Room,” *The Guardian*, 11 February 2009, accessed April 27, 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/feb/10/india-slumdog-millionaire-caste>.

he gets stuck in the outhouse and panics that he won't have a chance to get near the man. He improvises using his situation to his advantage, jumping into the toilet, and covered in feces head to toe (except for the photograph he holds up in his hand) he runs into the crowd surrounding the celebrity. Disgusted by the abominable smell and sight, they can't but let him through and he manages to get his autograph. This scene is another variation on imaginary identification where the subject's being becomes completely alienated in the image imposed on him from above (what the subject believes the Other wants him to be) while his existence, his scatological *jouissance* indexed to his untouchable status is entirely negated, abjected in the process (the actor doesn't even seem to notice him, covered in shit or not, he just signs the picture). This scene is a repetition of Renton's immersion into a public toilet for a couple of opium suppositories in *Trainspotting*, the obscene underside of his official quest to give up the drugs. There is also an equivalent of the Bollywood actor in the earlier film in the figure of Sean Connery, the main source of imaginary identification (of both admiration and mockery) for the junkies, a Scotsman whose most famous role appropriately put him in the service of the Queen's Empire.

Jamal's story from here on, much like Renton's quest to relinquish drugs, is an attempt to leave behind this scatological social role and become "normal" like anyone else. In other words, it's a quest for sovereignty. The first major obstacle he has to face, similarly to Renton, is the fact that others benefit from his subject position as a naïve believer and want to see him fixed as a social abject. When he and his brother Salim are orphaned, a local criminal, the runner of a beggars' operation takes them to a Dickensian compound of abandoned children where they are taught how to panhandle by exhibiting themselves as disabled bodies enclosed in their disturbing *jouissance* outside the sanctioned boundaries of the social. Fed with dreams of fame and success, little do they know that behind the apparently benevolent mask of their caretaker lies a sinister

plan: Jamal's ability to sing, he figures, would make him a more profitable beggar if he was *really* blind. Luckily, Salim intervenes in the last minute and the boys manage to escape together to see the world on their own for the first time, that is, move beyond their role as the blind gaze who supposed to believe and enjoy.

4.3.2 Separation and its Failure

In Lacanian terms, this is the point in Jamal's story where his separation from the Other begins as his naïve trust in his criminal stepfather is shattered. He is able to see him now as lacking, wanting something beyond the imaginary ideal ego that Jamal was so eager to perform: he wanted to profit from the very maiming and destruction of this ideal image, directly exploiting his beggars' abject existence. As a response, Jamal does what the child does upon discovering that his ego-image is not the sole object of the "mOther's" desire: he now makes a deliberate attempt himself to fill the Other's lack with his own scatological *jouissance*, hoping to make their desire (lack) coincide.⁶⁰ Through this, the paralyzing negativity of his former existence opposed to an imaginary ideal beyond his control is transposed into the gap that opens up between different ideal-egos that he can now autonomously play with, identifying with one against the other or vice versa. Appropriately, Jamal and Salim become con men, using their oriental appearance as bait to get money out of western tourists. For instance, Jamal pretends to be a tour guide at the Taj Mahal, offering its "real story that is not in the guidebook" to foreign visitors, ultimately coming up with as many horrifying and orientalizing fabrications as possible. In the same vein, he brings a couple of American tourists to a slum hoping they would pay him a substantial tip after seeing the miserable conditions of life there. His calculations prove to be

⁶⁰ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 52.

correct, the effects are even amplified by local kids stealing the tires of the couple's car and the chauffeur beating Jamal up as a response, allowing him to shout "you wanted to see the real India, here you have it!", to which the tourists, in a way satisfied with the spectacle, hand him a 100 Dollar bill out of pity.

In other words, Jamal, forming an ironic smart collective with his brother, is moving away from his formerly fixed role as the supposed subject of belief and enjoyment to become a good neoliberal entrepreneur of his self, living the capitalist dream of postcolonial India, linking his formerly untouchable *jouissance* into a network of global capital. He is, however, soon reminded of the radical inequalities and injustices grounding this fantasy land of opportunity when he meets one of his old friends from the beggars' compound; the boy is blinded now, playing the role Jamal would have if he had stayed. By giving him the 100 Dollar bill he earned only pretending to be disabled, Jamal interpassively⁶¹ turns the blind boy into a real abject, someone to remain fixed in the role of the scatological object for him, instead of him while he puts such mask on and off as he pleases for the sake of his business ventures. The exchange shows that, at this point, he still moves within the same regime of power that used to exploit him; he merely has turned the tables for the moment.

In *Trainspotting* Renton also breaks with his abject role as a junkie by becoming something like a con man: he moves to London and starts to work as a realtor (an episode which the Taj Mahal scene of *Slumdog Millionaire* repeats with some additional irony). Following a fast paced montage sequence of London's tourist sites and the skyscrapers of its City with a

⁶¹ The term interpassivity was coined by Robert Pfaller to describe the externalization of the subject's passive contemplation of an artwork on the object itself. See Robert Pfaller, "The Work of Art that Observes Itself" (paper presented at Amber Festival '08, Istanbul, Turkey, November 8, 2008), 08.amberfestival.org/public/file_5.DOC. Žižek expanded the scope of the concept to include the externalization of belief but also the excess of enjoyment. See Slavoj Žižek, "Cyberspace, or, How to Traverse the Fantasy in the Age of the Retreat of the Big Other" *Public Culture* 10, no. 3 (1998): 483-513.

pumping euro-disco song repeating the lines “find a feeling” in the background, he cynically summarizes the affective mutation of his subjectivity using the language of finance: “I quite enjoyed the sound of it. Profit, loss, margins, takeovers, lending, letting, sub-letting, sub-dividing [...] cheating, scamming, fragmenting, breaking away.” The neoliberal discourse, much like at the beginning of *Shallow Grave*, is still presented here as a transgression, the shared practice of a few smart entrepreneurs bending the rules.⁶² There is a similar scene of exchange to Jamal’s encounter with the blind beggar as well, except that it occurs right before, not parallel to the hero’s success, underlining their strong causal relation. Renton visits his old friend Tommy, whose life started to fall apart just about when his turned for the better, becoming a drug addict at the same time when Renton stopped shooting heroin. After that, Tommy’s life quickly deteriorated; his girlfriend left him and he found out he had HIV, making him withdraw into the miserable solitude of his dark apartment littered with cat feces. He has become what Renton could have been without his lucky break: a living dead waiting his end in noir isolation. He asks for money to “pay the rent” and Renton gives him cash with a telling smile on his face; he is fully aware that he is supplying his friend with his next dose of heroin.

It’s worth mentioning here that up to a point Tommy also serves as the prototype for Jamal’s character insofar as both of them have a reputation of being too sincere—in this sense the equivalent of the openly sociopathic Renton stealing Tommy’s sex tape and showing it to his mates is Jamal’s gangster/pimp brother Salim who turns his sibling’s childhood love, Latika, into a prostitute. Yet, while Tommy’s honesty led him to oscillate between well-disciplined bourgeois decency and extreme, self-annihilating transgression (in other words, he stayed fixed in the place of the subaltern who is supposed to believe and enjoy), Jamal’s honest appearance turns out to be

⁶² This approach resembles Hollywood films like *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) where neoliberal financialization is presented as a crime against some normal, regulated economy.

the other side of Renton's cynical detachment (they both end up as tricksters) like in the case of Alex in *Shallow Grave*. What is crucial is that both of them keep an inner distance to the dominant discourses while mimicking them in practice and for that precise reason they don't need to destroy themselves through overt transgressions. No wonder that in the end, it is Salim who dies a spectacular and violent death similar to Tommy's, indicating that despite all his smart nihilism his separation from the big Other wasn't as successful as it may have appeared (that behind his cold macho demeanor he remained attached to Latika, in an analogous way as David remained attached to Juliet after/through externalizing his love for her on Alex).

Renton and Jamal's own separation from the Other, however, also doesn't go as smoothly as their initial euphoria might have suggested; they eventually hit the *real* walls of the late capitalist class structure relying on their subordinated social position. After all his youthful smart entrepreneurial adventures, Jamal abandons his free floating, nomadic business with Salim and moves to Mumbai to find Latika. As a result, he ends up in a place where he merely pretended to be: he becomes a servant, an assistant in a call center whose role is to bring tea to senior associates. For them, he remains the naïve figure of the subject supposed to believe who knows all the silly details about celebrity gossip, about a world he is separated from forever due to the India's new class system taking over / preserving the historical role of former castes. The case of Renton is even more telling. Although he manages to make some money in his temporarily independent life as a realtor in London, he is reminded who he really is (a junkie) and where he is coming from (the defeated Scottish working class) when one day his friends, living as petty criminals by now, show up at his doorstep and move in with him. Soon he has to realize that they have a plan to use him and his hard earned money to buy and sell a substantial amount of drugs—an opportunity they cannot pass on but also cannot take without his support. While

apparently not eager to help, it is clear that such shady business venture also fits the entrepreneurial spirit of Renton's new neoliberal self, even though, unbeknown to him, it also marks its very real limit, cancelling the illusion of his temporary autonomy (just like the opportunities Mumbai's booming metropolis end up imprisoning Jamal in a call center). Before he knows it, the aim of his new life is diverted towards a bag of heroin and it's him who is designated to try it before the deal; just for business, he tells himself, but as Boyle shows with bitter irony, a junkie who merely acts like a junkie is still a junkie (or, in Jamal's case, an untouchable who merely acts like an untouchable is still an untouchable).

As the heroes' neoliberal quest for individual autonomy reaches a deadlock in both films, the disavowed issue of shared resistance through identity politics resurfaces. While Jamal regresses into the role of the *chai wallah* (serving tea for people), his brother becomes successful working as a hit man/pimp for the gangster-patriarch of the slum, dreaming of building a rich city out of the shanty town. When the two of them meet up after years of hiatus on the rooftop of a skyscraper construction site, Jamal nonetheless violently rejects Salim's offer to join him, blaming him for forcing Latika into prostitution. Similarly, when in *Trainspotting* the group of friends take a trip to the Scottish countryside as an act of male bonding and connecting with their heritage, Renton quickly undercuts the attempt: "It's shite being Scottish. We're the lowest of the low. The scum of the fucking earth. The most wretched, miserable, servile, pathetic trash... that was ever shat into civilisation. Some people hate the English, I don't. They're just wankers. We, on the other hand, are colonised by wankers." Such impatience can be read in both films as the rejection of old forms of the community linked to Scottish nationalist resistance and organizing the life of the slum (perhaps an allegory for anti-colonial militancy) in favor of the individual making it on his own, however unlikely his success might be. The strategy that both Jamal and

Renton follow after the temporary setback in their journey is thus the overidentification with neoliberal ideology, hoping to emancipate from the shackles of disciplinary society by glorifying the new digital forms of domination.

4.3.3 The Neoliberal Makeover

Boyle seems to be aware of this limitation, which is why he uses the language of the neoliberal media's makeover culture to narrate his heroes' second, now "successful" emancipatory attempt.⁶³ This is more explicit in *Slumdog Millionaire* which ingeniously presents the Indian version of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* as a makeover show for Jamal that helps to transform his old colonial untouchable body scorned by the public into a slick new digital self ready to connect to Mumbai's global capitalist economy. This is the new India that attracts investors to build skyscrapers in the place of slums, where call centers servicing affluent western countries create job opportunities for the unemployed, and where game shows offer huge cash prizes for ordinary people who prove to be knowledgeable in an indistinct mash of local and international (but British and American dominated) popular culture. The film sets up an opposition between an old and a new logic of colonialism, the former based on the hierarchical model of disciplinary power while the latter on the decentralized capitalism of global networks that Hardt and Negri termed Empire. Boyle seems to condemn the first while celebrating the second, mobilizing what Homi Bhabha called the ambiguity of the colonial discourse, its simultaneous repressive and emancipatory side. On the one hand, in contrast to his youthful phase of trickery with Salim that was full laughter, there is a curious affectless automatism in his TV performance as if the voice he was raising wasn't really his own, but something that the big

⁶³ On the make-over discourse as a neoliberal technology of the self see Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009), 124-50.

Other of a colonial discourse wanted him to say, making a spectacle out of his abject life just to make fun of him and increase the show's ratings. In this sense he resembles the applicants interviewed by the three roommates in *Shallow Grave*. The game show host invites the audience to laugh at him for being only a *chai wallah* in a call center, but he is also ridiculed for not knowing which banknote has Gandhi's face on it—the face of the symbolic father of postcolonial India who famously resisted the abolishment of the caste system, keeping Dalits like Jamal in their subordinated place. And yet, the film ends with his victory over the smug host, as if he somehow overcame the colonial stereotype of the *chai wallah* through his very excessive docility.

For Bhabha, the colonial discourse “is an apparatus that turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences. Its predominant strategic function is the creation of a space for ‘subject peoples’ through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited.”⁶⁴ On the one hand, it creates the colonized as separate, culturally distant others to maintain the colonizers' sense of superiority. At the same time, however, the governmentality of colonial power relies on the constant surveillance of the colonial subjects, on their total visibility and knowability. In this dialectic the attempt to fix the oriental other into essential, controllable images, what Bhabha calls stereotypes can never be complete, there is always a remainder of otherness escaping classification that would then direct colonial power to repeat its identifying act. When we look at this relation from the colonizer's point of view, his desire to fix the colonial subject into a stereotype can be read as forcing him into imaginary identification, i.e. alienation.⁶⁵ However, as Bhabha stresses, such identification always fails, there is always a lack, the return of the

⁶⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 70.

⁶⁵ Bhabha explicitly refers to the Lacanian theory of the imaginary to explain how the colonizer's attempt to fix the identity of the colonized always fails, how it remains a constant source of anxiety for those in power.

unrepresented that makes it unstable. Therefore he also connects the colonizer's position to that of the fetishist, the stereotype serving as his fetish object. "The fetish or stereotype gives an access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it."⁶⁶ The colonizer's desire for and escape from the real then leads to two simultaneous but contradictory relations to the colonized, that of narcissism and aggression, the desire to identify and to destroy.⁶⁷ In *Trainspotting* such ambiguous disciplining is taken up by Begbie (internalizing the voice of the English colonial discourse) when his attitude towards his junkie mates oscillates between friendly drinking sessions and homosocial debauchery on the one hand, and violent outbursts against the "shite" they are using on the other. Similarly, in *Slumdog Millionaire* Jamal is both encouraged as a contestant to reveal his *chai wallah* identity for the audience to cheer and brutally interrogated by the police for doing just that (who reason that an ordinary *chai wallah* is not supposed to be winning a game like this). If, as Bhabha insists, the colonial discourse mobilizes the scopic drive through the gaze that seeks knowledge about the other, the ambiguity of this strategy appears when the colonized returns the gaze and produces anxiety in the colonizer, indicating that the interpassive gaze of the abject can never fully be neutralized or excluded (can never be reduced to *objet a*).

It is this ambiguous process of imaginary identification of the colonial subject that is performed within *Slumdog Millionaire*'s game show setting. Jamal doesn't get further and further ahead because he is smart enough to know the answers. What he realizes playing the game is that the right answers correspond to the *jouissance* of traumatic experiences as an untouchable and the only thing he has to do is identify them, put them into a narrative. The

⁶⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 75.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

flashback sequences of his memories are both his personal recollections during the game and the result of the torture he is exposed to in-between sessions by the police who suspect him of cheating. The only way he can clear himself is by telling the story behind each answer to the policemen who, along with the host of the show represent the ambiguous gaze of the colonial discourse, the scopic drive luring Jamal into identifying with the stereotypes triggered by the questions while also punishing him for doing so. His answers can be seen as an alienated, reified sequence of self-images, of his scatological life offered as a (commodity) fetish to feed the Other's hunger for knowledge.

The previously mentioned scene about Jamal getting an autograph while being fully covered in shit illustrates this process nicely. It is literally this signed image that he uses to answer the question on the show (the name of the actor), that satisfies the desire of the host, who, just like after each of his correct answers, suggests Jamal to quit, to be glad that he has gotten so far, to remain in the fixed image he is temporarily identified with. There is, however, always an excess to his ex-istence (as *jouissance*), an absence not yet sutured into the scene of visibility which pushes him to move on to the next question (the next image). And, of course, this is the desire of the host as well whose constant taunting of Jamal is also the expression of curiosity about what else the boy's got in him. Nonetheless, it is unthinkable in the traditional, fixed disciplinary regime of colonial power that the questioning of someone like Jamal would ever end. Here, however, he is able to answer the *final* question, which ultimately leads to the elimination of the difference between the host, the bearer of western knowledge, the Lacanian figure of the subject supposed to know⁶⁸ and the colonial stereotype as the object of knowledge.

⁶⁸ See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 232.

Another one of Bhabha's key concepts, mimicry, can shed more light on this final moment of identity between opposites. "Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite*. Which is to say that the discourse of mimicry [like that of the stereotype] is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference."⁶⁹ Mimicry involves another aspect of the imaginary relation between colonial power and its subject, not the attempt to fix the colonized into stereotypes of difference but to make him almost, but not quite like the colonizers as part of their civilizing mission. What's at stake here is the identity of the colonizers, their presence, their originality which is reinforced by what is supposedly a mere imitation, mimicry performed by the colonized who will thus be always separated by a minimal difference from their dominators—a difference which is not substantial like with the stereotype but entirely arbitrary, imposed by a sovereign decision. For Bhabha, mimicry can be subversive of colonial authority as it creates anxiety in the colonizer through the production of identity-effects without any claim to originality and presence.⁷⁰ It opens up the possibility of seeing colonial power as arbitrarily constructed by decreating the images it relies on, bringing out the gestures shared by colonizer and colonized alike. Or to turn back to the movie, while Jamal's answers to the India related questions (like the one about the Bollywood actor) strengthen his place as a colonial stereotype ensuring that he can keep on playing, it is mimicking the western way of life, exhibiting knowledge about the west that will make him eligible to win the game by showing that there is no essential difference between colonizer and colonized.

⁶⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

The game show, then, works as a noir zone of indistinction where the host plays the classical masculine role of the sovereign and the contestant that of the *femme fatale*. This also means that just because there is no essential difference between the two of them, they are not equal: the sovereign, backed by the *bios* of the hegemonic community, devalues the other's life *arbitrarily*. In other words, the tactic of mimicry is not a guarantee of emancipation from disciplinary power as long as a glass ceiling separates the subject from the life he mimics. In societies of control, however, as Hardt and Negri argued, the western way of life increasingly detaches itself from any clearly identifiable *bios* of the west, becoming deterritorialized. A good illustration of this is the question "Cambridge Circus is in which UK city?" Jamal knows the answer not because he has knowledge of the UK's geography, but because the massive offices of his call center are divided into more manageable clusters using British city and street signs that he had to learn for serving *chai*. This scene is exceptional in showing us what the new ideal of Empire Jamal mimics actually is. As I have suggested, the questions on the show solicit identification with an image (either that of the colonial stereotype or the western ideal): the answers include a famous Bollywood actor, Benjamin Franklin, the national emblem of India, a famous cricket player, Dumas's third musketeer, etc. This means that they fit into the disciplinary logic of the colonial discourse. The question about the Cambridge Circus is no different in this regard, but the flashback to Jamal's memories makes it clear that while it aims to recall the image of London, for the young contestant it actually refers to a node in a network that has lost its territorial anchoring to the old (British) Empire's center. For him, the question evokes the way in which Empire's new global networks connect individuals into a deterritorialized productive machine that mobilizes the hitherto unexploited cognitive capacities of their brains. Jamal can have the right answer precisely because his own brain has already gone through a

cybernetic mutation: the flashback shows that he can use it like a computer, searching through data in his memory bank for the right combination of city and street signs. This scene therefore qualifies as what Patricia Pisters called the neuro-image, depicting a “brain-ride,” making the invisible processes of the human mind visible through a new digital imaginary.⁷¹ Following Laura Marks, she describes the neuro-image as neo-baroque formation, an “algorithmic aesthetic experience, in which a certain rational but awe-inspiring structure unfolds images in accordance with patterns and rules.”⁷² This aesthetic, according to Pisters, also realizes some of the late Deleuze’s speculations about the new video-electronic images of his time that differ from both the movement-image and the time-image. He suggested, first, that space in this new cinema becomes omnidirectional, like the virtual cyberspace depicting Jamal’s neural networks. Second, instead of being a window to nature, the screen functions as a table of information displaying data, just like the images of Jamal’s memory bank. Third, characters lose their classical psychological motivations and turn into automata, performers of speech acts, much like Jamal in his mimicry.⁷³ And isn’t the whole film in the end such a neuro-image? While at the level of narrative content it’s about Jamal’s confrontation with disciplinary colonial power, the very *form* of this confrontation, its nonlinear, omnidirectional progress following the compartmental organization of his memories, the steady electrified rhythm of the flashback montages, the submission to the game show format demonstrate that he is already connected to the new society of control.⁷⁴ As Agamben stresses, “televised game shows are part of a new liturgy; they

⁷¹ Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 21.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 189.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁷⁴ Incidentally, Deleuze argues game shows express perfectly the spirit of the society of control: “In a society of control, the corporation has replaced the factory [of disciplinary societies], and the corporation is a spirit, a gas. Of course the factory was already familiar with the system of bonuses, but the corporation works more deeply to impose a modulation of each salary, in states of perpetual metastability that operate through challenges, contests,

secularize an unconsciously religious intention,”⁷⁵ in other words, they belong to the sphere of glory under neoliberalism. And perhaps this is what Deleuze means as well when he suggests that game shows express “the spirit” of control society:

In a society of control, the corporation has replaced the factory [of disciplinary societies], and the corporation is a spirit, a gas. Of course the factory was already familiar with the system of bonuses, but the corporation works more deeply to impose a modulation of each salary, in states of perpetual metastability that operate through challenges, contests, and highly comic group sessions. If the most idiotic television game shows are so successful, it's because they express the corporate situation with great precision.⁷⁶

What Jamal mimics is therefore not simply an image but a spiritual form, the digital rhythm that connects the subject to the new, deterritorialized Empire.⁷⁷ As the anonymous authors of the Invisible Committee put it: “Empire is not an enemy that confronts us head-on. It is a rhythm that imposes itself, a way of dispensing and dispersing reality.”⁷⁸

In *Trainspotting*, Renton also breaks with his alienated being as the stereotype of a junkie through digital mimicry. At first, we see him resorting to its old disciplinary variation. When a judge, wearing the traditional wig of British office, gives him a suspended sentence for stealing a car radio, provided that he participates in a rehabilitation program, he answers by mimicking the solemn glory of the legal discourse instead of resisting it: “Thank you, your Honour. With God's help I'll conquer this terrible affliction.” But his real transformation begins right after, when he is

and highly comic group sessions. If the most idiotic television game shows are so successful, it's because they express the corporate situation with great precision.” Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter, 1992): 4.

⁷⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. J. Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 76.

⁷⁶ Deleuze, “Postscript,” 4.

⁷⁷ See also Steven Shaviro's suggestion to call the third Deleuzian category of images the “rhythm-image.”, Steven Shaviro, “The Rhythm-Image,” (paper presented the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, Fairmont Queen Elizabeth Hotel, Montreal, QC, March 27, 2015)

⁷⁸ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 13.

locked into his room by his parents to withdraw from heroin. His brain is reorganized in a nightmarish sequence of hallucinations accompanied by monotonous techno music (Underworld's *Dark and Long*), soon after which he is able to connect to the vibrant finance driven economy of London. Not only does the soundtrack become more electronic with Renton's neoliberal awakening, he even has conversations about the change in music trends and the drugs accompanying them with Diane, who is surprised the junkies' old favorite, Iggy Pop is still alive. As the film progresses, the soundtrack moves from punk through new wave to electronic dance music, mirroring the shift from heroin to synthetic party drugs that help Empire's old-new subjects pick up the changed rhythm. It is this accelerated deterritorializing rhythm, the pressure to constantly be on the move for fear of sinking that pushes Renton through the final moment of separation from the big Other of disciplinary power, breaking the gravity of resistance that linked him to his reprobate mates.⁷⁹ When the opportunity offers itself, he takes all the money from the drug deal and leaves his alienated life behind (while another Underworld song, *Born Slippy* is playing). For the others, his move is unexpected; after all, he is supposed to be the idiot who cannot say no to the seductive stereotype-image of the junkie they hold up in front of him as his "truth." On the other hand, he can get away with the money precisely *because* of his fixed position in the eyes of others as the dupe, because nobody expects him, this meager, emasculate, androgynous-looking addict to have the guts to pull it off.

As a result of his separation from the disciplinary apparatus, Renton's brain also becomes more like a computer. He solves the dilemma posed by his opening monologue, whether or not to choose bourgeois life, by demonstrating his capacity to memorize and quickly enumerate the list of requirements for that lifestyle, displacing thereby the question of belief in their normative

⁷⁹ His main abuser is Begbie who treats him like a servant, as an idiot whose function is to strengthen his rather pathetic phallic image (demanding Renton to buy him cigarettes, etc.).

nature as irrelevant. This is how the return to his opening lines, despite the similarly detached yet enthusiastic tone of his voice, can deliver now the opposite message, signalling the end of his resistance:

Now I'm cleaning up and I'm moving on, going straight and choosing life. I'm looking forward to it already. I'm going to be just like you. The job, the family, the fucking big television. The washing machine, the car, the compact disc, an electrical tin opener, good health, low cholesterol, dental insurance, mortgage, starter home, leisure wear, luggage, three-piece suit, DIY, game shows, junk food, children, walks in the park, 9:00 to 5:00, good at golf, washing the car, choice of sweaters, family Christmas, indexed pension, tax exemption, clearing gutters, getting by, looking ahead, the day you die.

What disappears from his words is the naive belief he had before, the belief in the self-belief of the proverbial bourgeois subject whose life he used to describe with resentment. He knows now that such a big Other doesn't exist. This doesn't mean, however, that he has turned into just another hypocrite like Begbie, acting like a respectable member of society only for the eyes of the subjects supposed to believe, perhaps the spectators addressed by his voice over, while holding on to an authentic identity shared with those who know better. Rather, through his final makeover, Renton realizes the potential inherent in the old colonial mimicry; his identity reveals itself as a non-identity, as partial presence, and through that, it reveals all identities as fake. In the end, neither does Renton believe himself, nor does an interpassive subject-proxy believe for him (his address to the audience is *both* knowing wink and a form of hypocrisy)—and yet, he does effectively *act* as a good capitalist subject. His identification can be described as cynical in Sloterdijk's sense of the term, involving an "enlightened false consciousness," because the gesture of demonstrating his knowledge regardless of its truth value (the bodily automatism of

his cybernetic know-how) took over the role of belief and disbelief in connecting him to the capitalist apparatus of production. While disciplinary power split its subject into parts of naive belief and enlightened knowledge, or, in more general terms, subconscious affect and conscious cognition, in the society of control this split is overcome by knowledge moving into the center, losing its previous status as resistance and turning into a form of false consciousness. As embodied know-how without a critical distance to the ruling ideology it becomes a tool of the multitude's "machinic enslavement."⁸⁰

Yet, free will doesn't disappear from this digital regime. The biopolitical price of Renton's connectedness is that in an arbitrary sovereign (cynical) decision he has to devalue the lives of those he is leaving behind, performatively creating the conditions that position them as born losers incapable of his neoliberal transformation. This is even clearer in *Slumdog Millionaire*. Jamal's last challenge of the TV contest involves his unfulfilled relationship with Latika, his childhood love interest from whom, due to unfortunate circumstances, he was separated from long ago. The last question of the game asks for the name of Dumas's third musketeer, a character Latika would play with Jamal and Salim when they were kids—without any of them knowing the actual name though, for which reason she cannot help Jamal when he calls her using the "phoning a friend" lifeline. It is him who has to name her, his final trauma to cure, the last obstacle standing between him and his new digital (connected) self. And despite not knowing the answer, he does it, in an act of arbitrary signification: "A." - he says. "Because? – Just, because." The scene is cross cut with Salim lying in a (dry) bathtub he ritualistically filled with money, waiting for the retaliation of his gangster boss for letting his property, Latika go free

⁸⁰ The term was introduced by Deleuze and Guattari to describe capitalism's subtle, deterritorializing technologies of control that don't depend on a fixed identity of the subject but regulate bodies subconsciously. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987), 466.

to allow her reunion with Jamal. The criminal's gunmen find and execute him at the exact moment when Jamal wins the game, but the sounds of violence are suppressed by the fanfares of victory televised on a multitude of TV screens all over the city.⁸¹ This signals how Salim's resistance to the capitalist apparatus he has been serving, his symbolic renunciation of money for the real of the sexual relationship (his love for Latika) becomes the subject of a biopolitical disavowal. His sacrifice is ignored because it is caught in a regime of disciplinary power where money (bourgeois normativity) and the real of *jouissance* (the state of exception) are diametrically opposed. By contrast, Jamal, the new neoliberal sovereign who performatively turns disciplinary power outdated can have both money and "love" at the end as the two registers become indistinct in control society's permanent state of exception. Here all bodies can be sovereign as long as they keep moving to the rhythm of Empire—a directive appropriately summed up by the Bollywood-style dance number Jamal and Latika are performing inside Mumbai's iconic colonial train station, the Victoria Terminus during the final credits.

It is nonetheless worth examining the question of ethnicity here in more detail. As Rey Chow observes, in the neoliberal era "to be ethnic is to protest less for actual emancipation of any kind than for the benefits of worldwide visibility, currency, and circulation."⁸² Yet, she adds that "[h]owever migratory, hybridized, and in flux it might be, is not ethnicity in this context

⁸¹ The becoming spectacle of Jamal also exemplifies Baudrillard's claims about the post-panoptic social link: "no longer one of persuasion (the classical age of propaganda, ideology, publicity, etc.) but one of dissuasion or deterrence: 'YOU are news, you are the social, the event is you, you are involved, you can use your voice, etc.'" Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. P. Foss et al. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1983), 53.

⁸² It is interesting to consider here Rey Chow's counter-argument. She accepts that in the neoliberal era "to be ethnic is to protest less for actual emancipation of any kind than for the benefits of worldwide visibility, currency, and circulation." Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 48. Yet, she suggests that "[h]owever migratory, hybridized, and in flux it might be, is not ethnicity in this context finally assigned the value of a referent that confines and immobilizes?" *Ibid.*, 152. In this sense there is a clear asymmetry between Renton and Jamal. While the former can escape his body's association with scottishness by mimicking the code of Anglo-Saxon bourgeois culture (he can pass for the universal white subject of the old empire), Jamal's digital self retains its association with Indian ethnicity despite doing the same (the code of the Bollywood musical keeps interrupting his noir moment). This could mean that whiteness, precisely because of its history of invisibility, remains the privileged skin color of neoliberal, post-identitarian subjectivity.

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As for the dance number itself, contrary to the traditions of Indian cinema, Jamal and Latika don’t sing. Like Alex in *Shallow Grave*, they are part of a mute multitude of isolated individuals (or in Deleuze’s terms: individuals performing coded speech acts)⁸⁴ who, although they are caught in the same productive machine, don’t have a shared language of resistance. In an irruption of the noir impulse, Boyle makes the large group of backup dancers disappear from some shots where he applies high contrast lighting and tilted camera angles, only to have them reappear in the next shot as if they were merely a digitally added layer, a simulation of communal life. This juxtaposition of the noir style with the musical genre is also a footnote to the final subtitle in the film, “it is written,” that appears after the lovers reunite in front of the station. The line is a reference to a question posed at the beginning: “Jamal Malik is one question away from winning 20 million rupees. How did he do it?” The answers offered are: “A: He cheated, B: He’s lucky, C: He’s a genius, D: It is written.” While in the film noir tradition what is written is one’s fate, in the context of the musical genre this can have a more literal meaning referring to the pattern of choreography. What is written for Jamal and Latika is the code of Empire, the

⁸³ Ibid., 152.

⁸⁴ “We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become ‘dividuals,’ and masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘banks.’” Deleuze, *Postscript*, 5.

algorithms of production controlling their bare lives now that they have left behind their old colonial abjection.

The very form of Boyle's films seems to celebrate rather uncritically this connective transformation of their medium itself by employing, as Igor Krstic notes, "postclassical narrative, cinematographic and editing strategies in order to reach out and communicate to its audience."⁸⁵ Boyle achieves this by constantly shifting between a noir style affective realism (close-ups, ground level shots, tilted camera angles, intensified continuity, etc.) and knowing winks that point at the films' artifice (the stylizations of the smart film such as tableau shots, the redoubling of the audience, blank voiceover, etc.). The films' steady rhythm is the result of the pulsating between these two regimes of meaning, standing for the two models of colonial power. On the one hand, there is a constant noir deterritorialization of the generic, an endless channelling of the (in)dividual's libidinal energy gained from the liquidation and fragmentation of the communal into the network of Empire. By soliciting the interactive participation of the audience in this process, something that as Thomas Elsaesser stresses is itself a form of affective labour,⁸⁶ Boyle makes them glorify the same post-disciplinary regime of production Jamal and Renton end up in. On the other hand, this interactivity also means that the generic smart film form never fully disappears; it keeps returning and evoking a possibility of shared irony that implies a common *bios* and territoriality resisting the remnants of the old empire. Jamal, after all, doesn't just take the money and leave; he joins Latika and they perform a noir inflicted mute parody of Bollywood musicals together.⁸⁷ Even Renton leaves part of the score for his mate Spud who had

⁸⁵ Igor Krstic, "Immersion in the 'Maximum City'? Interactivity, Kinaesthetics and Notions of Embodiment in *Slumdog Millionaire*," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 9, no. 2-3 (2011): 85.

⁸⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. W. Buckland (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), 34.

⁸⁷ The production of the oriental couple in the finale is ironic also because the idea of an oriental love story staged for the western gaze is mocked earlier in the Taj Mahal sequence (the young Jamal and Salim are watching their

been previously victimized by Begbie just like him. The last shot of *Trainspotting* is Spud smiling when he finds the money in a locker—it matches Renton’s grin addressed directly to the camera earlier, although it was blurred immediately, signalling the impossibility of reciprocal exchange. This smile without the shared sound of laughter is Boyle’s cynical variation of the crystal-image: it marks both the becoming gesture of the image in an ongoing autoimmune self-destruction of the old regime of disciplinary power and the becoming (sovereign-)image of the gestural by glorifying life’s machinic connection to the society of control. Boyle’s cynic is fleeing from the old towards the new, without, however, creating a new territoriality (a new social-symbolic order);⁸⁸ he affirms capital’s accelerating deterritorializing dynamics as its “territory,” perpetuating the transitory moment without arriving anywhere. For this reason he remains dependent on the continuing existence of a pre-digital other just like the old colonial discourse needed the oriental fetish of the colonized. The difference is that while disciplinary colonial power wanted its subjects to remain in their place by imposing an identity on them, Empire’s society of control mobilizes them to abandon of all fixed identities and become enslaved to a perpetually deterritorializing machine instead. In the meantime those still resisting “problem individuals” who don’t participate in digital mobilization are left to die.⁸⁹

marks, western tourists, enjoying an oriental opera the two conmen would later exploit). The film in a way reproduces cynically what it ironically mocks earlier, showing that irony needs a community of at least two, and after Jamal abandons Salim, as an isolated individual he himself will get caught in the fiction of oriental love produced for the viewers of the game show as well as the film itself.

⁸⁸ As Maurizio Lazzarato puts it, “with neoliberal deterritorialization, no new production of [social] subjectivity takes place.” See Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. J. D. Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 8.

⁸⁹ To quote the *Coming Insurrection*, “Mobility is this slight detachment from the self, this minimal disconnection from what constitutes us, this condition of strangeness whereby the self can now be taken up as an object of work, and it now becomes possible to sell oneself rather than one’s labor power, to be remunerated not for what one does but for what one is, for our exquisite mastery of social codes, for our relational talents, for our smile and our way of presenting ourselves. This is the new standard of socialization. Mobility brings about a fusion of the two contradictory poles of work: here we participate in our own exploitation, and all participation is exploited. [...]The present production apparatus is [...], on the one hand, a gigantic machine for psychic and physical mobilization, for sucking the energy of humans that have become superfluous, and, on the other hand, a sorting machine that allocates survival to compliant subjectivities and rejects all ‘problem individuals,’ all those who embody another use of life

4.4 Cynicism as Capitalist Realism, Anti-Utopianism, and Anti-Feminism

Because of its emancipatory biopolitics liberating individuals from being abused by communities they don't fit into, the cognitive behavioural self-therapy of cynicism nonetheless has a lot in common with utopianism. As Patrick Hayden and Chamsy el-Ojeili note, the same goes for globalization (Empire) itself, which is often seen as a

utopia of a 'world without borders', encompassing truly free trade, high-tech production, progressive equalization between nations, and unheard of individual freedom and choice; politically, the idea of the decline of sovereign states, and the simultaneous emergence of a cosmopolitan order of multilateral negotiation, human rights, peace, and global governance; culturally, the vision of an increasingly cosmopolitan orientation amongst world citizenry, where everyone is connected instantly with everyone else, a global village of mutual understanding and constructive interchange, where people can pick and choose from the wealth of humanity's diverse, rich cultures.⁹⁰

The key difference between such utopianism of neoliberal deterritorialization and the Jamesonian-Lacanian concept of utopia developed in the previous chapters is the different abstract universal behind them. As I have proposed, utopianism in classical and modernist noir was an attempt to imagine a (non-all) social totality where all lives were equally valued, bypassing the phallic procedure of sovereign exception. The possibility of such universality was opened up by the capitalist apparatus of abstract labour itself, due to its evaluation of human life

and, in this way, resist the machine. On the one hand, ghosts are brought to life, and on the other, the living are left to die. This is the properly political function of the contemporary production apparatus." Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 50-51.

⁹⁰ Patrick Hayden and Chamsy el-Ojeili, "Introduction: Reflections on the Demise and Renewal of Utopia in a Global Age," in *Globalization and Utopia*, ed. P. Hayden and C. el-Ojeili (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 7-8.

based on the potential labour power everyone has (this is why Marx called work the “species being” of humanity). In this context, sovereignty was an alternative, biopolitical practice of valuing life, both overwriting and supplementing the abstract measure of industrial capital with the *bios* of hegemonic social groups—in classical noir ultimately with that of white petty bourgeois men. If the abstract, universal apparatus was blind and indifferent, film noir’s sovereign was all seeing and all knowing—he knew which life was *really* worth living, and through the performance of his perverse (fatalistic) knowledge he made sure it stayed that way. In the age of the deterritorialized Empire, however, the apparatus of abstract labour and its principle of equivalence stops being the dominant axiom of capitalism. As Paolo Virno insists, today we are witnessing “the end of the society of work” (in the Fordist sense) and instead “[s]cience, information, general knowledge, and social cooperation present themselves as ‘the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth.’”⁹¹ He notes that in his *Grundrisse* Marx himself referred to the productive potential of socially organized knowledge in a thought experiment about “the general intellect,” envisioning a utopian society where all the work would be done by machines and humans would share the fruits of their creativity. What actually happened, Virno suggests, is something much more dystopian:

Whereas money, the ‘universal equivalent’ itself [the ultimate embodiment of the axiom of abstract labour], incarnates in its independent existence the commensurability of products, jobs, and subjects, the general intellect instead stabilizes the analytic premises of every type of practice. Models of social knowledge do not equate the various activities of labor, but rather present themselves as the ‘immediate forces of production.’ [...] They are not ‘species’ existing outside of the ‘individuals’ who belong to them, but axiomatic rules

⁹¹ Paolo Virno, “The Ambivalence of Disenchantment,” in *Radical Thought in Italy*, ed. P. Virno and M. Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1996), 19.

whose validity does not depend on what they represent. Measuring and representing nothing, these technico-scientific codes and paradigms manifest themselves as constructive principles.⁹²

Conversely, the general intellect, destroying commensurabilities and proportions, seems to make everyday life and its forms of communication intransitive. [...] Although the general intellect ineluctably determines the conditions and premises of a social synthesis, it nevertheless occludes its possibility. It offers no unit of measure for an equation. It frustrates every unitary representation. It dissects the very bases of political representation.⁹³

Society as a whole breaks down now into a noir zone of indistinction with digital forms of life based on their own a sovereign knowledge that resist reciprocal communication. Virno sees cynicism as an adaptation to this circumstance, “making of necessity a virtue:”

The cynic recognizes, in the particular context in which he operates, the predominant role played by certain epistemological premises and the simultaneous absence of real equivalences. To prevent disillusion, he forgoes any aspiration to dialogical and transparent communication. He renounces from the beginning the search for an intersubjective foundation for his practice and for a shared criterion of moral value.⁹⁴

Empire is not built on a unified code of production like Fordism but is more of a rhizomatic network where incompatible productive practices (from Silicon Valley tech firms to Mexican drug cartels) can co-exist as long as they are connected to system using standardized protocols of control accumulating their surplus value in the background. Instead of relying on a symbolic

⁹² Ibid., 21.

⁹³ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

order of equal measure, capitalism today deploys a non-signifying (machine) semiotic that bypasses meaning and directly mobilizes the death drive of its multitude, exploiting the circular movement around their incongruent unary traits. As Brian Massumi puts it, “[t]he more varied, and even erratic, the better. Normality starts to lose its hold. The regularities start to loosen. This loosening is part of capitalism's dynamic [...] The oddest affective tendencies are OK—as long as they pay.”⁹⁵

Boyle’s *Millions* (2004) is a good example of this new productivity of weird affective tendencies that carry a pseudo-utopian promise. It’s about a young boy, Damian, who is obsessed with Catholic saints to the point where he regularly has hallucinated encounters with them. One day he is playing the hermit withdrawn to his hut made out of paper boxes by the train tracks when a bag of money falls on his lap from the sky. Convinced that it’s a gift from God, he starts giving it away “to the poor,” that is, various people in his gated community that appear to be in need in the eyes of a 7-year old. For instance, he stuffs cash into the mailbox of a group of Mormons, which the pious men spend on a pile of consumer goods including a foot spa. The same happens with Damien’s own family members who all take their cut from the money to pursue their materialist obsessions. Only a tiny fracture goes to those who actually need it, like the commuting beggars of the town whom the boy invites for a pizza dinner, or the African villagers whom he wants to help dig a well. It is this bitter irony that Mark Browning misses when he considers the film as “a more optimistic, child-centred version of the basic narrative premise of *Shallow Grave*, as we move from a Thatcherite universe to a Blairite, New Labour view of social justice.”⁹⁶ Edwin Page similarly sees it as “the positive to *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting*’s negative, showing an individual who is not stricken by greed and material desire

⁹⁵ Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Malden: Polity Press, 2015), 20.

⁹⁶ Browning, *Lust for Life*, 171.

and whose wish to help others is granted.”⁹⁷ True, *Millions* is indeed like a “white noir,” an idyllic obverse of Boyle’s earlier dark and nihilistic neo-noirs. We move from “greed is good” Thatcherism to the philanthropic capitalism of George Soros or Bill Gates—we even see Damian meeting St. Frances on a lush green meadow with a perfect blue sky above that imitates the default desktop image of Windows XP.

But the system doesn’t change. It’s still about the cult of the neoliberal self, the fetishization of his sovereign affects for their magical value producing capacity. For instance, Damian and his brother regularly receive money and treats by playing the “our mom’s dead” card. The original source of wealth (work) also disappears from the equation when the protagonist thinks God gave it to him to fulfill a charitable mission (which, ironically, ends up boosting middle class consumption). In fact Damian gets so disappointed when he learns that the money is from a bank robbery and the robbers want it back, that he actually burns most of it (“God doesn’t rob banks” he cries). It is important to note that the criminal who comes looking for it clearly stands out as working class (and by having a Scottish accent) among the small town’s well-protected English bourgeoisie, just like the two brutes in *Shallow Grave* did. While in the earlier film it is David’s psychopathic obsession with panoptic surveillance that stops the intruders, here it is community policing, the garden district’s fascism with a human face. Also, if in *Shallow Grave* the writer Hugo stood allegorically for the paradigm of cognitive labour (the general intellect) taking capital’s profit from the Fordist system of work, so does the young dreamer Damian. It is no coincidence that he shares the first name with the child protagonist of *The Omen* (1976) who turned out to be none other than the Anti-Christ (just like Hugo’s messianic pose was deeply ambiguous in *Shallow Grave*—both being subtle examples of a noir

⁹⁷ Page, *Ordinary Heroes*, 187.

impulse that can potentially go undetected by the viewer). The money he burns out of religious fanaticism is the symbol of general equivalence, the reification of the working class's labour the admittance of which would, however, threaten the fiction of his neoliberal chosenness through which he glorifies capital. Appropriately, the ghost of his dead mother appears to Damien by the flames and tells him he is special, that giving birth to him was the miracle that granted her sainthood. With his messianic fantasy restored, his sovereign voiceover announces the success of his philanthro-capitalist mission: it's *his* story, he says, he's going to end it the way he wants to. Accordingly, he donates the money he couldn't burn because his materialistic family skimmed it from the pile earlier to the cause of digging wells in Africa. In a neuro-image we see how his brain constructs the fantasy of all of them travelling there using his box castle as a teleport, joining the local villagers playing in water that now flows in abundance thanks to the white saviours. The scene follows the aesthetic of National Geographic Magazine and has a kitschy world music song in the background (*Nirvana* by El Bosco); as the freeze frame of Damien's silent grin, a pure cynicism-image, suggests, these are the codes structuring his *jouissance* that connect his personal affects to the network of Empire. The last shot of water flowing in front of the people celebrating dissolves into a gleam of light, which, as it then starts to fade into black, turns out to be made up of an infinite number of digital replicas of the film's artificially lit title. In Boyle's cynical ontology, the light (*lumen*) which in the modernist noir tradition stood for a utopian impulse decreating the image is now sublated into the *lux* of money, forming digital building blocks of a simulated idyll much the same way as the cold but utopian light of classical snow noir developed warm, idyllic tones in films like *Before and After* or *Long Kiss Goodnight*.

The sci-fi noir *Sunshine* (2007) is Boyle's ultimate film in this regard since it's about the rebooting of the dying Sun that brought a new ice age to Earth. As Lyotard notes, since the

death of our Sun would mean the end of all human life, it is also the absolute limit of our thought; it's inevitable, yet we are unable to properly imagine it: "[h]uman death is included in the life of the mind. Solar death implies an irreparably exclusive disjunction between death and thought: if there's death, then there's no thought."⁹⁸ As Fredric Jameson has argued, the same goes for imagining the end of capitalism today,⁹⁹ and we could add that this is because since the recent cognitive turn thinking itself is captured in the process of capital accumulation. Whether Boyle was aware of this parallel or not, the allegory of keeping the dying Sun alive fits perfectly into his series of capitalist realist films about how Empire has no alternative even if it's in a state of permanent crisis.

The ideological stakes of *Sunshine* are framed as a religious conflict between the sovereign glory of the neoliberal self and the apocalyptic fundamentalism of radical egalitarianism. At the beginning, these two alternatives are not diametrically opposed yet. When the crew of the spaceship Icarus II travelling towards to Sun to revive it receives a distress signal from its disappeared predecessor Icarus I, it still seems possible to both rescue the survivors from the ship in trouble and complete their mission to save humankind. When Capa, the physicist on board is entrusted with the decision whether to go off course, he simply has to rely on the central computer's calculations that enable the detour. After a human error in setting the new route leads to the explosion of the ship's oxygen supply, however, the two objectives start to become mutually exclusive. In a second sovereign decision the standing members of the crew vote on whether to kill their injured colleague recovering in the sick bay so that they would have enough air to deliver their load or let him live, in which case the mission fails and humanity eventually

⁹⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Can Thought Go on Without a Body?" in *Materialities of Communication*, ed. H. U. Gumbrecht and K. L. Pfeiffer, trans. B. Boone and L. Hildreth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 289.

⁹⁹ He actually claimed that it is *easier* to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. See Fredric Jameson, "The Antinomies of Postmodernity," in Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (New York: Verso, 1998), 50.

dies as well. After agreeing that the vote has to be unanimous, three of them including Capa votes for the murder, but Cassie, the melancholic female pilot refuses to (according to her backstory in the script she had to have an abortion to be recruited). The majority decides to go forward with the killing anyway only to find that the fifth crew member already committed suicide. Crucially, it is the “femme fatale” Cassie’s apocalyptic melancholy that comes to stand for a universal valuation of life, bringing her close to the Sun worshipper Pinbacker, the sole survivor of the Icarus I who does everything in his power to sabotage the mission of Icarus II, embracing the extinction of mankind. Boyle calls him an “extreme fundamentalist” on the DVD commentary,¹⁰⁰ and he is indeed the descendant of *Elephant*’s executioners caught in an autoimmune delirium destroying their own population. The difference between him and Cassie is that for him, no life is worth living which is precisely why he has to keep actively murdering people, while for her all life has value which is why she remains passive when it comes to the choice of sovereignty. Allegorically, we could read her desire as utopian, refusing the blackmail that life disconnected from Empire (the Sun) can have no value.¹⁰¹ By contrast, Capa becomes the film’s true neoliberal sovereign, affirming that there is no alternative by activating the payload that successfully reboots the Sun (perpetuates its domination artificially). While Boyle, pointing at the cinematic artifice, shows Pinbacker’s body as a glitch in the film’s digital code, the CGI in the final explosion is flawless and awe inspiring. It looks like a neuro-image from inside of a supercomputer’s brain, the gigantic structure of the mysterious bomb filled with flashing electric circuits stimulating and reanimating the molten body of the Sun (an allegory for

¹⁰⁰ *Sunshine*, directed by Danny Boyle (2007; Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home, 2007), DVD.

¹⁰¹ In a recent paper on ice planets in Hollywood sci-fi films, Noelle Belanger identifies their common feature of unexploited resource abundance. They represent a contradictory imaginary insofar as they cannot maintain life but promise its potential. In my Jamesonian-Agambenian reading, this means they embrace a certain anti-capitalist inoperativity immanent to resource extraction and exploitation. Noelle Belanger, “Contemporary Hollywood Films, Cold War Legacies, and The Politics of Ice,” (paper presented the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, Fairmont Queen Elizabeth Hotel, Montreal, QC, March 31, 2015)

the flesh of the multitude) entering it. Before the fire consumes him, the cynic's silent grin appears on Capa's face, this time as a sign of quasi-religious ecstasy. We then cut to his sister and her kids on Earth who just received his last digital message from a few days ago, telling them to expect some extra sunlight soon if the mission is successful. When the rays finally arrive, the family stands and smiles in silent awe, repeating Capa's glorifying gesture in isolated connectedness.

If *Sunshine* follows Boyle's cynical ontology of light to its logical conclusion, *28 Days Later* (2002) goes to the end with his biopolitics of autoimmunity destroying the shared forms of modern life. The film is about a handful of survivors of a massive virus infection that turned most of the UK's population into raging human-animals. After escaping the zombie infested London to find the source of a radio signal somewhere in the countryside promising food, shelter, and the company of others, three of them make it to an army base run by a dozen male soldiers planning to rebuild civilization with the help of military discipline and some women serving as breeding stock. The group of three, Selena, Hanna, and Jim soon have to realize that after the zombie infested London they are yet again trapped in a biopolitical camp, this time with a distinctive fascist flavor where their bodies are fully exposed to the sovereign power of the military tribe. The soldiers in their obsession with murder, torture, and rape are no different from the zombies in the eyes of the main characters who are shocked by their all too direct exercise of thanatopolitics without its comforting liberal multicultural mediation they were used to as citizens of London. As Anna Froula observes, the obscene practices of the military camp return to them the repressed and distanced neoimperial violence of the post-9/11 world that the people

of Britain have become—willingly or unwillingly—complicit in.¹⁰² The zombies targeted by the Queen’s proud soldiers in *28 Days Later* stand pointedly for the threat of a racial and cultural Other that Britain, along with the US and its allies, has unleashed on itself by turning millions into refugees and migrants with its “war on terror.” The living dead in the film are infected with a form of rabies, spreading incredibly fast; they are also capable of running unlike their sluggish predecessors in the zombie film tradition. For these reasons, their biopolitical separation from the healthy is centered on the fantasy of reproduction, with the terror of zombies multiplying without any limit opposed to the controlled reproduction of the healthy population.

Abandoning this autoimmune fascism of the old Empire by becoming a good neoliberal subject is the trajectory of the Jim’s character development. When the two women are about to involuntarily fulfill their reproductive role, he resists and tries to save them, for which he is sentenced to death by the camp’s leader. A couple of soldiers take him outside to the zombie-infested area where he manages to escape leaving his executioners thinking he is left to certain death. Lying on the ground barely alive, he sees an airplane flying by—a sure sign that there is still an organized state out there, only one that is indifferent to the plight of its citizens. This realization pushes him to take law into his own hands, to act as sovereign in the place of exception to the camp’s *bios* and make decisions about the life and death of others in it. He turns into a killing machine, a raging animal much like the zombies themselves, and attacks the military base at night to massacre all the soldiers with his bare hands and save the two women from forced impregnation. The slaughter is shot with mesmerizing noir imagery (fully digital this time), which for Boyle is also an indication that Jim’s sovereign reason didn’t fully dissolve into self-annihilating madness. When Selena encounters him fully covered in blood, she looks into

¹⁰² see Anna Froula, “Prolepsis and the ‘War on Terror’: Zombie Pathology and the Culture of Fear in *28 Days Later...*” in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the War on Terror* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 195-208.

his eyes and after a momentary hesitation, instead of striking him with her machete, she offers her helping hand. Jim's strategic transformation into a human-zombie hybrid successfully integrates his bare life into the logic of neoliberal governmentality. Instead of simply excluding the mass of precarious bodies (the *homo sacer*) from the *bios* of a productive population, Empire's new biopolitical apparatus solicits zombification as an efficient "technology of the self" that helps to develop responsible subjects who know how to provide for themselves in the absence of the state and social institutions.¹⁰³

Significantly, however, Jim's transformation also complicates the non-hierarchical organization of the survivors' small group. The last scenes show the three of them in a peaceful hillside cottage, the women sewing together some linen to signal airplanes while he is recovering from his injuries. Boyle shoots these idyllic images on film, as if to suggest that we are back to normal after the deviation to digital video that documented the UK's biopolitical state of emergency.¹⁰⁴ This normalcy, however, also implies the return to conservative gender roles: two women doing housework while the sovereign male head of the family is resting. When Jim wakes up and sees that the dress Selena was forced to wear by the soldiers is now sewn together with the sheets, he remarks jokingly "You looked all right in this, you know?" Furthermore, the sign the women prepared on their own reads HELL, and only when Jim joins them do they add the last letter O to the message together. This momentarily visible SOS signal is addressed to the former (welfare) state, to the big Other upholding the principle of equality that the neoliberal turn rendered inoperative. No wonder that an airplane only appears when through the man's

¹⁰³ I rely here on Thomas Lemke's reading of Foucault in Thomas Lemke, "'The Birth of Bio-Politics' – Michel Foucault's Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality," *Economy and Society* 30, no. 2 (2011): 190-207.

¹⁰⁴ Boyle shares Lev Manovich's conviction about the digital as meta-media, merging its semantic field with that of film noir, the cinematic meta-genre. See Lev Manovich, "Understanding Meta-Media," *ctheory.net*, accessed Sept 7, 2015. <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=493>.

intervention the meaning of the message is changed to its exact opposite, from “Get us out of here!” to “Look at us, we’re fine, we have solved all our problems alone!” In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this is what the phallic signifier is about: turning what is perceived as negativity, lack, 0, into its opposite by giving it a positive symbolization.¹⁰⁵ This is the sovereign act that the women are unable to perform in Boyle’s conservative universe. Although at the beginning it is the militant black anarcho-survivalist Selena who breaks the news about the lack of a functioning government to Jim, she is unable to see the anarchy caused by the infection as an opportunity for self-expression. As a fierce zombie killer, she still belongs to the autoimmune, self-destructive moment of the old Empire just like Salim, Begbie, David, or the soldiers of *28 Days Later*. This difference is also visible in their reactions to the airplane’s arrival. While Selena voices her happiness addressing Hanna (“You think they saw us this time?”) and the two of them exchange gazes, Jim is looking up to the sky with his back towards the women who appear blurred in the background while the camera focuses on his silent grin.

Curiously, the original ending of the film had Jim die of his injuries while leaving the two women alive, the last scene showing them walk away from his dead body with automatic weapons to continue their struggle for survival (Hanna even takes a gun from Jim’s hands). The reason why this radical feminist ending was later dropped, as Boyle explains on the DVD commentary,¹⁰⁶ is because test audiences found it too bleak, getting the sense that the women are walking into their certain death. The final shot indeed gives this impression: as they disappear into a long hospital corridor, the camera remains static, waiting until an automatic door slowly closes behind them, gradually killing all the remaining light. Had the director chosen to stick to

¹⁰⁵ Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 135-36.

¹⁰⁶ *28 Days Later*, directed by Danny Boyle (2002; Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home, 2003), DVD.

this version, *28 Days Later* would have been closer in tone to *Elephant* than to his later films. But it still wouldn't have changed the way he typically represents women.

As a rule, if they appear within a disciplinary regime, they are depicted as the system's autoimmune disease, *femmes fatales* undermining the stable boundaries of any biopolitical community without offering a positive alternative. Juliet in *Shallow Grave* kills David, betrays Alex and leaves; Diane in *Trainspotting* is an intruder disrupting the junkie's shared rituals; Dorothy in *Millions* undermines the male homosocial balance of Damian's family by dating his father then planning to leave with part of the money; Latika in *Slumdog Millionaire* breaks up the friendship between Jamal and Salim and causes the death of the latter; and Cassie in *Sunshine* is ready to sacrifice humanity out of melancholic resignation after her personal trauma. We could add to the list *A Life Less Ordinary*'s Celine, a spoiled rich girl who rebels against her father by orchestrating her own kidnapping; *The Beach*'s Françoise cheating on her boyfriend with the protagonist Richard, threatening the stability of the desert island commune they joined together; and Sal, the commune's leader who not only does the same, but in her obsession with the idea of a perfect paradise she is ready to excommunicate and even murder its members who put it in jeopardy. In all these cases, feminine resistance to disciplinary power is shown as a nihilistic, potentially self-annihilating force. On the other hand, some of these women can make the transition into the neoliberal society of control by renouncing their former critical negativity and starting to believe in the glory of the digital through the mediation of the male protagonist. Latika has to answer the phone call of Jamal from the game show and witness his transformation into a media spectacle, Celine has to be enchanted by a love letter a divine apparatus of angels wrote in the name of his kidnapper, Selena has to put her machine gun aside and formulate a more life affirming message with Jim's help, Dorothy has to be caught in Damien's white

saviour fantasy, and Françoise has to believe the cheesy pickup line of Richard about parallel universes and send it back to him with a digital photograph after the loss of their real life paradise. All these unruly women are educated into the neoliberal way of life through what Pisters (after Deleuze) calls “the powers of the false,”¹⁰⁷ by learning to shift their attention from the destructive search for authenticity to the truth-effects constructed artificially through the language of digital media (from images that represent reality to direct brain-images).

And the same goes for utopianism in Boyle’s films. When it comes to the great modern ideological projects, he is the follower of Fukuyama: “I personally accept that we’ve left behind ideologies. We’ve decided, as Westerners, that we’ve left behind ideological choices. We’ve become what we are—consumers. And we’re all in that race to consume. But within that, there remain principles that you do have or you don’t have.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, all of the potentially utopian spaces in his films (*Shallow Grave*’s apartment, *The Beach*’s desert island, *Millions*’ gated community, *28 Days Later*’s military base, *Slumdog Millionaire*’s slum, etc.) always already include a desire to consume. It is consumption that undermines collective utopian projects in the modernist sense for Boyle because it is always a matter of individual enjoyment (a sovereign “lust for life”) that cannot be unified in any way into a commonly shared *bios*. Those who try it in his films end up with a fascist dictatorship, the autoimmune excess of the old, disciplinary model of power. He clearly prefers the neoliberal culture of the self that consumes the very affects it produces through the mediation of Empire’s new media.¹⁰⁹ As Richard from *The Beach* puts it after he returns from his eventually dystopian vacation on an oriental island to his life as an ordinary American: “I still believe in paradise. But now at least I know it’s not someplace you

¹⁰⁷ Pisters, *The Neuro-Image*, 6.

¹⁰⁸ Jeffrey Overstreet, “Danny Boyle: The Looking Closer Interview,” in *Danny Boyle: Interviews*, ed. B. Dunham (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 86.

¹⁰⁹ As Foucault put it, “[t]he man of consumption, insofar as he consumes, is a producer. What does he produce? Well, quite simply, he produces his own satisfaction.” Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 226.

can look for. Because it's not where you go. It's how you feel for a moment in your life when you're part of something. And if you find that moment, it lasts forever."

4.5 Conclusion

It is the neoliberal self in becoming that Boyle's circular narratives keep returning to,¹¹⁰ the postmodern nomadic subject embodied by a post-phallic (emasculate, often androgynous, and even asexual) man¹¹¹ standing for the endless noir deterritorialization of biopolitical communities and identities, an "eternal recurrence of 'difference'"¹¹² that finds its momentarily reified expression through the digital media apparatus enslaving its affective labour.¹¹³ We can even talk of a castration by the digital insofar as Boyle's heroes have to renounce an unconnectable abject-remainder of their bodies, the excess of their original community's *jouissance* to become smooth, free floating neoliberal commodities. While in some of his films this castration is symbolic (like giving up heroin in *Trainspotting* or the Dalit identity in *Slumdog Millionaire*), in others it becomes more literal, forced. In *A Life Less Ordinary* and *Sunshine*, the physical body of the protagonist has to die to live on in digital form. In *127 Hours* (2010), the protagonist, Aron records himself cutting off his own hand that got stuck under a rock while he was climbing in the Grand Canyon, preventing the free flow of his digital self by forcing him "off the grid" for 127 hours. The rock is an allegory for the mold sculpting his

¹¹⁰ Fernando Maldonado calls it Boyle's "circular nihilism." See Fernando Maldonado, "Pop Nihilism," *Leigh Review* 9 (2001): 60.

¹¹¹ While most of Boyle's films have an androgynous male protagonist, it is *Trainspotting*'s Renton who explicitly formulates this move beyond fixed identities of gender: "The world is changing. Music is changing. Drugs are changing. Even men and women are changing. One thousand years from now there will be no guys and no girls, just wankers. Sounds great to me!"

¹¹² Pisters, *The Neuro-Image*, 304.

¹¹³ As Berardi stresses, "[w]hen the relation between labor and value becomes indeterminable, the pure law of violence, of abuse, reigns in the global labor market. No more simple exploitation, but slavery, pure violence against the vulnerable lives of global workers." Franco Berardi, *After the Future*, ed. G. Genesko and N. Thoburn (Baltimore: AK Press, 2011), 92.

properly neoliberal body, making it flexible by exploiting what Catherine Malabou calls the plasticity of the self, the brain's ability to dynamically adapt by both receiving form and destroying it.¹¹⁴ In Boyle's universe, the former, passive aspect of plasticity is prioritized over the "explosive" capacity of the brain, exemplifying what Malabou calls "neuronal ideology" that uses neuroscientific metaphors to glorify the new docility of post-Fordist affective and cognitive workers.¹¹⁵ Boyle reflects on the masculine nature of this digital coercion in his neuro-thriller *Trance*, where the female psychiatrist Elizabeth is "asked" by her patient/boyfriend to shave off her pubic hair entirely claiming that "the hair serves to remind us of our biology, of our origin. But without it, there is a perfection untainted."¹¹⁶ She then erases herself from the mind of her partner who turns abusive, switching to a long distance relationship through video messages with a more suitable man (one who lives on another continent).

Other than noir's classical stylistic repertoire, then, Boyle frequently uses the language of new media (interactive game shows, reality TV, selfies, video games), and neuro-images to depict the emergence of the new neoliberal culture of the self. Insofar as they embrace this regime's "powers of the false" his heroes are cynical capitalist realists who affirm their bodies' subordination to Empire's deterritorialized productive network, their constantly mobile subjectivity as the antidote to the endless self-purifying violence of the "real," territorially anchored biopolitical communities they are fleeing from. The meta-violence in this shift, the cynic's decision to devalue any physically shared form of life through a digital sovereign-image is masked by this framing of all real life communities as self-destructive. The main character of

¹¹⁴ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. S. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 5.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁶ As Berardi notes, "[t]he video-electronic generation does not tolerate armpit or pubic hair. One needs perfect compatibility in order to interface corporeal surfaces in connection. Smooth generation." Berardi, *After the Future*, 68.

Boyle's films, contrary to the classical noir protagonist, usually ends up physically isolated (sometimes dead even) but digitally connected, with his life valued (exploited) in its uniqueness by the apparatuses of networked capitalism that, by magically neutralizing biopolitical tensions, also bring people together in a supposedly frictionless cyberspace. This way, the new digitally castrated self can simultaneously stand for a new masculine strategy to disavow castration. Or, to put it differently, instead of confronting the devastating and alienating effects of neoliberal deterritorialization on shared human life the director can have his digital cake and eat it, so to speak, by ending his films with a male centered cyber-idyll he seems to be affirming while also referencing an interminable noir impulse against its temporarily reified expressions, thereby indicating his private cynical detachment.

5 Men's Lives Matter: Christopher Nolan and the *Bios* of the Neoliberal Cynic

5.1 Introduction

While Christopher Nolan, like Danny Boyle, was born in the UK and made his first feature film there with very little money, his career follows a different trajectory towards big budget Hollywood productions with each of his last four movies costing more than 150 million dollars. What his early black and white indie-noir *Following* (1998) and his blockbuster comic book adaptation *Batman* series (2005; 2008; 2012) nonetheless have in common is a consistent ambition to address the audience as mature and intelligent,¹ one that is capable of following complex puzzle plots and doesn't shy away from exploring the darker side of the human condition, especially the psychopathologies of the mind. The template of film noir is an ideal tool in such pedagogical agenda, something that Nolan keeps falling back on regardless of the genre he is working with. His formal rigor and Kubrick-inspired calm,² coldly serious tone—unusual for pre-9/11 (or even for early 2000s) Hollywood—has earned him the title of a “blockbuster author” from sympathetic critics,³ while his detractors such as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson refer to his films as “midcult,” a “form of vulgarized modernism that makes formal experiment too easy for the audience.”⁴ Either way it's safe to say that he was at the right place at the right time when America's neoimperialist “war on terror” created mass demand for

¹ As Nolan puts it, he likes to “complement the audience's intelligence.” See “Christopher Nolan: The full interview – Newsnight,” YouTube video, 23:41, posted by “BBC Newsnight,” Oct 16, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtH6kiPbMBw>.

² See Scott Collura, “Christopher Nolan on Kubrick as an Influence,” *IGN*, Apr 8, 2013, accessed Jan 7, 2016, <http://ca.ign.com/articles/2013/04/08/christopher-nolan-on-kubrick-as-an-influence>.

³ Erin Hill-Parks, “Developing an Auteur Through Reviews: The Critical Surround of Christopher Nolan,” in *The Cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the Impossible*, ed. J. Furby and S. Joy (New York: Wallflower Press, 2015), 26.

⁴ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Christopher Nolan: A Labyrinth of Linkages* (Madison: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2013), 55.

vaguely nihilistic and discretely fascistic blockbusters to replace postmodern Hollywood's self-indulgent peacetime pastiche with something "real."

His more generous critics call this the confusion of the boundary between Hollywood and non-Hollywood cinema,⁵ but this ambiguous institutional alignment is nonetheless markedly different from Boyle's indiestream position—and not just because of the different budgets at their disposal. While Boyle is a populist on a quest to make intelligent movies for ordinary people ("for everyone"),⁶ Nolan has an elitist approach to his viewers who are addressed as smarter than the regular filmgoer while in their substance his films may actually be rather ordinary. The elitism is in his films' form, which, combined with a carefully maintained air of mystery about the true meaning of their plots as well as about the director himself,⁷ enhances Nolan's cult as the single auteur of his films far beyond that of Boyle who is often perceived sharing creative credit with his collaborators.⁸ The two filmmakers' approach to film noir also differs significantly. As I have suggested, Boyle uses noir to deconstruct the immunizing form of film genres, exposing the autoimmune tendencies of these discursive communities (culminating in the postmodern smart film) and their reliance on the inclusively excluded figure of the subject supposed to believe and enjoy whom he emancipates into the neoliberal cynic. Nolan, by contrast, moves in the opposite direction by infusing film noir with the puzzle film genre and preserving the role of the Metzian naive observer as the one who believes in the final explanation to the plot's inconclusive riddles. If Boyle's solution aims to eliminate the implicit hierarchies of the classical cinematic apparatus by democratizing sovereign access to the digital powers of the false, Nolan rigidly reaffirms them by attributing the cynical wisdom about a necessary, heroic

⁵ See Stuart Joy, "Dreaming a Little Bigger, Darling," in *The Cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the Impossible*, ed. J. Furby and S. Joy (New York: Wallflower Press, 2015), 1.

⁶ "For Everyone" was the theme of the Boyle directed opening for the 2012 London Olympics.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸ Hill-Parks, "Developing an Auteur," 25.

lie covering the lack in the film's symbolic texture to a small masculine elite (including himself). As Todd McGowan astutely observes, "Boyle presents the lie as truth, while Nolan presents truth as the product of a lie."⁹ While the former shifts the moral and epistemological problem of truth to the field of the neoliberal bio-aesthetics of the self, the latter fixes the meaning of truth as immoral and resulting from the desire *not* to know.

If Boyle's cynicism is that of liberal multiculturalism, Nolan's is a right wing reaction to it, responding to an inconsistency in the liberal cynic's position regarding the contours of the dominant biopolitical group and those whom they exclude from the list of lives worth living. As I have argued in the previous chapter, Boyle avoids this problem by creating an illusion of a new universality of deterritorialized neoliberal selves, as if somehow the bare life (*zoe*) of any individual willing to tear himself from his organic community could gain a sovereign value through capital's new digital networks connecting it to a biopolitically neutral virtual multitude (*bios*). Those who *are* excluded from the glory of the digital and are left to die in his films are the beneficiaries of a now outdated and self-destructive disciplinary regime of power, and are therefore shown as responsible for their own demise. In Nolan version, on the contrary, cynical sovereignty loses its pseudo-democratic connotations and re-entrenches the neoliberal *bios* as white, bourgeois, heterosexual, and male against the bare life of the multitude framed as a threat of femininity. For him, the ultimate expression of sovereign power's glory is not the connective mutation of the multitude but the "acclamations, ceremonies, liturgies, and insignia" of the white male ruling class. His traditionalist view of noir cynicism is also expressed in Nolan's notorious aversion to digital video and the overuse of CGI, appropriate for his project to return to the body of classical Hollywood masculinity as the privileged sovereign. Reading Nolan's films against

⁹ Todd McGowan, *Fictional Christopher Nolan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 8.

the background of Boyle's oeuvre allows us to start mapping the inconsistencies inherent to the ideology of cynicism, how the biopolitical antagonism at the heart of contemporary film noir generates a set of incompatible responses in tension with one another.

5.2 Solving Noir Puzzles with the Powers of the False: The Immoral

Epistemology of the Cynic

5.2.1 *Following*

Critic Jim Emerson suggests that *Following*, Nolan's first feature film already contains the seeds of the director's later work,¹⁰ but the same can also be said about his earlier short *Doodlebug* (1997). It's a 3 minute paranoia noir about an agitated young man in a wife beater trying to smash a bug crawling on the floor of his dilapidated apartment, but the creature keeps getting away to hide in the dark. We hear the clock ticking and the phone ringing loudly as his anxiety grows, until he finally discovers that what he thought was an insect is in fact a tiny version of himself running around, mirroring his moves trying to hit something, except that the little man seems to be a few seconds ahead of him, representing his future self. This is why, unbeknownst to him, he can catch up with him only at the moment of his (their) death: when the tiny figure stands still for a moment to finally smash his target, providing an opportunity for his normal sized double to do the same, only for himself to be killed by his giant alter ego emerging behind him a few seconds later. It is as if Nolan read Lacan's seminar on the gaze as *objet petit a*

¹⁰ Jim Emerson, "Following: Nolan in a Nutshell," *Scanners*, Jul 22, 2010, accessed Jan 7, 2016, <http://www.rogerebert.com/scanners/following-nolan-in-a-nutshell>.

and applied it to the film noir universe.¹¹ The gaze of the Other appears in the film as that primordially alienated correlate to the subject, the object cause of his desire, a gaze of the *real* always behind his back that enters his field of vision as the stain (the “bug”) on reality’s symbolic texture and that, he believes, he can simply eliminate to become complete. However, as I have outlined in Chapter 2, for Lacan there can be no I without a stain, a blind spot,¹² which is why such pursuit of self-purification, if pushed to its logical conclusion, leads to paranoid psychosis: to the autoimmune destruction of the self that Nolan depicts as the bad infinity of collapsing parallel universes. From a biopolitical perspective what we see here is an escalation of the central conflict of Boyle and Clarke’s *Elephant*: the inability of the postmodern subject to enter into an immunized territory shared with others, one with stable boundaries set up by mutually agreed upon norms of inclusion and exclusion (in other words: “a good life”). While in the earlier film this impotence is that of the white male community as a whole, in Nolan’s version it appears as the lethal dialectic between the self and his double. *Doodlebug* therefore is also about the crisis of the white male sovereign-image, its disintegration into abstract gestures, and if it differs from Nolan’s later films it’s because, just like *Elephant*, it never offers any solution. Instead of constructing the smallest circuit between actual and virtual, self and the other in a crystal-image of productive time, the film presents us with the collapse of temporality.

Like with Danny Boyle, Nolan’s subsequent films make an effort to resolve this crisis. In fact it’s interesting to consider *Elephant* as an unacknowledged influence on his next film *Following*,¹³ which starts with an unemployed would-be writer, Bill, following random strangers around for inspiration. His voyeuristic endeavour to find out about their secrets as a way to break

¹¹ see Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 67-123.

¹² *Ibid.*, 97.

¹³ Along with Sophie Calle’s performance art piece. See David Thompson, “Following,” *Sight and Sound*, Jan 1999, accessed Jan 7, 2016, <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/266>.

his writer's block is yet another example of the subject chasing his *objet a*, the mysterious ingredient missing from his self-expression. While this relationship initially is merely imaginary, a narcissistic incorporation of the other from a distance,¹⁴ its failure gradually gives way to its opposite, an aggressive breach of the other's boundaries and its violent destruction comparable to the hero's paranoid outburst in *Doodlebug* (the two protagonists are even played by the same actor) and the executioners' mayhem in *Elephant*.¹⁵ Bill's harmless stage of voyeurism ends when someone returns his gaze and confronts him, making him suddenly engulfed in shame as a result. He is ashamed, however, *not* because his perverse game is suddenly revealed to the other in all its embarrassing detail. On the contrary, shame comes rather from the breakdown of Bill's imaginary relationship to *objet a* (embodied by the person he has been observing), from the disintegration of the fantasy image of a writer at work the lonely man made up for a supposedly all-seeing gaze of the Other to hide the fact that he is a failure. As Joan Copjec explains, "shame is awakened not when one looks at oneself [...] through another's eyes, but when one suddenly perceives a lack in the Other. At this moment the subject no longer experiences herself as the fulfillment of the Other's desire, as the center of the world [...] In shame [...] one experiences one's visibility, but there is no external Other who sees, since shame is proof that the Other does not exist."¹⁶ Cobb, the man Bill's been watching is now looking at him but he (unlike the Other he imagined earlier) cannot *see* him: his gaze is ignorant of his narcissistic fantasy (with an irritated voice he asks Bill whether he's a cop or a "fag"), much the same way as the sardine can was ignoring the pathos of the young Lacan's roleplaying during his seafaring adventure. Shame,

¹⁴ I follow Lacan in his distinction between the small (imaginary) other and the big Other of the symbolic order. See Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II (1954-55)*, trans. S. Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1988), Chapter 19.

¹⁵ Lacanian psychoanalysis refers to this dialectic as narcissistic rivalry, the oscillation between incorporation and destruction of what Lacan calls the ego-ideal, the subject's imaginary double (the small other). See Alenka Zupancic, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (New York: Verso, 2000), 153.

¹⁶ Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 127.

in other words, is an affect produced by the decreation of the image that leaves the subject frozen into gestures that appear meaningless, stupid.

Yet, this shameful moment doesn't last long. Not only is Cobb not interested in shaming Bill, he encourages him to take his narcissistic relationship to the next (openly sadistic) level and accompany him to break into random apartments to steal what people hold most precious to "show them what they had." He thereby enters Bill's fantasy and starts to actively engineer it, sharpen its contours, put its objective in more exact terms (identifying what they're after as the box of personal items that all people have in one form or another, which, as Todd McGowan observes, stands for the hidden kernel of the subject's existence a.k.a. *objet a*).¹⁷ By acting as Bill's enabler Cobb exemplifies the post-disciplinary figure of authority in the society of control who, instead of repressing *jouissance* actively solicits, manages, and manipulates it.¹⁸ As Jacques-Alain Miller summarizes, "[w]e are at a point where the dominant discourse enjoins one not to be ashamed of one's *jouissance* anymore."¹⁹ Cobb even mocks Bill for trying, before they met, to come up with explicit rules to keep his habit of following under control (such as never follow the same person twice, etc.), giving the impression that in his more advanced version of the game everything is permitted. He encourages Bill to take anything he wants from the burgled homes, have a drink from the owner's liquor cabinet, etc.—that is, to pick the unary trait that would activate his drive and grant him access to *jouissance* in his own way, without any socially determined use value or meaning.

¹⁷ McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 22.

¹⁸ See Slavoj Žižek, "You May!" *London Review of Books* 21, no. 18, 18 Mar 1999, accessed Jan 7 2016, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n06/slavoj-Žižek/you-may>.

¹⁹ Jacques-Alain Miller, "On Shame," in *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, ed. J. Clemens, R. Grigg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 27.

However, as Nolan is quick to show us, this address of the neoliberal subject as an autonomous agent is a farce; Cobb is carefully constructing a mousetrap for Bill, slowly setting him up to take the fall for a murder he's about to commit. And the key to getting him into the trap is precisely the illusion of free agency. For instance, at their first break-in he lets his young apprentice have the satisfaction of finding the key on his own above the doorframe, not realizing that it was Cobb who put it there earlier for him to find. To avoid suspicion Cobb even looks under the doormat first, to which Bill responds "People don't really do that, do they?", but the gesture nonetheless makes him look around for the key while Cobb's trying to pick the lock. As McGowan puts it, "[Bill] fails to grasp how the world that he sees includes him within it and anticipates his involvement, even though he experiences this involvement as the product of his own free act."²⁰ Cobb similarly sets him up to fall for the film's *femme fatale* (referred to as The Blonde in the script), the melancholic ex-girlfriend of a local gangster who knows the combination of the criminal's safe. After taking some personal items from her house in a burglary arranged by Cobb, Bill becomes obsessed with her, seeks her out and starts a relationship with her, not suspecting that she is acting on Cobb's behalf. Just as Bill is being played by The Blonde who gives him the job to break into the gangster's safe as an excuse to set him up (take the fall for a similar burglary she believes Cobb is wanted for by the police), Cobb is playing her by omitting the fact that he was hired to kill her by the woman's criminal ex-lover. At the end we have a "perfect crime" in which all the pawns play their part "freely," unknowingly contributing to their own downfall while Cobb remains above suspicion (the police don't even believe he exists).

²⁰ McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 25.

Nolan similarly plays with his viewer through the nonlinear development of the story, the first example of his later, increasingly more elaborate puzzle narratives. The plot is framed by Bill's noir style confession to the police, and the sequence of the events unfolding represents his way of recollecting them, his filling in the blanks in the story as well as incorporating the new information he finds out from the detective interrogating him (for instance when he learns that The Blonde was murdered, he imagines a flashback scene where Cobb is killing her with a hammer). This technique not only restricts the viewer's range on knowledge to that of Bill, we are even more limited as we only have access to the information he already knows one piece at a time, forced to follow his hectic form of remembering just like the policeman he is talking to (who, as it turns out, already knows more than us about the case). For instance, we see the scene of Bill meeting The Blonde in a seedy underground bar before we learn about her connection to the break-in that happened earlier in the story, which gives the impression of a chance encounter, playing on the classical noir theme of fatalism that later turns out to be a simulation. In other words, at the bottom of the chain of manipulation is the viewer herself, trying to posit a coherent narrative universe to complete the fragments of information fed to her, and then revising it again and again as new pieces come along. In and of itself this cognitive process is not different from what according to David Bordwell is involved in following any cinematic plot.²¹ What makes Nolan's puzzle narrative different is that he foregrounds the role of the filmmaker in deliberately misleading the audience by exploiting their desire for meaning (his alter-ego in the film is Cobb manipulating Bill, who in turn is a stand-in for the viewer), and finally exposing the quest for an objective truth itself as a futile endeavour that only a fool would undertake. Instead, as McGowan suggests, in Nolan's world truth always emerges out of a lie, that is to say, intersubjective truth-effects are always anchored in private self-interest; "all knowledge is

²¹ See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2013)

necessarily perspectival.”²² This explains why the final scene of Cobb disappearing in the crowd is ambiguous. It can mean that Bill is a schizophrenic who created him to cover up his psychotic tendencies, but it can also signal Cobb’s successful execution of his plan. The two simultaneously possible readings define what Christian Metz called the spectator’s fetishistic split between the role of the credulous and the incredulous observer regarding the reality of the cinematic image, in this case something like “I know very well that Cobb doesn’t exist at all (that he is just a stand-in for the director), but his plan nonetheless worked perfectly in the diegesis.”²³

And isn’t Bill’s mistake precisely that he, like a fully credulous observer, the Lacanian subject supposed to believe, naively believes in the existence of Cobb, the master signifier of the truth that would fully explain his story and exculpate him in front of the public (the police)? Once again, what he doesn’t understand is the shift from the disciplinary logic of authority to the society of control. A clear indication of this new state of affairs is the role the detective plays in the film. With Bill giving himself up to prove his innocence yet telling a story that fully incriminates him, the policeman is offered a version of what in classical detective fiction is called a “locked room paradox,” a crime scene that is all too perfect, like a dead body in a room locked from the inside. As Copjec stresses, the role of the classical detective upon encountering such a case is to question the apparent self-explanatory nature of the evidence and posit “one signifier more” that would start the process of investigation. What the detective activates is the sliding of the signifier through the lack in the symbolic order, keeping in mind that the successful self-signification of the symbolic is always an illusion: “the detective reads the evidence by positing an empty beyond, a residue that is irreducible to the evidence while being, at the same

²² McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 4.

²³ See Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. C. Britton et al. (London: MacMillan Press, 1982), 72.

time, completely demonstrated in it.”²⁴ This is the properly public function of the detective (from Dupin to Columbo) in modern disciplinary societies where there is an autonomous public sphere separated from the private. Public here should be understood in the Hannah Arendtian sense of the term as a sphere based on the principle of universal equality.²⁵ As I have argued after Copjec in Chapter 1, classical noir deals with the sovereign excess of this regime, the criminal’s idiosyncratic *jouissance* that can never find its expression in the symbolic order, which is why representatives of public authority as a rule don’t want to listen to noir confessions.²⁶ The noir hero’s abandonment in his lonely room, Copjec argues, therefore supplements the locked room opened by the detective.²⁷ *Following*, by contrast, depicts a neoliberal society of control where public and private have collapsed into one another, or more precisely the public sphere has been privatized, overflowed by private *jouissance*. This means, on the one hand, that Bill’s noir perversion stops being a taboo (an exception) and the policeman is able to have a face to face conversation about it. On the other hand, the price the officer has to pay for his post-disciplinary (post-public) consciousness is the loss of his ability to be a detective proper and ask the questions that could open the locked room paradox to start an investigation (why did Bill give himself up if he is indeed the murderer?) The final vanishing of Cobb in the urban crowd therefore also marks the disappearance of that “one signifier more” needed to publicly mediate between seemingly incompatible forms of modern life by constructing a shared idea of truth *qua* symbolic fiction. In the society of control such signifier loses its public function and is allocated entirely to the

²⁴ Joan Copjec, “The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in Film Noir,” in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1993), 179.

²⁵ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1998), 22-79.

²⁶ They tend to shoot first as in *Gun Crazy*, *Out of the Past* or refuse to take the confession seriously like in *Scarlet Street*.

²⁷ Copjec, “The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal,” 189.

private realm: for the policeman Cobb is nothing but a lie made up by Bill to hide his own guilt (we could say he is Bill's unary trait the encounter with whom activated his death drive).

If there is a pedagogical agenda to the film it is to confront the viewer with the Lacanian forced choice of today's cynical society of control: one can either stick to his private self-interest and lie like Cobb or assume a public role and claim the truth in which case he still will be perceived as lying like Bill is. It's crucial to note that Nolan reverses here Lacan's classical formula ("the father or worse")²⁸ where the only sensible choice was symbolic castration (the Oedipal-disciplinary order) since the alternative was the real of *jouissance* beyond meaning (psychosis). In *Following*, on the contrary, it is the symbolic castration by a public master signifier that is renounced as impossible, and shamelessly sticking to one's *jouissance* is presented as the only viable option. But choosing enjoyment doesn't mean the madness of the classical noir hero anymore who kept trying to confess the truth of his ex-istence without anyone listening. Instead, Nolan's cynic formulates his self-expression as a lie that very much relies on intersubjective communication and only works if it reaches a symbolic agent (Bill) still stuck in the disciplinary regime who believes in public truth *for him*, instead of him. This is why with this early version of Nolan's cynic—Cobb who in a way replicates the director's own obsession with puzzle narratives—we regress into what Heidegger called the correspondence theory of truth,²⁹ truth as an accurate description of the world: we get from him multiple answers to the nonetheless vulgar question of what really happened instead of revealing ("unconcealing"), like the classical noir hero did, his existential excess, his "being in the truth" beyond such simplified notion of objective truth and falsity. The fact that Cobb remains a psychologically flat character throughout the film is therefore a sign of his inauthenticity, his parasitic attachment to the social

²⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Televison*, trans. D. Hollier, R. Krauss and A. Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990), 46.

²⁹ See Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Parable of the Cave and the Theaetetus*, trans. T. Sadler (New York: Continuum, 2002), 1-6.

conformism of the Heideggerian “they,” the Lacanian big Other as the subject supposed to believe. By contrast, Bill remains very much stuck in a classical noir universe with a personal depth enhanced by affects of shame, guilt, love, jealousy, and impotent rage that make him an ideal patsy for Cobb. It also helps him to gain the viewer’s sympathy, allowing us even to read *Following* as a critique of cynicism—a possibility that gradually disappears from Nolan’s later films.

5.2.2 *Memento*

While Nolan’s second feature film *Memento* is usually remembered for the backwards narration of its primary plotline, it’s less often noted that this formal experiment merges the two main character types from *Following* into two temporarily distinct mental states of one and the same protagonist. Leonard is a former insurance investigator who, after the trauma of witnessing his wife’s murder by two burglars, loses his short-term memory. He is able to remember his life before that moment, but since then everything slips out of his mind after a few minutes. Unlike the hero of *Doodlebug*, however, he is able to manage his crisis of temporality: he develops an elaborate self-control system combining tattoos all over his body, Polaroid photos and sticky notes to organize his life. He is motivated by one goal only: to find his wife’s second killer, who, he is convinced, was ignored by the police investigation. His argument is that there must have been a second man who knocked him out from behind while he shot the first attacker, someone who then set up the scene as a classical locked room with only one perpetrator. In other words, the second man, the mysterious John G., is that one signifier more that Leonard posits, playing the role of the detective himself in the absence of an effective public institution of justice. As such, he resembles the revisionist private eye from *The Long Goodbye* or *Night Moves* defending

the public good when nobody cares anymore, except that for him this public quest is reduced entirely to personal vengeance: Nolan makes this clear by starting with the temporal endpoint of the story, Leonard executing whom he believes to be his wife's killer in cold blood. While Marlowe's comparable divine violence at the end of Altman's film had utopian connotations, the hero of *Memento*, I will argue, remains imprisoned into the private sphere.

There are two main timelines in the film, each with their own specific flashback sequences that further complicate the unity of the narrative universe. The primary plotline in colour moves backwards in time and explores the events immediately before Leonard's act of vengeance, eventually merging into the one in black and white that develops chronologically and leads up to the key scene that set the man on his murderous path. This key event, I will show, is none other than the hero's cynical sovereign decision that tears him out of the disciplinary apparatus of power he had previously been caught in and installs him into a society of control.

The black and white (disciplinary) realm is itself split in two. On the one hand, we have Leonard in a classical noir lonely room of a motel talking to someone on the phone but really rather monologuing to himself with no apparent response. After a while when he notices a "Don't answer the phone!" tattoo on his arm he becomes paranoid and hangs up, later explaining to the man from the front desk that he is not good on the phone, he needs to look people in the eye while talking to them. At this point he is a man in noir isolation trying unsuccessfully to share the traumatic excess of his life with someone else.

The correlate to this classical noir subjectivity is the content of his paranoid voiceover, his story about a man named Sammy Jenkins, a model husband of an idyllic suburban family home who had suddenly started to experience short term memory loss and whose insurance claim he was assigned to investigate. In this black and white flashback Leonard plays a detective

who still has the dispassion of a public servant, upholding the letter of the law (ironically, that of a private insurance contract) against possible fraud. He suspects Sammy of faking because he is playing his role all too perfectly, and, although he cannot prove it directly, he manages to argue that such behaviour doesn't fit the description of the actual illness that the insurance covers. The letter of the law prevails, but a tragic accident that kills Sammy's wife after she follows Leonard in doubting and testing her husband seems to break something in the protagonist, pushing him into noir madness. We could say that he is traumatized by seeing the modern apparatus of the Law as a necropolitical machine of the ruling class where the public prevalence of justice is always already motivated by private economic interest (of the insurance company in this case) and therefore comes at a price of letting innocent people die. This is why, as William G. Little observes, "the film's narrative threads [...] stimulate, but do not satisfy, nostalgic longing for a prelapsarian truth."³⁰ Nolan takes postmodern neo-noir's nostalgia for an uncorrupted suburban America and deconstructs it, empties it of substance, collapsing it with the nihilism of classical noir.

In turn, the spaces of the colour plot are that of a rhizomeatically expanding urban sprawl without the neat orderliness of Sammy's suburban home. We see a bar where local drug dealers hang out and the barmaid, Natalie, spits into Leonard's drink when she sees that he isn't one of them; a labyrinthine trailer park where a local thug chases him around with a gun; a roadside motel whose owner cheats him by renting him multiple rooms; a tattoo parlour he uses to engrave new memories on his body; and an abandoned oil refinery where a crooked cop, Teddy, hides dead bodies, but which is also the site where the protagonist burns the mementos of his late wife. Similarly to Leonard himself these spaces seem to have lost their identity; the life they

³⁰ William G. Little, "Surviving Memento," *Narrative* 13, no. 1 (2005): 71.

contain is overflowing the boundaries set by their traditional social function. They represent the memory impaired hero's attempt to spatialize (territorialize) time, something that Jameson associates with the contemporary aesthetic of cognitive mapping emerging after the postmodern decline of historical consciousness.³¹ Leonard indeed has a map of all the locations he visits in his motel room wall with Polaroid images and post-it notes of his findings making up for the deficiencies of his brain, allegorically standing for the ahistorical working of the postmodern mind in an externalized neuro-image.³² This is in sharp contrast to the very same mental disorder of Sammy that was framed by a modern disciplinary regime: in the black and white flashback sequences we see that his life is organized by the panoptic gaze of a clock on the wall that regularly interrupts his watching TV when he is supposed to inject his diabetic wife with insulin. This means that through the prostheses of the television and the clock he still has access to linear historical time, although, contrary to Leonard, reliance on these apparatuses makes him spatially immobile.

The plotline in colour also has its own flashbacks representing Leonard's intimate memories of his wife as well as the trauma of seeing her being murdered. In contrast to the story of Sammy that follows the conventions of classical Hollywood narration, these sequences are rather incoherent fragments that eventually end up depicting contradictory versions of events, suggesting that Leonard's voiceover narration throughout the entire movie is unreliable—another instance of Nolan's skepticism about objective (that is, public) truth.³³ The meaning of his

³¹ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 154-81. For more on *Memento* as an allegory for postmodern temporality see Carlos Gallego, "Coordinating Contemporaneity: (Post) Modernity, 9/11, and the Dialectical Imagery of *Memento*," *Cultural Critique* 75 (Spring 2010): 31-64.

³² See Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), as well as Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

³³ Volker Ferenz groups the film together with *The Usual Suspects* and *American Psycho* as in all three cases "[the protagonists'] main offense seems to be their epistemological skepticism." Volker Ferenz, "Mementos of

story's master signifier, John G. also turns out to be relative as we learn that various characters (including himself) exploit the protagonist's obsession with vengeance to have him kill random people they want dead by feeding him false information. Therefore, while the official (public) goal of people pursuing John G. is to reveal the killer's true identity, their real (private) aim is the exact opposite: never to fix the signifier's meaning but endlessly circle around the void it signifies, gaining access to *jouissance* through this very repetition of their drive.³⁴ We could say that the cynical use of this signifier allows for a private management of an otherwise uncontrollable and paralyzing *real* at the core of Leonard's trauma (and the same goes for Natalie, the film's *femme fatale* who, as the protagonist observes has "also lost someone" and manipulates the John G. narrative to avenge him).

The question is how do we get from the black and white Leonard of classical noir isolation and paranoia to the one in colour who re-enters society playing the *private* detective as a source of a never ending, perverse enjoyment? This shift occurs with the event of the sovereign decision in which the two main plotlines converge in a crystal-image of cynicism. Teddy, a corrupt cop Leonard has been speaking to on the phone appears at his motel and convinces him to go after a local drug dealer whose name happens to be John G. Leonard kills the man but has doubts about his identity afterwards and confronts Teddy who arrives at the scene to take the drug money. Teddy admits setting him up (assuming he won't remember anyway), claiming that he had already helped Leonard kill the real murderer only he forgot about it. He also suggests that by perpetuating his revenge fantasy he is in fact doing what Leonard himself wanted when he purposefully discarded parts of the police file on his wife's murder to create enough blind

Contemporary American Cinema: Identifying and Responding to the Unreliable Narrator in the Movie Theater," in *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. W. Buckland (New York: Routledge, 2009), 279.

³⁴ Az Žižek notes, this is the basis of the Lacan's "distinction between the aim and the goal of drive: while the goal is the object around which drive circulates, its (true) aim is the endless continuation of this circulation as such." Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2004), 61.

spots in the case that could occupy him forever. As Teddy summarizes, “So you lie to yourself to be happy, there is nothing wrong with that, we all do it.” It’s not clear whether Leonard believes him or not but he certainly understands the morale of his story: before he forgets what just happened he makes notes for himself that will incriminate the corrupt cop as his next John G. (his full name is John Edward Gamble). It is his execution that opens the film, a sovereign act now revealed as the result of a cynical decision. Teddy/Lt. Gamble had to die because he stood for the split subject under the disciplinary logic of power, for symbolic authority as well as its inherent transgression (the two versions of his name showing the separation between the public and private spheres).³⁵ Unlike the hero of revisionist noir, however, Leonard doesn’t kill to refuse the obscene male homosocial pact offered to him. His murderous act signals rather both its acceptance and privatization: Teddy has to die so that Leonard can keep living the fantasy life they constructed together and enjoy creating false memories *on his own terms*. Like noir sovereigns before him but through other (cynical) means, he “becomes *causa sui*, the origin of his own being,”³⁶ exemplifying the bourgeois myth of a perfectly self-possessed subject³⁷ who “decides to ‘posit’ the very traumatic presuppositions of his activity,”³⁸ creating the stains on his own visual field.

In purely formal terms Leonard is the Lacanian pervert, the subject who disavows his castration (his confrontation with the lack in the Other) by claiming to know what the Other wants from him, and as a consequence having no doubt about what he himself wants.³⁹ This is the subject who, like Cobb in *Following*, has no shame, who would substitute his ego for the

³⁵ We see him switching in front of Leonard to whichever role suits him.

³⁶ McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 12.

³⁷ Little, “Surviving Memento,” 82.

³⁸ Anna Kornbluh, “Romancing the Capital: Choice, Love, and Contradiction in *The Family Man* and *Memento*,” in *Lacan and Contemporary Film*, ed. T. McGowan and S. Kunkle (New York: Other Press, 2004), 133.

³⁹ For an introductory account of Lacan’s theory of perversion see Bruce Fink, “Perversion,” in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. M. A. Rothenberg et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 38-68.

void of the *real* and plug the hole in the symbolic order with the *jouissance* of his own body. Yet, Nolan's pervert belongs to the society of control, which is why he responds to the desire of the Other quite differently than his predecessor under disciplinary power. The latter is illustrated by classical noir's male hero who imagines fate ordering him to incriminate himself as a method of bringing down the *femme fatale* with him. He imagines the excess of his bare life to be feminine and inherently doomed (marked by some primordial guilt),⁴⁰ and he keeps living it just to condemn it, like an undercover suicide bomber sent by the masculine regime. Today, however, in the society of control whose post-disciplinary surveillance regime directly mobilizes the previously repressed, inoperative *jouissance* of individuals' bare life, the pervert doesn't have to be punished for enacting a sovereign decision.⁴¹ The emphasis therefore shifts from the knowing *what* of fatalism to the knowing *how* of cynicism: instead of knowing (remembering at the moment of death) what life is not worth living, what matters is knowing how to get away with the crime of such life, how to merge it with a code (an algorithm) that would connect the formerly guilty subject's affective economy to the protocols of a global capitalist network. As Thomas Elsaesser argues, *Memento* "foregrounds the idea of 'programming,' as opposed to remembering."⁴²

Leonard represents not the old-fashioned film noir detective, but the new multitasking personality (dissociative, reactive: not rapid reaction, but random reaction force), with a subjectivity programmable not through ideology and false consciousness, but programmed by a fantasy, or self-programmed through the body (where the body

⁴⁰ But not shame as that would imply the break in his perverse knowledge and a confrontation with the lack in the Other, i.e. his castration.

⁴¹ While the Other of the Other in disciplinary power wanted to *punish* the subject, the new superego authority wants him to *enjoy* out in the open.

⁴² Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," in *Puzzle Films Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. W. Buckland (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 28.

functions as a technology of recording, storage, and replay: the somatic or pathologized body as an advanced “neural” or “biological” medium, in its mental instability and volatility potentially more efficient than the current generation of electronic media, at least for certain tasks.”⁴³

By cynically letting himself loose in a labyrinth of his own making after a false target, he is able to turn his formerly paralyzing paranoia into a “productive pathology”⁴⁴ “contained and constrained within a protocol.”⁴⁵ Elsaesser sees the film’s mind game narrative doing the same to the viewer, testing her repeatedly to exploit her affective labour, make her adapt to the conditions of digital, networked production. “Undergoing tests – including the “tests” put up by mind-game films – thus constitutes a veritable “ethics” of the (post-bourgeois) self: to remain flexible, adaptive, and interactive, and above all, to know the “rules of the game.”⁴⁶

The game here refers to the one played by members of a generic community, except that, just like the smart film, mind game narratives are self-reflexive of their generic form, establishing, as Elsaesser puts it, a meta-contract with their audiences.⁴⁷ Unlike with the smart film, however, this meta-contract is not autoimmune but cynical-sovereign. While, as I have argued in Chapter 1, classical genres were immunizing, allowing for a limited expression of life/*jouissance* while remaining tied to the symbolic law repressing it, the postmodern smart film activates a quest for an authentic, pure form of life that is downright hostile to any symbolic norm, eventually undermining its own conditions of possibility like a parasite killing its host. In Boyle’s noirs, the sovereign function of cynicism steps in to put an end to this autoimmune

⁴³ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 37.

madness and steer subjects back towards a stable status quo by limiting the uncontrolled proliferation of life to forms that are productive under the new neoliberal economy. Contrary to the autoimmunity of the smart film, the cynicism of the mind-game film is not negatively defined in relation to traditional genre games as an ironic gesture of “that’s not it,” but simply as the knowledge of how genre cinema has always worked as an apparatus capturing and manipulating viewers’ attention. Cynics, as Žižek notes, “know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.”⁴⁸ Why? Because the new meta-contract offers them to do it interactively, seemingly on their own terms.

While the classical Metzian spectator was split against his own will between a credulous and incredulous part, that is, she was always partially fooled by the cinematic apparatus, Nolan’s cynic assumes the film viewer’s fetishistic split as the consequence of his own sovereign act. He appropriates the passive state of being captivated by the moving image by interpreting cinema’s magic as a lie and then affirming it as such. This means that the new division is not between those who are fooled as opposed to those who know better, but between those who are fooled by others and the cynics who lie (also) to themselves. The crucial slippage that occurs here is that the cynic takes this lie to be ethical rather than epistemological, disavowing the necessary blind spot of his perspective by avowing it as willed immorality, like Leonard after he realizes he had killed the wrong man. While the smart film’s negative dialectic keeps pursuing an inverted idea of public truth in epistemological terms, publicity’s blind spot supposedly embodied by an authentic (non-)community of ironic language users, the mind game film embraces cinema’s powers of the false and encourages the viewer *qua* individual to, similarly to Leonard, lie to himself and play along taking the open display of generic clichés and film production rules as

⁴⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso: New York, 2008), 25.

original and “real.”⁴⁹ If the smart film is the paradox of a meta-generic genre that ultimately, as Boyle demonstrated, undermines itself, the mind game film is rather a genre that is post-generic, doing away with the mediation of a traditional generic community by directly linking individuals *qua* perverts to an immoral production code of lies. While classical genres were living communities enabled by the partial exemption (immunity) from codified (“dead”) symbolic norms, *Memento*’s mind game film collapses code and life into a cybernetic organism of its participants’ (self-)programmable body. Former generic conventions turn into a non-signifying semiotic of repeatable algorithms (noir clichés) capturing the viewer’s attention through cynical interactivity, mirroring Leonard’s endless construction of false games of pursuit using recycled memory fragments.

It is the cynic’s sovereign role in the neoliberal society of control that McGowan misses when he considers Leonard a post-bourgeois subject, someone entering an atemporal existence of the death drive outside the productive time of capitalism by repeating his empty act of vengeance for eternity.⁵⁰ He suggests that films like *Memento* respond to the lack of a lack in the digital era—the problem of hyperreal, instantly accessible, never decaying objects provided in abundance by new media that make traditional consumerist desire for future satisfaction increasingly meaningless—by foregrounding the constitutive loss of the subject outside linear temporality, the lack that the drive circles around in an eternally suspended present.⁵¹ This, for McGowan, opens up new possibilities for a free and ethical life by embracing the necessary failure for the self to ever become complete.⁵² While, as I stressed in Chapter 1, I agree with

⁴⁹ The central rule one has to follow to enjoy mind game narratives, Elsassesser notes, is taking them for real, that is to say, disavowing the fictional nature of the cinematic universe. Elsassesser, *Mind-Game Film*, 35.

⁵⁰ Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011), 231-39.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 25-28.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 14.

McGowan that the atemporality of the drive has utopian connotations, this should not be confused with the sovereign-masculine mobilization of atemporality as a state of exception to the temporal. In my reading *Memento*'s cynical use of the drive does the latter, restoring a zero level of linear temporality by embracing the very destruction of the disciplinary regime as a historical project, not unlike the way the United States started using global neoliberal deterritorialization itself as the means to territorially expand its Empire after the fall of the USSR, speaking the end of history discourse to mask a very much historical project of neocolonialism.

After its ostensible failure, the restoration of the action-image is signalled by Leonard's final monologue. As he drives away from the crime scene his voiceover states: "I have to believe that when my eyes are closed the world is still here." He then closes his eyes and imagines himself in bed with his wife with an "I've done it" tattoo on his chest—a clearly impossible fantasy scene. He continues: "I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them. Do I believe the world's still there? Is it still out there?" He opens his eyes and his voiceover says: "We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I'm no different." He then stops at a tattoo parlour to carve the clues incriminating Teddy in his flesh. As McGowan points out, "[Leonard] implicitly believes in an Other-God, some faceless authority" that guarantees the value of his actions.⁵³ What is important here is that he imagines such guarantee precisely at the moment when he just cynically destroyed/privatized the public institution of justice that used to have that very function throughout modernity. His belief therefore evokes the neoliberal ideology of the invisible hand of the market, a fantasmatic entity that magically evaluates "each according to his own ability" *without* (or *beyond*) the mediation of public social

⁵³ McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 63.

institutions.⁵⁴ In Lacanian terms, Leonard doesn't *believe* in the big Other of the social symbolic order, nor is he satisfied by its immunizing obscene underside; it is precisely his distrust in public institutions (Lt. Gamble) as well as their inherent transgressions (Teddy) that led him to take law into his own hands—an action supported by his *conviction* that there is a *real* (deterritorialized) Other (what Lacan called the Other of the Other) watching him even when no one else is, not even himself.⁵⁵ His cynical lie addressed to the old (territorialized) public realm (including part of himself as subject supposed to believe) therefore becomes the condition of possibility for his personal *jouissance* produced by his drive for vengeance to become *absolute*, that is, *more* valid than the merely objective truth of public symbolic fiction—the same way as US hegemony became absolute by overflowing its territorial limits through globalization. This could also answer the conundrum noted by Temenuga Trifonova, the inconsistency between the memory-impaired Leonard and the unknown subject with an exceptionally good memory whose recollections the backwards moving narrative represents to the viewer.⁵⁶ It is not Leonard himself who remembers but the apparatus of an all-seeing, *real* gaze of the Other-God that supplements his cynical subject position, the glorification of whom prevents him from slipping into paranoia and psychosis by establishing a zero level ritualization of his life (a “world” as Leonard puts it).⁵⁷ The next section explores the biopolitical dimensions of this reterritorialization performed by Nolan's cynic.

⁵⁴ Incidentally Adam Smith who came up with the term did not believe the market could work without public institutions providing its moral principles. See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: Printed for A. Millar, 1761)

⁵⁵ Lacan, of course, had famously stated that “there is no Other of the Other,” another way of saying that there is no metalanguage, no sexual relationship, no society as an organic whole, no full access to enjoyment. For the original quote see his untranslated Seminar VI. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Book VI, Le désir et son interprétation* (Paris: Édition de la Martinière, Le Champ freudien, 2013), 353.

⁵⁶ Temenuga Trifonova, *The Image in French Philosophy* (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 278.

⁵⁷ Contrary to *Following* where the flashbacks are still POV.

5.3 The *Inception* of Cynicism from the Ruins of Sexual Difference: The Biopolitics behind Enlightened False Consciousness

5.3.1 Introduction

Christopher Nolan's *Inception* is a science fiction-/heist-/puzzle-/conspiracy-noir about a group of corporate spies specialized in "dream extraction" who are hired to do an unusual job: instead of stealing secrets from their target's mind while he's asleep, they are supposed to plant an idea deep enough into his unconscious so that when he wakes up, he would simply assume it as his own. In psychoanalytic terms, their task is to alter someone's fundamental fantasy, the primordially repressed original scene of loss constitutive of human subjectivity that serves as the necessary blind spot of consciousness, driving everyone to repeat unique patterns of behavior beyond their control. In the analytic setting Lacan referred to such life changing event as the "traversing of the fundamental fantasy,"⁵⁸ undoing the existing coordinates of the subject's libidinal economy, liberating her by shattering her ego and its passionate attachment to an imagined trauma.⁵⁹ In the film the role of the analysand is played by Robert Fisher, the soon to be heir of a multibillion dollar international corporation whose unconscious the team of spies has to manipulate into splitting up his father's fortune after his imminent death. They accomplish this quite literally by performing an ad hoc psychotherapy on him, replacing the resentment he feels towards his cold-hearted father for neglecting him with the fantasy of a loving smile hidden behind the old man's mask of rigidity. And indeed, when Fisher wakes up at the end of the film

⁵⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 273.

⁵⁹ See Slavoj Žižek, "From 'Passionate Attachments' to Dis-Identification," *UMBR(a): A Journal of the Unconscious* 3 (1998): 3-19.

he is magically reconciled with his father; a suffocating weight is lifted off his shoulders. From a masculine perspective, this is what the procedure of inception is all about: it offers someone to have his cake and eat it with regards to the fundamental fantasy; it helps to gain a distance from its traumatic centripetal force but without having to pay the price and go through a painful “subjective destitution.”⁶⁰ As if one only had to find the right angle from which the scene of terror reveals itself as an image of happiness. To paraphrase Žižek, inception is the commodified, decaffeinated (unmanly) version of the Lacanian traversing of the fantasy that helps the faint hearted to avoid confrontation with the traumatic real kernel of their desire, with the fact that they never really lost anything, that lack is rather constitutive of their existence.

Yet, the film is not simply an allegory of the pervasive influence of today’s neoliberal ego psychology, cognitive behavioral therapy, identity politics, or interactive new media that produce happy idiots pursuing narcissistic pleasures within the invisible walls of the society of control. It also offers the genealogy of this credulous subject’s masculine-cynical obverse who deliberately chooses his mind’s enslavement to the late capitalist machine in a sovereign act: the presupposed infantile (feminine) position of Fisher is only the background against which the real drama of Cobb, the protagonist’s life can unfold. Much like in Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972), the official science fiction narrative obfuscates the true libidinal focus of the film, which revolves around the main character’s guilt over his wife’s, Mal’s, suicide. Her specter returns again and again to disturb Cobb’s well prepared descents into his targets’ (and his own) unconscious.⁶¹ The dead wife’s spirit drives the plot both as the loved one to be mourned and as the *femme fatale* posing a threat to masculine identity, following the conventions of classical noir. By repeatedly

⁶⁰ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 263.

⁶¹ As Temenuga Trifonova points out the narrative posits a conspiracy within a conspiracy here: “Cobb’s team conspires against Robert Fischer by planting an idea in his mind”, while on the other hand “Cobb’s subconscious conspires against him.” Temenuga Trifonova, “Agency in the Cinematic Conspiracy Thriller,” *SubStance* 41, no. 3 (2012), 121.

sabotaging the group's mission, she serves as the ultimate obstacle to her husband's wish fulfillment: his reward of a clean criminal record in the US enabling him to return home to his children. As McGowan points out, she thus occupies the position of the object-cause of the hero's desire (the Lacanian *objet a*), the constitutive distorting element in his fantasy which, precisely by preventing reaching its goal, keeps his desire alive through an infinite postponement of satisfaction.⁶² In a postmodern self-reflexive twist pointing at the rules of the noir genre game, the director makes his protagonist (and thereby the viewer) aware of all this from the very beginning: Cobb deliberately holds onto Mal's spectral appearance and the painful emotions repeatedly stirred up by it to build a protective fantasy screen against something even more traumatic. It helps him to avoid the encounter with the real of *jouissance* in his fundamental fantasy, which the film, through multiple flashbacks, presents as Cobb's passive (inoperative) enjoyment he experiences when he is unable to prevent his wife's suicide and his subsequent forced separation from his children. His masculine-heroic endeavor and the plot's main objective then is to mourn the loss of his wife and confront the traumatic real of his desire by going through the fundamental fantasy and then re-instrumentalizing his *jouissance* by reuniting with his children as a reward. What prevents him from doing so is his paralyzing guilt which he can redeem himself from, much like the classical noir hero, by transferring it on the *femme fatale*, blaming his wife for getting caught too much in the powerful illusions of her dreams and abandoning her family. Significantly, this resolution that eliminates the feminine threat coincides with the male hero's return to his father, underlining the phallic outcome of his crisis.

In epistemological terms, the solution that *Inception* offers to his male protagonist's emotional impasse is that of enlightenment; Cobb can awaken from the dream world of illusions

⁶² McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 158.

by renouncing both Fisher's adolescent naiveté and the irrational lure of Mal's feminine sexuality.⁶³ For this reason, the film works as a postmodern variation of what Horkheimer and Adorno identified as one of the earliest western myths of (masculine) enlightenment: Homer's story about Odysseus and the Sirens. There the coordinated effort, that is, the distribution of labour between two masculine positions, master and his servants navigated their ship past the mortal danger posed by the female voice. On the one hand, his men tied Odysseus to the mast to prevent him from jumping into the abyss towards the alluring sound while at the same time allowing him to gain knowledge about it. On the other hand, the rest of them plugged their ears with wax so that they could keep rowing and get everyone out of there alive.⁶⁴ The elaborate dream-architecture of *Inception*, I will argue, operates as a similar machine of patriarchal reason where one exceptional sovereign figure, Cobb, is designated to investigate the feminine real in order to keep the rest of his crew (and especially Fisher) at a safe distance from it, allowing them to live a life of illusory happiness. Cobb, like Odysseus, returns from his submersion into the vertigo of the real as a tragic hero who, after a glimpse at eternity suddenly loses his taste for ordinary living. However, his knowledge is not turned into critical negativity seeking a different world in the way that Adorno and Horkheimer's modernist pathos still could. In the film's postmodern twist, the enlightened Cobb becomes a cynical realist, someone for whom the failures and shortcomings of the reigning symbolic order are turned into signs of *his* authenticity, into proof that he is special among the living by carrying the burden of a terrible truth. It is out of epistemological narcissism (to keep the truth to himself) that he learns to accept his world as it is in the end, cynically embracing the apparent falsity of his moment of reconciliation with his

⁶³ On the allegorical parallels between the film's multiple scenes of awakening and Western enlightenment see Michael J. Blouin, "A Western Wake: Difference and Doubt in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*," *Extrapolation* 52, no. 3 (2011): 318-37.

⁶⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 34-35.

father and children. His awakening, then, paradoxically coincides with the assumption of a false consciousness, a phenomenon that Peter Sloterdijk labeled cynical reason, the ultimate sign that the project of western Enlightenment has exhausted itself.⁶⁵ In other words, Cobb's quest of traversing of his fundamental fantasy ends up re-programming and appropriating it as a lie (erasing the traces of Mal from it)—the heroic act of which saves him from the sublime vertigo of the feminine real. What is disavowed by this sovereign-cynical conclusion is an alternative, feminine organization of the film's symbolic universe put forward by Mal that has to be forgotten for the narrative to appear to the masculine viewer as a game of puzzle solve.

5.3.2 Simulating the Phallic Exception

As I have argued in Chapter 1, for Lacan, reality and the real are diametrically opposed to each other. While reality refers to the social symbolic order as the site of meaningful fictions framing human lives, the real is what escapes symbolization, attesting to the necessary inconsistency of every symbolic universe. It is this incompleteness of the symbolic, the fact that what Lacan calls the big Other is always necessarily lacking, that leads to the subject's encounter with the alienating enigma of the Other's desire, the traumatic real of which she tries to filter through fantasy. The imaginary of fantasy, the Lacanian "picture" which Jean Laplanche perhaps more appropriately calls the *mise-en-scene* of desire,⁶⁶ is always an ultimately failed attempt to answer the question "What does the Other want from me?" and thereby account for the subject's place in the world.⁶⁷ In Oedipal-disciplinary societies the function of the symbolic father was to

⁶⁵ Peter Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. M. Eldred (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3-10.

⁶⁶ Jean Laplanche, and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. V. Burgin et al., (London: Methuen, 1986), 8.

⁶⁷ See Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 95-145.

alleviate the anxiety of the subject facing this overwhelming question by providing some answers to it, intervening into the dyadic relationship between the flawed imaginary shield of fantasy and the terrifying real by symbolically suturing part of the subject into the big Other, stitching together its holes with the signifier. The postmodern crisis of the father function, on the other hand, leads to the disappearance of this mediation that, according to Mark Fisher, can be seen in *Inception* as a “general ontological indeterminacy, in which the nature of the whole fictional world is put into doubt.”⁶⁸ For Cobb, the words of his father trying to influence him to enter/come back to the real (symbolic) world instead of getting lost in the dreamscapes of his fantasy seem to fall on deaf ears; for him, such a stable reality with the comforts of American middle class family life is nothing but a memory of a long lost past, the object of nostalgic longing, hence when he does return to his children in the end, there is a strong suspicion both in him and the viewer that he is still dreaming (Faraci, 2010).⁶⁹

This doesn't mean, however, that the diegetic universe is filled with psychotic hallucinations and surreal outbreaks of the repressed unconscious, quite the contrary. As Fisher observes, considering its topic, *Inception* is remarkably un-dreamlike.⁷⁰ Its dream world rather expresses the aesthetic of today's corporate non-places: anonymous hotel lobbies, conference rooms and bars that could be in any financial district in the world; bullet trains, airports, elevators, parking garages, etc. As Marc Auge puts it:

“[A] person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver. [...] Subjected to a gentle form of possession, to which he surrenders himself with

⁶⁸ Mark Fisher, “The Lost Unconscious: Delusions and Dreams in *Inception*,” *Film Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2011): 37.

⁶⁹ See Devin Faraci, “Never Wake Up: The Meaning and Secret of *Inception*,” *CHUD.com*, Jul 19, 2010, accessed Jan 8, 2016, <http://www.chud.com/24477/never-wake-up-the-meaning-and-secret-of-inception/>.

⁷⁰ Fisher, “The Lost Unconscious,” 40.

more or less talent or conviction he tastes for a while—like anyone who is possessed—the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing.”⁷¹

It is this uncanny experience of the de-realized late capitalist space without identity and historicity that the film’s dreamscapes draw upon, giving a spatial expression to the crisis of the Oedipal order. Fisher is quite right in emphasizing how the affects associated with this emphatically contemporary *mise-en-scene* differ from the suffocating anxiety and paranoia of a noir classic like Orson Welles’s *The Trial*.⁷² There the crisis of the disciplinary apparatus manifests in the panoptic gaze becoming voyeuristic and crossing over to the private sphere, adding a sense of claustrophobia as well as obscenity to the labyrinthine corridors of the Law, distorting their space into the surreal topography of a nightmare. Here, by contrast, we are already in the age of the post-panopticon of decentered, anonymous, automated surveillance where, as Zygmund Bauman suggests, the authorities who used to be watching have slipped away, making the surveilled masses feel simultaneously abandoned and controlled through “liquid” techniques of persuasion that are hard to identify.⁷³ The dense, hallucinatory imagery of paranoia noir gives way to the weightless similitude of corporate aesthetic, totalitarian discipline to voluntary but empty and meaningless role playing—to the gestures of late capitalism. It is to evoke this vague sense of loss that the heist team constructs a dream-maze out of non-spaces for their mark. Their elaborate scheme to reconstruct a fantasy-image for Fisher exploits the man’s

⁷¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. J. Howe (New York: Verso, 1995), 103.

⁷² As I have argued in Chapter 2, paranoia proper appears in the noirs of the immediate post-classical period (1962-1975) as a result of abandoning the sovereign-fatalistic position of the classical era the perversion of which shielded the male protagonist from falling into psychosis. Like in *Following* and *Memento*, it is this post-classical noir paranoia that Nolan evokes briefly in *Inception* as a stage his protagonists have to pass through, not, however, to subtract from the sovereign-masculine regime like the revisionist noir hero but to cynically reaffirm the status quo with no alternative.

⁷³ Zygmund Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 11. On the other hand, as I have indicated in Chapter 2, Welles’s film brilliantly gestures towards this other, postmodern side of the Oedipal subject in crisis through the depiction of vast open spaces where the protagonist seems to be abandoned by the panoptic apparatus.

(and the viewer's) nostalgia for paranoia itself, a desire for someone, something to reassemble the Other's disseminated gaze that, as a "nonspecific but pervasive pathos," "hangs over *Inception*."⁷⁴

This is why on the first level of the dream Cobb offers a conspiracy theory to Fisher—not a very convincing one, but the sheer fantasy that someone is there watching him still gets the man hooked immediately. At that moment the dreamscape around them also undergoes a fundamental change: the flat, featureless monotony of brightly lit corporate non-places suddenly gives way to dark corridors with looming shadows presented with noir style deep focus photography and low-key lighting. The former indistinction between the hotel's inside and outside, produced through mirrors and looped architecture, also becomes undone as explosions of unknown origin on the street reveal the vulnerability of Fisher's habitual bubble. The irony, of course, is that although this simulated conspiracy narrative appears crude and obviously manipulated, it also happens to be true. Telling Fisher that he's been put to sleep by hostile agents aiming to steal company secrets by controlling his dream, Cobb lies in the guise of the truth, exploiting the gap that forever separates the void of the Other's desire and its particular symbolization. He can do this because he knows that his act of arbitrary master signification will touch on the personal relationship between Fisher and his father, offering a symbolic frame the blanks of which the anxious son can fill in with his own fantasy. At that moment, the trap is complete insofar as he, like Bill in *Following*, misrecognizes his own role in the otherwise true plot: he misses the fact that they are not in his dream but in one of the inceptors. The same limitation doesn't apply to the viewer whose knowing participation in the construction of the dream/film narrative gives him an epistemic advantage over the duped Fisher—an advantage tied

⁷⁴ Fisher, "The Lost Unconscious," 45.

to the perspective of Cobb and his team of experts, whose roles, as critics have noted, are allegorical of the filmmaking process itself.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, this blinding of the subject to a part of the Other's desire, to its *jouissance* is not simply a technique of deception but precisely the function of the paternal metaphor doing the work of symbolic castration so that what formerly appeared to be a lack, a paralyzing negativity in the texture of the world all of a sudden appears as a meaningful problem that the subject can participate in solving.⁷⁶ It is such shift that is signaled by *Inception*'s change to noir style and to a new topology: instead of the flat ontological indeterminacy of a universe made out of non-places, Fisher is now offered another layer of reality, a transcendental other place (the 2nd level of the dream) that supposedly holds the secret that is key to understanding the apparent vacuity of the upper level as well as his actual life. This is where we enter what Lacan called the masculine logic of language based on a constitutive exception. In this paradigm, as I have argued in Chapter 1, normal symbolic reality reaches its completeness only through a cut, an incision whereby a little piece of the real, standing in for its inherent inconsistency, is expelled from it, only to appear fantasmatically beyond the horizon in the form of the real phallus of absolute power which, like the Holy Grail, magically completes the universe by fulfilling the everyone's desire.⁷⁷ For Fisher this exceptional object, the McGuffin of his simulated quest, will take the form of a toy he gave his father as a young boy—to his mind the fact that the old men kept it all along will prove his true affections for his son.

⁷⁵ See CallSignStarbucks, "Inception as an Allegory for Filmmaking," *IGN*, Mar 26, 2011, accessed Jan 7, 2016, <http://ca.ign.com/blogs/callsignstarbucks/2011/03/26/inception-as-an-allegory-for-filmmaking>. Nolan even made Leonardo DiCaprio, the actor playing Cobb, look like him in the film. As Žižek notes, "doubt about the efficiency of the master-figure (what Eric Santner called the 'crisis of investiture') can be supplemented by the direct rule of the experts legitimized by their knowledge." Slavoj Žižek, "Objet a in Social Links," in *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, ed. J. Clemens, R. Grigg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 110.

⁷⁶ Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 575-85.

⁷⁷ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* (New York: Verso, 1996), 155-59.

On the other hand, the postmodern, post-metaphysical topology of *Inception* also complicates the standard phallic duality of worlds by positing not one but a potentially endless series of exceptions, dreams within dreams that nonetheless follow a clear hierarchical structure where every level can be manipulated by one below it. As McGowan notes, this is ultimately a paranoid structure of a “bad infinity,”⁷⁸ which Cobb’s team is trying to contain and turn into a productive pathology for Fisher: drop him into a dream labyrinth simulating the Oedipal apparatus of masculinity but prevent him from falling into the abyss beyond it. As Žižek points out, in a well-functioning symbolic order organized around the phallic exception, the official level of normative interaction always has its obscene supplement where the explicit rules of the social are transgressed in a no less coded and ritualistic fashion, providing an outlet of *jouissance* away from the ignorant gaze of the symbolic father.⁷⁹ With the decline of the father function, however, the immunizing effect of these generic transgressions also disappears; it is eclipsed by the logic of the superego that demands complete obedience without exception, for which reason it is never satisfied with the subject’s performance. Fisher’s father is clearly such a figure of the superego whose last words to his son are the expression of his general disappointment without any specific content (“Disappointed...” he says). The inceptors’ job is then to translate these words back into the logic of a (simulated) good, symbolic father, introducing a gap between their literal meaning and their intention, suggesting that the dead father’s disappointment was caused by Fisher’s inability to transgress against him and defy his explicit orders. Accordingly, Fisher can find peace with his father when he is able to accept and enjoy the exception to the old man’s legacy offered to him by the dream extractors—the splitting up of the company—as his own of phallic act.

⁷⁸ McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 154.

⁷⁹ This is what Žižek calls “inherent transgression.” See Slavoj Žižek, “The Inherent Transgression,” *Cultural Values* no. 2, 1 (1998): 1-17.

5.3.3 Disavowing Sexual Difference

Phallic *jouissance*, however, is not the only manifestation of the real in the film. In line with its film noir core, what disturbs the masculine fantasy about a real phallus existing in the state of exception is the specter of Mal, the film's *femme fatale* who undermines the masculine team's effort to symbolically castrate Fisher, that is, to endow him with patriarchal authority.⁸⁰ What we encounter here is the Lacanian real of sexual difference,⁸¹ that is to say, the necessary coexistence of two incompatibly "sexuated" subject positions with regards to the totality of the symbolic order, representing two irreconcilable ways to relate to its constitutive lack. Contra Lacan's theory, the central ideological procedure of *Inception* is the disavowal of sexual difference as real, that is, as a threat to the masculine logic of phallic exception. Throughout the film the feminine Other *jouissance* of Mal is reduced to phallic *jouissance* and woman becomes a special subspecies of man, his symptom (excess), a memento reminding him that one can always descend into further and further states of exception, destabilizing the previous ones. The female protagonist's autonomy is already undermined by the premise of the plot that presents Mal as a mere projection of Cobb's guilt for causing her suicide. As we learn later, the suicide was the unintended consequence of an idea planted into her mind by him, the idea that the dream world is not real and one can wake up from its illusion only by killing herself. The real question is, why was it necessary for Cobb to perform inception on his wife in the first place? According to the narrative, while the couple initially constructed a dream world together using their real life memories, it was Mal who gradually lost the ability to tell dream and reality apart while Cobb

⁸⁰ The only female member of the group is Ariadne, the dream-architect (played by Ellen Page) who fully accepts the masculine rules of his colleagues, underplaying her femininity.

⁸¹ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, trans. B. Fink (New York, W.W. Norton, 1998), 77.

always maintained a distance towards their virtual playground. The film thereby reproduces the standard male chauvinist myth about women's diminished capacity for critical thinking but, in a postmodern twist symptomatic of the contemporary anti-feminist backlash, identifies this cognitive disability with the intoxication with phallic power. Mal's blindness was the result of having full access to the masculine power of imaginary creation and destruction, which she enjoyed so much that she never wanted to leave its source, abandoning even her real life duties as a mother (flashback sequences show Cobb reminding her, in vain, of her obligations toward their children). The male protagonist, by contrast, was able to show restraint and sacrifice part of his enjoyment for his family.

All this, of course, represents Cobb's interpretation of the events. It is his belief that by artificially planting the idea of the dream's unreality into Mal's mind he would cure her of her irresponsibility, turning her into a rational (castrated) subject like himself. What his move accomplishes, however, is the exact opposite: his wife's phallic obsessions are not cured but amplified; now she wants to find the place of absolute exception, and she is ready to kill even her physical self for it. Upon closer look it becomes clear that Cobb's assessment of Mal's initial behavior in cyberspace as irresponsibly, excessively phallic is a retroactive justification of his own violence against her, whereby he tries to account for the trauma of her feminine *jouissance* by forcefully integrating it into the masculine logic. What comes to haunt him later, however, is not merely Mal's phallic excess but the very feminine logic he disavowed, a different way to totalize each symbolic universe. Mal's specter appears to him on each level of the dream maze asking Cobb to stay with her and accept the necessary inconsistency of every symbolic order instead of looking for the exceptional angle from which one of them looks perfect. Cobb, however, "heroically" resists this temptation in the name of fatherly responsibility.

In this *Inception* follows Hollywood's ostensibly post-phallic turn in the early 90's that introduced kinder and gentler male heroes taking over traditionally feminine, often maternal roles (*Mrs. Doubtfire*, 1993; *Kindergarten Cop*, 1990), abandoning the previous hegemonic masculinity of "hard bodies" from the Reagan-era.⁸² According to Tania Modleski, such move all too often leads to the male appropriation of femininity *against* feminism and thus ultimately against women themselves.⁸³ The softness and guilt ridden masochism of the new man can be understood as a Nietzschean resentment towards his phallicly empowered female counterpart which takes the form of putting the blame on women for the excesses of neoliberal individualism now seen as ruining traditional male dominated communities and the patriarchal family unit. As I have suggested in Chapter 2, in neo-noir films such panic over the successful self-made woman is played out most effectively in erotic thrillers such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Basic Instinct* (1992) or *The Last Seduction* (1994). *Inception's* corporate non-spaces haunted by a phallic woman offer a further variation of this fantasy in its more advanced stage where the feminine threat is eventually contained and eliminated.

The neutralization of feminine *jouissance* through its reduction to an extreme case of phallic exception wouldn't be complete without the male hero beating his female counterpart in the game he forced her to play, the rules of which are rigged in his favour. It may be true, according to the masculine mythology, that Woman (as one of the names of the primordial father) can control any place of exception to everyday reality; but she cannot re-emerge from there like man can. Woman qua *femme fatale* is the masculine name for a man who got intoxicated with phallic *jouissance* and went too far after it, pursuing exceptions *ad infinitum*,

⁸² See Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994)

⁸³ Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York, Routledge, 1991)

reaching a point of no return. In this she is similar to male psychotics like Kurtz in the *Apocalypse Now* or *Inception's* own primordial father figure, the Japanese businessman Saito who falls off the edges of the deepest layer of the dream labyrinth (not unlike Mal in her real life suicidal jump) into an eternal state of limbo from which Cobb has to rescue him. Contrary to Woman and the—in this case orientalized—father of the primal horde, really existing masculinity always involves a dialectic between the symbolic and its imaginary (never quite *real*, that is, absolute) exception, which helps men not to get lost at the level of fantasy. Accordingly, the final test of Cobb's masculinity, guaranteeing his triumph over Mal is the traversing of his fundamental fantasy after which he can awaken as an enlightened man.

5.3.4 Reprogramming the Fundamental Fantasy

The film's reduction of the feminine *jouissance* to the phallic logic starts by Cobb and Ariadne seeking out the former, feminine Mal to find and rescue Fisher whom she's been holding captive since he passed out on level 3. Her domain (level 4) is largely built out of the kind of the non-places introduced earlier in the film, except now they are emptied of their capitalist function. It's a metropolis with endless lines of skyscrapers that seems to be dead and alive at the same time; near the edges it's reduced to decaying ruins flooded by the ocean, with birds arriving from the sea to reclaim the crumbling urban buildings. Towards the center space becomes more sterile, even the simulation of the traditional looking brick house where Cobb and Mal used to live is intertwined with blocks of corporate architecture: a rectangular pond with metal railings, surrounded by a concrete path and steel pillars supporting an office building. This infinite, atemporal, virtual playground of memories, a unique noir zone of indistinction between

life and death, past and future, nature and civilization resembles closely what Deleuze, giving his own twist to Auge's concept of the non-place, called any-space-whatever:

Any-space-whatever [...] is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways. It is a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible. What in fact manifests the instability, the heterogeneity, the absence of link of such a space, is a richness in potentials or singularities which are, as it were, prior conditions of all actualisation, all determination.⁸⁴

While there is certainly melancholy in the air, the indistinct grey tonality of the sequence is strikingly different from Cobb's own recurring nostalgic memory of his children playing in the garden, depicted in vivid colors. Mal's crumbling-regenerating universe of whatever-spaces stands for a life made out of the discarded, abandoned, undead substance of late capitalism, the utopia of means without an end organized by the feminine drive, whereas Cobb's ideal space is built on the disavowal of death, which for him is a purely destructive force embodied by the female Other. If Deleuze argues that the any-space-whatever suspends the functioning of the action-image, halting the progress of the hero's quest in the narrative space,⁸⁵ *Inception* reveals the gendered dimension of this spatial conflict. For Cobb to return home to his children he has to destroy the whatever-topology of the feminine universe and reinscribe his logic of phallic exception into it by positing another (fifth) level of his dream labyrinth.

⁸⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986), 109.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 120-21.

The moment of the phallic neutralization of the feminine is worth looking at in detail. When Cobb and Ariadne find Mal in the simulation of the couple's old house, she tries to convince Cobb to stay with her, arguing that her world is just as real as any. But Cobb resists, maintaining that although he wants to be with her, he simply cannot because he *knows* the truth. He cannot but know because he feels guilty, for he was the one who planted the idea of the world's unreality in her head, causing her suicide. Here we encounter what Lacan called "a highly refined way of making up for the absence of the sexual relationship, by feigning that we are the ones who erect an obstacle thereto."⁸⁶ The threat of sexual *différence* posed by Mal's feminine whatever-universe is eliminated by evoking the idea of a sexual *relationship* fully possible in the past, and explaining its empirical nonexistence in the present by claiming responsibility for its loss. Nolan appropriates here the postmodern sovereign operation of melancholy, exercised mainly by the *femme fatale* in neo-noirs of the 80s and early 90s,⁸⁷ as a male tactic to control women, to keep them at a distance. By imposing this masculine discursive frame on Mal's world, Cobb effectively turns her into a deadly Siren who wants to take the poor man's soul to the underworld with her. Then, in a heroic self-sacrifice, he offers a deal to her: he would stay if the woman released Fisher. This deal is never honored, however. Instead, Mal is simply (arbitrarily) killed off by Ariadne, the dream architect student of Cobb's university professor father who, as McGowan stresses, acts as the emissary of patriarchal authority.⁸⁸ She intervenes as the third term into the noir couple's dyadic relationship potentially deadly to men, preventing Cobb to be lured into the abyss by the female voice, or, from the feminine perspective, to stay in an eternally suspended limbo where the real and the symbolic can't be told apart.

⁸⁶ Lacan, *Encore*, 69.

⁸⁷ see Chapter 2 of this dissertation

⁸⁸ McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 156.

The autonomous threat of Mal is neutralized also through its division into two separate masculine figures. On the one hand, her femininity is equated with the infantile naivety of Fisher as both of them are shown to be incapable of waking up on their own, which is why their mind has to be controlled, “enlightened” by someone else. Yet, while Fisher merely needs “the push” from a more mature man (someone on an upper level to make his sedated body fall, activating his inner ear function that would wake him up), Mal, not being part of the masculine *bios*, is not even capable of such enlightenment by proxy; when she is killed at the deepest level of Cobb’s unconscious memory bank—the noir zone of indistinction structured like an any-space-whatever—she simply disintegrates. On the other hand, when the Mal of feminine *jouissance* is eradicated, she also dies as a masculine fantasy of absolute power: her role as the Woman, as a name for the primordial father standing in for the real phallus, is taken over by Saito, Cobb’s multibillionaire employer who allegorically stands for the infinite power and flexibility of deterritorialized capital itself.⁸⁹ He plays *Inception*’s ultimate “subject supposed to know,” showing up out of nowhere in the real world always in the right place at the right time, making it all too clear to everyone that it is his game they are playing (for instance, when the heist team is brainstorming about how to sedate Fisher on an intercontinental flight, he simply buys the airline). Cobb’s descent into the last (fifth) level of the dream to confront the real of his fundamental fantasy, supposedly even more disturbing than his memory of Mal, is therefore an encounter with the real gaze of Saito as the primordial father of corporate capitalism, the Thing as the real-impossible object of desire beyond ordinary consumer fantasies. Until that moment in the film the Thing primordially lost for Cobb had been symbolized by his children he would sacrifice anything to return to. However, the recurring image burnt into his mind of him glimpsing at them for the last time while they were playing peacefully, not knowing about their

⁸⁹ He is the producer in the film crew allegory.

father's imminent departure, is itself perhaps best understood as what Freud called a screen memory, covering up the real trauma that cannot be represented.⁹⁰ Within the film's diegetic universe we never actually see the scene of Cobb's fundamental fantasy. As Žižek emphasizes, such a scene doesn't have an existence outside the analytic process.⁹¹ It can only be *constructed* as the gravitational center of the subject's other, more manifest fantasies, such as Cobb's inability to say goodbye to his children or prevent Mal's suicide. A possible construction of his (and the narrative's) primordially repressed fundamental fantasy could involve the death of his children out of the negligence of the parents. Maybe this is why Cobb's father simply tells him "come back to the real world" after his son tells him about the last big heist he has to pull in order to reunite with his children. It's possible that the elaborate story about the murder investigation against him in the US is yet another screen memory he has built up to keep the truth out, perhaps the fact that his children were killed by a train while their parents were busy dream surfing (this would explain the sudden intrusion of trains into various dream levels, no doubt symbolizing Nolan's obsession with restoring linear temporality over the feminine atemporal). Yet, as Žižek stresses, the fundamental fantasy is definitely not some kind of final truth of the subject. It is, rather, "the ultimate, founding lie" holding his libidinal economy together.⁹² What is crucial in such an imagined scene invisible to the eyes of the subject is that he nonetheless, insofar as he operates within the masculine regime, acts as if there was a gaze out there for which the fundamental fantasy would fully reveal its secret. Incidentally, this is also the significance of the large number of audience speculations about the film's true meaning. While there is no consensus about the definitive content of the plot, the very form of these theories indicates a

⁹⁰ Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories," in Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition, Vol. 3*, trans. J. Starchey, 301-22 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953)

⁹¹ Slavoj Žižek, "Desire: Drive Truth: Knowledge," *UMBR(a): A Journal of the Unconscious* 2 (1997): 149.

⁹² Slavoj Žižek, "Our Daily Fantasies and Fetishes," *JAC* 21, no. 3 (2001): 650.

shared conviction that there is one, potentially visible if looked at from a unique angle.⁹³ It is this real-impossible gaze itself that Lacan identified with *objet a* in the field of vision, that is to say, the missing piece primordially separated from the subject appears to him as an imagined gaze beyond the horizon of the symbolic that has knowledge about this very lost object.⁹⁴ Consequently, one can traverse the fundamental fantasy by realizing that this transcendental gaze of the Other, the ultimate subject supposed to know, is blind, it has no secret to tell: the fundamental fantasy is fundamentally *inoperative*.

Something similar happens to Cobb on the last level, in the “limbo” of *Inception*’s dream-labyrinth where the time of the male homosocial slows down and enjoyment becomes dissociated from phallic object-instruments. He goes there to bring Saito back who fell into a coma on level 3 after being fatally wounded. We see Cobb’s body washed ashore of the ocean (a properly idyllic one this time); he is half unconscious, hallucinating his children playing in the sand, but they don’t turn their faces towards him; he passes out. The next shot is that of a soldier waking him up by poking a gun at him; the reverse shot shows the gleam of the sun blinding Cobb (and the viewer) until the soldier’s head comes to block it. They take him to Saito’s oriental palace where he has to sit at a conference table opposite to him.⁹⁵ Saito looks a 100 years old, despite the fact that Cobb just left him a minute ago one level up, indicating how much slower time flies down there. He slowly examines the two objects Cobb brought with him, a gun and a spinning top, the latter of which is Cobb’s “totem,” an object that can tell whether someone is in a dream or not (if it never stops spinning the person is in a dream). He spins the top and looks up, but his eyes are completely dark, his eyelids only half open. “Have you come to kill

⁹³ Disavowing, as Elsaesser noted, the fictional nature of the film.

⁹⁴ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 67-123.

⁹⁵ Wendy Chun refers to this romanticization of the hyperspace using East-Asian symbolism that is common in cyberpunk texts as “high tech Orientalism.” See Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “Othering Space,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. N. Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 2002), 243-55.

me?”, he asks with a feeble voice, but it is not an interrogation; it is a request. Cobb then looks up and stares at him with horror: the most powerful man he knows, the allegorical embodiment of neoliberal capital, is sitting there broken, impotent, waiting for someone to kill him. Like Marlon Brando’s Kurtz from *Apocalypse Now*, Saito is also a primal father without any secret to tell. Instead of a hidden meaning, there is only the blind repetitive movement of the totem, the stain of the fundamental fantasy standing for Cobb’s death drive, demonstrating that the real of “*jouissance* is what serves no purpose.”⁹⁶ Cobb then utters the words he told Mal before when he tried to castrate/enlighten her by waking her up: “I came back for you to remind you of something. Something you once knew; that this world is not real.” – Saito: “To convince me to honor our agreement.” – Cobb: “So we can be young men together again.” What didn’t work with Mal now succeeds through the symbolic pact between two men that folds the inoperative gestures of the two fallen characters into a homosocial ritual. Allegorically, Cobb saves corporate capitalism threatened by the excesses of the orient through its re-anchoring in white American masculinity. They wake up, and a moment later Saito indeed makes the phone call that allows Cobb to enter the US and reunite with his children as his payment for the successful inception-job on Fisher. Traversing his fundamental fantasy therefore doesn’t result in Cobb’s subtraction from the masculine status quo like it did for the revisionist noir hero; it leads instead to the reprogramming of this fantasy on his own terms, literally buying the *mise-en-scene* of patriarchal domesticity as a commodity-image in exchange for his work as a corporate spy.

⁹⁶ Lacan, *Encore*, 3.

5.3.5 Towards an Enlightened False Consciousness

On the one hand, such conclusion with the hero's successful wish fulfillment seems utterly alien to the classical noir narrative. As I have argued after Hugh Manon in Chapter 1, *that* noir protagonist is a pervert in the sense that he prefers to forever postpone the realization of his desire and fetishizes instead the very obstacle (*objet a*) that helps him to delay the moment of satisfaction. It is this perverse libidinal economy, I proposed, that leads to a spatiotemporal suspension unique to classical noir, what Vivian Sobchack calls the chronotope of "lounge time," where men and women idle their life away in the non-places of hotel rooms, bars, cafes and cars, cut off from productive work and the safety of home alike, forever fixed in a transitory moment without arriving anywhere.⁹⁷ Conversely, the hero of *Inception* emphatically does arrive home in the end precisely by traversing this quintessential noir fantasy about *jouissance* as unproductive, the pursuit of which that would trap him in an eternally suspended state of limbo. Similarly to Alex in *Shallow Grave* he can succeed because he never stops working, because even the traumatic affects of his subconscious life are solicited and rewarded as immaterial labour. As Roshaya Rodness notes, Cobb and his team perform their dream-work in what Antonio Negri called "tautological time," symptomatic of the late capitalist extension of the working day beyond its Fordist limits whereby "the entire time of life has become the time of production."⁹⁸ Along these lines Drew Winchur calls the film "corporate propaganda" for never problematizing the violence involved in serving this new regime of absolute exploitation, the cynical acceptance

⁹⁷ Vivian Sobchack, "Lounge Time Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. N. Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 129-69.

⁹⁸ Roshaya Rodness, "Capital Logic: *Inception* and Corporate Cartography of Dreamspace," (paper presented at ACLA Annual Conference, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, March 23, 2014); Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, trans. M. Mandarini (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 29.

of which helps Cobb to escape responsibility for the injustice done to Fisher,⁹⁹ itself only a repetition, as I have argued, of what he did to Mal before.

On the other hand, the blatant commodification of Cobb's wish fulfillment also makes the ending ambiguous. True, he is able to return to his children but these final images of happiness are shot in a way to resemble standard Hollywood depictions of a dream: bright lights, warm colors, and people smiling and moving in slow motion. Cobb himself seems to be skeptical about their authenticity, this is why upon arriving at his old house—which somehow looks exactly like he remembered—he spins the top just in case. But then finally, after repressing their memory for years, he sees the faces of his children and he ignores the result in what is the film's most striking cynicism-image. In the last shot the camera zooms in on the top spinning, perhaps just about to fall, but then we suddenly cut to the end credits without really knowing. The cynical viewer, much like Cobb himself, is encouraged to ignore the outcome of the test while knowing very well what result it might bring. That is to say, the top's previous function as the stain of the real undermining one's fantasy frame doesn't simply disappear through another primordial repression but remains there as part of the picture. After his cynical enlightenment, there is no way back to such naiveté neither for Cobb, nor the viewer. For this reason, despite its appeal of a Hollywood ending, the final scene of happiness cannot but have something uncanny, unreal about it, not unlike the corporate non-places that dominate rest of the film. We could say with Auge that just like his previous roles in the dream world, fatherhood itself becomes “a gentle form of possession” for Cobb, a self-imposed behavioural algorithm associated with the rather sterile and generic looking space of his home that lacks historicity and identity: the dinner table resembles the various conference room tables seen throughout the film, and although there are paintbrushes soaked in watercolours placed in a couple of jars for the children, the pieces of

⁹⁹ Drew Winchur, “Ideology in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*,” *CineAction* 88 (Summer 2012), 47.

paper next to them are completely empty. Such de-realization of reality is characteristic of the post-panoptic world of full transparency in which the disseminated gaze of the Other is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. It's a noir universe without shadows, that of the Baudrillardian hyperreal simulacra that seems to lack nothing insofar as even the blind spots that used to serve as its constitutive outside are now included in it.

Yet, as a film noir *Inception* also reveals the arbitrary cynical-sovereign decision that grounds such postmodern space of full transparency, differentiating it from the feminine logic of the any-space-whatever. The ending shows how Cobb's (and the masculine spectator's) cynical control over the narrative, his ability to *construct* its conclusion relies on an act of fetishistic disavowal, the split of his consciousness between knowing very well that his world is not real but nonetheless acting as if it was, opposing himself to the feminine totem, his fetish object that is unable to perform such cognitive distance.¹⁰⁰ From the feminine perspective, however, Cobb's false consciousness doesn't end by deliberately choosing an illusion (*his* illusion) over the idea of the truth. The ideological misrecognition of his situation lies rather in his assumption that he could, if he wanted to, go after the truth (mirroring the masculine viewer's belief in the final meaning of the story) that for him remains transcendental, adding one more layer of phallic exception to the symbolic status quo. His masculinist conviction is that if he didn't show restraint and lie to himself by looking away from the totem, he would find himself in the bad infinity of Woman, and the happy scene of his family home would turn out to be level 6 of an endless dream labyrinth. He re-masculinizes the post-Oedipal order by misperceiving the de-realization of his reality as the tragic price of his heroic-cynical enlightenment. The traumatic real he is not ready to confront, however, is the exact opposite, and this is what the Lacanian feminine subject

¹⁰⁰ On the concept of fetishistic disavowal see Octave Mannoni, "I Know Very Well, but All the Same..." *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. M. A. Rothenberg et al. (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003), 68-93.

stands for: there is only one world with no states of exception, one in which his children are always already dead, so to speak (even if they are alive they are ignorant of Cobb). The ideology of cynicism allows him instead to heroically take the boring petty-bourgeois reality as it is, with its simulated pseudo-pleasures modeled after corporate aesthetics, and still feel like he was a revolutionary by doing so—just like the viewer, who after the self-congratulatory results of his cognitive labour of piecing the narrative puzzle together might overlook the clichéd, rather unimaginative content of the plot.¹⁰¹

The top becomes the ultimate support of Cobb's (and the viewer's) new cynicism insofar as it stands for Mal (the top used to be her totem) after her fatal inception by her husband. As McGowan points out, in Freud's theory the totem is the substitute for the primordial father after his death/castration.¹⁰² What the endlessly spinning totem provides is the film's machine of inception through which the *jouissance* of the feminine drive is always already captured in an apparatus of phallic exception: the top's centrality in the final scene neutralizes the audience's doubts about the reality of the happy end by opposing the "real enough" of the simulated images to the vertigo of madness beyond the universe of meaning.

For this reason, Cobb's walking away from the spinning top sets up the same antinomy between the simulacrum and the sublime as the line "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown." in Polanski's classic. The difference is that while in early postmodern neo-noirs the affect holding

¹⁰¹ Nolan himself explained the ending of his film at a commencement ceremony at Princeton University: "In the great tradition of these speeches [to undergraduates], generally someone says something along the lines of 'chase your dreams', but I don't want to tell you that because I don't believe that," he said. "I want you to chase your reality." Nolan added: "I feel that, over time, we started to view reality as the poor cousin to our dreams, in a sense ... I want to make the case to you that our dreams, our virtual realities, these abstractions that we enjoy and surround ourselves with, they are subsets of reality." Ben Child, "Christopher Nolan explains Inception's ending: 'I want you to chase your reality'," *The Guardian*, Jun 5, 2015, accessed Jan 8 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jun/05/christopher-nolan-finally-explains-inceptions-ending>. *Inception* demonstrates that Nolan's idea of taking dreams for reality is built on an assumption of a necessary founding *lie*, a violent killing of the truth.

¹⁰² McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 169.

this antinomy together was melancholy, *Inception's* ending signals instead the successful completion of a process of mourning through a cynical decathexis from the lost object (Mal). If in nostalgic neo-noirs the sexual relationship was *lost*, pushed away by the melancholic so it could continue to be libidinally invested in as lost, in Nolan's film it is rather *betrayed*, which means that desire for (the lack in) the Other itself is given up for a safe but asexual masculine existence of immediate gratification. It is such betrayal, McGowan observes, that is the source of Cobb's guilt complex that doesn't cease with his return to single fatherhood but is rather amplified by it:

For Lacan, guilt does not result from disobeying and killing the father but from abandoning one's desire and one's object for the sake of the father and his law. As he puts it in his seminar on ethics, "The only thing one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one's desire." This statement appears to contradict every notion of ethics that we have: ethics involves the restraint of desire, and we feel guilty when we cede control to our desire, not when we give ground relative to it. But Lacan's point here is that the development of guilt has nothing to do with transgressive actions. Instead, it develops when one opts psychically for the father's law and betrays one's object or one's obstacle. Feelings of guilt arise as a result of the father's prominence within the psyche, without which one could act guilt-free. In *Inception*, Cobb chooses paternity over the object, and this explains the massive amount of guilt that haunts him throughout the film.¹⁰³

"The father's law" should be understood here as the phallic apparatus of sovereignty and in this sense guilt has always been a correlate of masculinity. However, as Lazzarato reminds us, the guilt of today's docile subject is intensified beyond its previous (Oedipal) limits because it serves

¹⁰³ Ibid., 159.

as the affective support for the neoliberal economy of indebtedness. Today “[e]veryone is a ‘debtor,’ accountable to and guilty before capital,”¹⁰⁴ condemned to produce and consume, or as Lacanians put it, *enjoy 24/7*.¹⁰⁵ In this context, Cobb’s cynical completion of mourning also signals his shift from the passive but limited guilt he suffered from as a result of a particular traumatic event (Mal’s suicide) to an actively chosen abstract and absolute guilt following his sovereign betrayal: guilt as a productive pathology mobilizing the neoliberal subject. As Copjec argues, the alternative to such infinite guilt in front of the superego is shame: encountering the lack in the Other instead of shamelessly placing one’s ego as guilty into it to cover it up.¹⁰⁶

5.4 From Anti-Utopianism to Authoritarian Capitalism

5.4.1 Undoing Snow Noir

Intervening into a feminine utopia by establishing the masculine regime of guilt is also the ideological agenda of Nolan’s cynical snow noir *Insomnia* (2002). It’s a murder mystery about a strangled teenage girl set in a fictional Alaska town called Nightmute during the time of the year when the sun never sets—an anti-noir location if there ever was one. As Ellie, the local police officer explains to the two LA cops arriving to help with the murder investigation, “people come here to live the way they want to.” Nobody is judged for their lifestyle: the small community operates without imposing guilt. By contrast, the main character Will Dormer, one of the outsider detectives, suffers from a bad conscience. There is an Internal Affairs inquiry into one of his previous cases where he planted evidence to secure the conviction of whom he thought

¹⁰⁴ Maurizio Lazzarato, *Making of the Indebted Man*, trans. J. D. Jordan (Amsterdam: Semiotext(e), 2012), 7.

¹⁰⁵ See Todd McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004)

¹⁰⁶ Copjec, *Imagine There Is No Woman*, 127.

was a child murderer. Hap, his long-time partner accompanying him to Alaska is supposed to testify against him when they return to LA. Their relationship is troubled but still friendly, which is why when during a chase after the killer in heavy mountain fog Will shoots and kills Hap, he himself doesn't know whether it was an accident or not. Either way, his growing guilt makes him cover up what happened and frame the killer they were after for the shooting. Walter, the pursued murderer, soon finds out about Will's tempering with the evidence and blackmails him into supporting his own agenda: steering suspicion away from himself by planting the murder weapon in the house of the victim's teenage boyfriend.

Like many of Nolan's films (*Following*, *The Prestige*, or the *Batman* series), *Insomnia* fits into the subgenre that David Greven calls the "double protagonist film," especially popular in the Bush to Bush era (1988-2008), where characters representing two types of manhood he calls narcissistic and masochistic battle each other until, as a rule, the latter wins the rivalry.¹⁰⁷ He sees the conflict revolving around the American ideal of self-made masculinity, the inherent contradictions of which the narcissist embodies as symptom.¹⁰⁸ "The historical problem of self-made manhood in American life is that the myth of total self-sufficiency threatens to impair or even destroy one's social connections and abilities to have intimate sexual relations."¹⁰⁹ Masochism, the embracing of a castrated male image is promoted in these films as a tool to mitigate the excesses of narcissism. Its true purpose, however, Greven insists, is not to critique the bourgeois-individualist notion of American masculinity but to realize it. As the author perspicuously notes turning around standard assumptions of psychoanalytic film theory,¹¹⁰ it is

¹⁰⁷ David Greven, *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009)

¹⁰⁸ On the history of the American ideology of the self-made man see Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 11-30.

¹⁰⁹ Greven, *Manhood in Hollywood*, 120.

¹¹⁰ Greven critiques both Laura Mulvey's account of the male narcissist's voyeurism as a form of being in control and Gaylyn Studlar's promotion of masochistic self-abandonment as its supposedly more progressive alternative.

the narcissist not the masochist who is more vulnerable to the gaze of the other,¹¹¹ constantly relying on the social recognition of his self-image.¹¹² By contrast, “masochism covers up an unwillingness to acknowledge that one is enslaved by one’s own image,” for which reason it is a better strategy towards self-made manhood. As Greven summarizes, masochism is nothing but “hypocritical narcissism.”¹¹³ Or, we could say: it is the narcissism of the cynic who maintains a private distance towards his social masks to hold onto the fetish of his authentic inner self.

Insomnia certainly reproduces this dynamic. The main difference between Walter and Will is not their sovereign-arbitrary use of lethal force, which both are guilty of, but their different relationship to the other’s gaze. The weakness of Walter, the middle aged novelist, is his dependency on his fans’ recognition, which is why he starts a romantic relationship with one of his teenage admirers. It is when the girl, resembling the 80s *femme fatale*, finally laughs in his face after a jealousy dispute that he starts hitting her and eventually strangles her to save his wounded ego. A similar narcissism drives him to Will, confessing the intimate details of his sovereign crime to him assuming they can build an obscene-homosocial bond. The detective, however, refuses to reciprocate and desperately tries to break their involuntary association. He also has a different, radically asexual relationship to his female admirers. Not only does he actively discourage Ellie from idolizing him, he even pushes her in the right direction in the mountain shooting investigation, thereby incriminating himself. Furthermore, he confesses his sins to a motel receptionist but, contrary to the film’s Norwegian original, not in order to have

See Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *Media and Cultural Studies Key Works*, ed. M. G. Durham and D. M. Kellner (Malden: Blackwell, 2006.), 342-353., and Gaylyn Studlar “Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 4 (1984): 267-82.

¹¹¹ The small or imaginary other in the Lacanian sense, that is, other people.

¹¹² This is also Michael Kimmel’s point about the male homosocial gaze. See Michael S. Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” in Michael S. Kimmel, *Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 23-43.

¹¹³ Greven, *Manhood in Hollywood*, 39.

sex with her but instead of it. The remake also omits the scene where the detective molests a teenage witness to pressure her for information, turning a sleazy protagonist who barely differs from the murderer into repenting moralist. To sum up, narcissistic manhood is presented in the film as weaker insofar as it's unable to control the female gaze it's dependent on, that of the empowered, autonomous *femme fatale* who used to be neo-noir's melancholic sovereign in the 80s and early 90s. For Nolan's cynic in *Insomnia* as well as in *Inception*, the option of male narcissism (to be an object of female desire) is a trap laid by the melancholic woman driving men crazy by looking for her perfect male counterpart while at the same time considering him to be always already lost (impotent, castrated).¹¹⁴ The turn to masochism, just like the shift to mourning, is therefore a strategy to re-masculinize sovereignty, to cut men's dependency on women by tying the sovereign role not only to a masculine gender performance but also to the *bios* of the male sex. By avowing their castrated public image, Nolan's cynics let go of a masculine ideal they didn't have control over in the first place, effectively privatizing phallic power by detaching it from the site of feminine surveillance.

It is nonetheless misleading to reduce the plot to the struggle between two types of manhood/sovereignty. What such framing omits is *Insomnia*'s feminine-utopian universe which poses a threat to both men. As J. L. A. Garcia observes, "[s]everal times during the movie, we come across a bright glare, which might eventually facilitate vision but at first only blinds and dizzies both the characters and us viewers."¹¹⁵ This blinding gleam of light can be read as *lumen*, as the Lacanian gaze of the Other as *objet petit a* from his parable about the sardine can, one that appears at the moment when the subject's fundamental fantasy driving his actions disintegrates. This is the light shining through the shutters of Will's motel room, threatening to turn his guilt

¹¹⁴ For a more detailed analysis of feminine melancholy see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

¹¹⁵ J. L. A. Garcia, "White Nights of the Soul: Christopher Nolan's *Insomnia* and the Renewal of Moral Reflection in Film," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 9, no. 4 (2006): 96.

into shame, making him an insomniac permanently haunted by a disorienting brightness. As a response he desperately tries to cover the window to get some rest (to reconstruct the blind spot on his visual field), to regain his strength and continue with his masculine quest. In the final showdown scene this light appears as the muzzle flash of the guns the two men shoot at each other simultaneously, catching up with their *objet a* at the moment of their death like the hero of *Doodlebug*.

Yet, the film doesn't simply end in a mutual (self-)destruction of the male doppelgangers like the classical noir *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959) Nolan clearly references with the denouement. The detective, although fatally wounded, survives long enough to assure that his masculine legacy lives on through Ellie. By now the female police officer has learned about Will's cover-up, but seeing how he's been willing to repent, she is ready to forgive him and discard the evidence implicating him in the shooting of Hap. Will's cynical move here is to reject the offer of redemption in front of the feminine gaze that would be the standard outcome in classical noir, and have people remember him as guilty for a crime he is not even sure he committed. After he dies, Ellie honours his wishes and places the incriminating bullet slug she wanted to throw away back into a plastic container, carefully seals it and puts it into her pocket; it is now her "totem," the reminder of the paternal law's entrance into a world formerly exempt of guilt. The final long shot shows her troubled gaze panning the landscape as if she suddenly felt watched by a mysterious Other's presence in it. This is what McGowan misses when he sums up Will's white lie as a proof of "the necessary badness of the good cop."¹¹⁶ His arbitrary lie is necessary only within the masculine universe of guilt based on a constitutive sovereign

¹¹⁶ McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 71.

exception. In the feminine regime that Ellie stood for until the end, in the utopia where everyone is always already redeemed, such lie is not only unnecessary: it is meaningless.

5.4.2 Batman, or, The “Inner Greatness” of Cynicism

While *Insomnia* is a snow noir set in the Alaskan summer when the snow has—symbolically and literally—already melted, in the climax of Nolan’s Batman trilogy (*Batman Begins*, 2005; *The Dark Knight*, 2008; *The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012) snow actually falls on Gotham City (a fictional equivalent of New York) and even its rivers freeze over. If *Insomnia* is about the successful masculinization of a small and remote utopian collective through cynicism, the final installment of the Batman series imagines the opposite scenario in the center of global capitalism: a failed revolution against the cynical masculine metropolis the eponymous hero struggled to establish. These blockbusters, contrary to the director’s low budget existential noirs, focus on the complex political apparatus grounded in cynical sovereignty: a police surveillance state controlled by the class of plutocrats Batman/Bruce Wayne belongs to, whose main objective is to keep the urban proletariat in check by marking and eliminating their self-appointed leaders as terrorists. The Batman series is perhaps Nolan’s strongest capitalist realist statement to date. It goes as far as suggesting that in today’s escalating conflict between democracy and capitalism one should side with the latter to curb the populist tendencies that ordinary people develop once they are allowed to govern themselves.

The first two films deal with the collapse of Gotham City’s liberal democratic law and order and the emergence of Bruce Wayne/Batman as a multimillionaire/masked vigilante—an ideal neoliberal subject running his privately funded security operation instead of relying on the state. This is the main difference between him and his philanthrocapitalist father, Thomas Wayne,

whose massive empire he inherits: his old man built hospitals for sick children and subway lines for the poor, making up for the gaps in public services without, however, interfering with the state's monopoly on violence. Bruce on the other hand is distrustful of the public as such, which is why he is taking law into his own hands. He doesn't use his wealth to prop up an autonomous public sphere; instead he privatizes its functions and runs it like an "enlightened despot."¹¹⁷ by the second film the police basically follow his instructions and he even has an (illegal) surveillance system covering the whole city that violates people's privacy. The primal scene that sets him on this path features him passively witnessing his parents' murder by a mugger as a young boy. They are killed despite the fact that his father offers his wallet without resistance—his naive liberal trust in the people blinds him to the class antagonism that makes him their enemy. As China Miéville points out,

[*Batman Begins*] argues quite explicitly (in what's obviously, in its raised train setting, structured as a debate with *Spiderman 2*, a stupid but goodhearted film that thinks people are basically decent) that masses are dangerous unless terrorised into submission (Spidey falls among the masses they nurture him and make sure he's ok. Bats falls among them they are a murderous and bestial mob because they are not being *effectively scared enough*).¹¹⁸

Like in *Inception* the protagonist's character development involves dealing with his feelings of guilt through mourning, that is, reconfiguring his paralyzing fundamental fantasy/memory by erasing the traces of the hostile masses from it, "terrorizing them into submission" like Cobb did to Mal.

¹¹⁷ China Miéville quoted in Mark Fisher, "Gothic Oedipus: subjectivity and Capitalism in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*," in *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 2, no. 2 (2006), accessed Jan 8, 2016, http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v2_2/fisher/.

¹¹⁸ China Miéville quoted in *Ibid.*

Accordingly, Bruce's response to the trauma of his father's and his own impotence is sadistic vengeance: after years of martial arts training by a mysterious warrior sect somewhere in Asia he returns home to Gotham and starts patrolling the streets at night wearing the mask of Batman. He is like an upper class Travis Bickle on a self-righteous rampage to criminalize the poor in the city's Dickensian ghetto, punishing them collectively for harbouring terrorists, just like the US does with the population of Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, etc. In the final showdown he symbolically undoes his father's liberal/social democratic legacy "by the demolition of the mass transit system that ruined everything by literally raised the poor and put them among the rich."¹¹⁹ For Justin Toh this new Batman is also symptomatic of a post 9/11 regression into a Reaganite neconservatism, glorifying hard bodied masculinity and the military industrial complex as America's saviours from terrorism. His gadgets are all military prototypes designed by Wayne Enterprises: the Batsuit is essentially a soldier's armour and the Batmobile is a tank.¹²⁰ As Nicholas Winstead observes, this is a clear digression from Joel Schumacher's camp version of Batman in the 90s that mocked white heterosexual male authority and embraced a queer interpretation of the superhero. By contrast, in Nolan's films "the absence of the heterosexual masculine power structure results in chaos, anarchy, and a world ruled by the lawless. It is the white male American dream that needs saving, and Batman shows up to deliver its salvation."¹²¹

Along these lines Cynthia Barounis contrasts Batman's "able-bodied corporate masculinity" to the Joker's "anti-bourgeois crip dandyism" in *The Dark Knight* (2008), noting

¹¹⁹ China Miéville quoted in *Ibid.*; As Vilja Johnson observes, in the final fight between Batman and the villain Ra's Al Ghul on a subway train "Batman purposely engineers damage to the train and the tracks so that the train will crash and explode, killing everyone on board in the process. Ra's Al Ghul nearly defeats Batman, but Batman uses the falling train as a diversion to gain the upper hand." Vilja Johnson, "It's What You Do that Defines You: Christopher Nolan's Batman as Moral Philosopher," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 47, no. 5 (2014), 961.

¹²⁰ Justine Toh, "The Tools and Toys of (the) War (on Terror): Consumer Desire, Military Fetish, and Regime Change in *Batman Begins*," in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"*, ed. Anna Froula et al. (New York: Continuum, 2010), 127-41.

¹²¹ Nick Winstead, "As a Symbol I Can be Incorruptible: How Christopher Nolan De-Queered the Batman of Joel Schumacher," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 3 (2015), 583.

how the villain acts like “the kind of BDSM queer whose perversity is the stuff of [...] heterosexual nightmares.”¹²² Like Cobb in *Following* or the character Jigsaw in the torture porn series *Saw*, the Joker sets up sadistic games for his victims, introducing them with the phrase “You know you’re going to enjoy this.” He, for instance, rigs explosives on two hostages at different locations but gives Batman enough time to save only one of them. Yet, this also means that he is not quite the “agent of chaos” he describes himself to be. Similarly to Nolan’s other anti-heroes his weakness is his narcissism, his need for an audience, his care for the other’s enjoyment, for which reason no matter how destructive he appears of law and order he nonetheless stands for a zero level of the social bond. We could even say that he embodies the autoimmune excess of the late Thomas Wayne’s liberal pedagogical agenda, the same self-destructive “feminine” madness that erupts from Gotham’s honorable district attorney Harvey Dent after the Joker burns half his face off—a fascistic force of terror that can only be neutralized by a cynical man without a passionate attachment to the people. Batman does it by taking Dent’s sins on himself after he kills him, pretending to be guilty of the murders he committed to fake an antinomy between good and evil the terms of which he can manipulate, not unlike like the way the US state department invented the Axis of Evil with Weapons of Mass Destruction to justify its permanent “war on terror.” While in *Batman Begins* the hero’s bourgeois vengeance on the people is limited to cuts in the welfare state, in *The Dark Knight* Batman goes further and engineers a permanent state of emergency suspending civil liberties: he pretends to be a terrorist and goes into hiding just to prevent the restoration of democracy.

It’s interesting to consider here Martin Fradley’s commentary who hesitates to simply call Nolan’s Batman films reactionary. He argues with Richard Maltby that in order to maximize

¹²² Cynthia Barounis, “‘Why So Serious?’ Crippling Camp Performance in Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight*,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 7, no. 3 (2013): 313-15.

its profits and reach a maximum number of viewers, “Hollywood entertainment disavows any responsibility for the ideological meanings audiences attach to or extrapolate from its products. In other words, rather than having any legible political view point, [the film] deliberately concedes to the individual viewer the authority to decide what it means.”¹²³ In the case of *The Dark Knight* this would mean that viewers can read the film both as a patriotic apology for George W. Bush’s war on terror as well as its critique; as a heteromasculinist reaction to queer politics or its support, etc. While such analysis of the film industry’s investment strategies is certainly convincing, it misses the point that ideology is not only in the films’ content but in their form as well, that Hollywood’s neutralization of antagonistic value systems into simultaneously present sides of antinomies is itself ideological, and is inscribed into the films as a distortion of their form, in Nolan’s case as a cynical-sovereign decision in a noir state of exception that grounds the seemingly post-ideological consensus. It is the ideological (bourgeois-masculinist) nature of this sovereign decision that McGowan also misses when he praises Batman’s anti-heroic self-sacrifice as an authentic act restoring justice:

The hero's relationship to heroic exceptionality forms the basis of authentic heroism. If the hero adopts the position of the exception as the difficult duty that one must perform for the sake of a greater good (the position of Iron Man, President Bush, Superman, and most exceptional heroes), then exceptionality becomes an unlimited end in itself that will never cease to be required. If, however, the hero adopts the position of the exception as a criminal duty, as a necessity that removes him from the realm of heroism altogether, then exceptionality can realize itself in justice rather than in the production of an increasing

¹²³ Martin Fradley, “What Do You Believe In? Film Scholarship and the Cultural Politics of the Dark Knight Franchise,” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2013): 19.

amount of injustice. [*The Dark Knight*] shows us that authentic heroism necessarily appears in the form of evil.¹²⁴

In reality, instead of undoing the exceptional masculine heroism of the superhero genre, Nolan rather reaffirms the trope cynically. He lets the viewer know that the place of exception is artificially constructed (Batman has no superpowers, only his wealth), but he also shows that he who can afford to put himself in this place (the bourgeoisie) is de facto exceptional anyway.

The Dark Knight Rises, the final installment in the saga is the first in which the class dimension of Batman's sovereign reign is explicitly challenged. The film's main antagonist, Bane, enters the scene as a Wall Street occupier, and by arming and mobilizing the homeless in the city's the underground sewer system he soon establishes his "dictatorship of the proletariat," taking Gotham hostage with the help of a nuclear bomb. He reveals the lie about Harvey Dent and releases the prisoners who were sentenced under the Dent Act, that is, during the state of emergency (the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie") devised by Batman. Instead of becoming the sovereign leader of the people, however, he simply tells them: "Gotham is yours! None shall interfere, do as you please!" The people indeed take over and as winter arrives they organize a city state out of the snowy Gotham that looks like a bourgeois caricature of the Paris Commune: show trials, terror against the rich, rationing, curfew, and armed gangs patrolling the streets. The real ideological move on the part of the filmmakers, however, is to make Bane's hidden agenda apocalyptic: he doesn't want communism, he is just using its rhetoric as a distraction while he prepares blowing up the entire city. "Some people just want to see the world burn," says Alfred, Bruce's butler about the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, summarizing the bourgeoisie's paranoid fear of a proletarian revolution that determines the representation of Bane as well.

¹²⁴ McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 132.

Nevertheless, as Žižek observes, the film, reactionary as it may be in the end, cannot but leave traces of Bane's authenticity intact, most importantly his unconditional love for Talia, his terrorist comrade and the *femme fatale* of *The Dark Knight Rises* played by the same actress (Marion Cotillard) who played Mal in *Inception*.¹²⁵ As Karthick RM puts it:

Bane, [...] with all the tough veneer, reveals the source of his hardness – love. In a fleeting, but touching moment, through a tear, the ‘monster’ tells the story of his becoming that Che Guevara so eloquently phrased decades back: “Hay que endurecerse sin perder jamas la ternura”. One must endure, become hard, toughen oneself, without losing tenderness. While Batman was brought into his line of work through a personal loss, Bane's initiation was an unselfish act of love [helping the child Talia escape slavery], which came with enduring terrible suffering and sacrifice [torture as punishment from his slave masters]. The ideal was not limited to his personal fetishes. As love goes, the ideal in itself was total and absolute. Contrast a Batman, inconsistent with both his personal and political lives, and a consistent Bane who saw no difference between the two. In this sense, Badiou is right in saying that the truly subversive thing in the world today is not sex, but love. No wonder, the chap who sleeps around represents the liberal system while the committed lover, the terrorists!¹²⁶

Like Batman's bourgeois cynicism, the authenticity of Bane's revolutionary commitment is also more than just one of the films conflicting value systems exploited by Hollywood. Its appearance is tied to a distortion of the film's formal texture into snow noir, a utopian negation of the

¹²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “Dictatorship of the Proletariat in Gotham City | Slavoj Žižek on ‘The Dark Knight Rises’,” *Blog Da*, Aug 8, 2012, accessed Jan 8, 2016, <http://blogdaboitempo.com.br/2012/08/08/dictatorship-of-the-proletariat-in-gotham-city-slavoj-žižek-on-the-dark-knight-rises/>.

¹²⁶ Karthick RM, “The Dark Knight Rises a Fascist?” *Unceasing Waves*, Jul 21, 2012, accessed Jan 8, 2016, <https://wavesunceasing.wordpress.com/2012/07/21/the-dark-knight-rises-a-fascist/>.

masculine law that separated *jouissance* from the site of politics. It shows that the film is the site of a meta-ideological struggle between the sovereign-masculine and the feminine-utopian organization of its symbolic order, one that could go *either* way but not *both* at the same time. In the regime of snow noir Talia is with Bane, and their political commitment and love for each other are indistinguishable. In Gotham's masculine noir order, by contrast, Talia sleeps with Bruce, both posing as eccentric philanthropists, equally deceiving the other about their true political agenda. In his other role as Batman, the bourgeois counterrevolutionary, he teams up (but doesn't have sex) with Selena (aka Catwoman) whose ideological and class alignment he finds more appropriate: after getting arrested for stealing jewellery, she accepts the deal offered by the police to fight Bane alongside Batman, effectively betraying, as Karthick stresses, her working class origins.¹²⁷ Her acceptance of the bourgeois-masculine rules is similar to Ariadne's entry into Cobb's men only team of corporate spies in *Inception*, and like her, she is the one who, as a freshly turned agent of patriarchy finishes off the villain (Bane in this case) threatening the male protagonist.

But it is Batman who restores the glory of the ancien regime by releasing Gotham's police force from captivity and repeating his fake sacrificial act from the end of previous film: he flies away with the nuclear bomb towards the sea just minutes before it detonates, making everyone believe that he died in the explosion. The city's grateful bourgeoisie builds a statue to honour the anti-communist hero and his example inspires a young policeman to quit the force and be the city's next masked vigilante. These scenes of restoration are cross cut with Alfred getting a table in an upscale café somewhere in Italy, surrounded by renaissance statues and marble pillars. As he looks up from his newspaper, to his surprise his eyes meet Bruce Wayne's

¹²⁷ Ibid.

sitting not far from him with Selena. The two men smile and nod at each other without Selena noticing, and Alfred stands up and leaves without saying anything. This is Bruce's reprogrammed fundamental fantasy: a silent homosocial exchange between male aristocrats from which the proletariat is finally excluded (they are outside of the frame playing their designated role as waiters) and which women are ignorant of.

5.5 Conclusion

The final scene of *The Dark Knight Rises* evokes the ending of classical noirs like *Out of the Past*, except that there the homosocial exchange is an impossible one between the dead noir hero and his mute assistant saluting the sign displaying his name, making it clear that the excess of the protagonist's bare life (*zoe*) can never be integrated into the masculine *bios*: even if he in the end helps to restore its status quo he has to die for his sins. Contrary to classical noir's doomed protagonist, Nolan's cynic can survive and even be accepted by a masculine community. This is what also happens at the end of *Inception*, where after they complete their mission and wake up on the airplane, members of Cobb's team silently and surreptitiously exchange gazes with one another while remaining seated, not to let Fisher know they've been cooperating—then they split up to live in their own fantasy worlds. This is Nolan's version of the *bios* that cynical sovereignty grounds. While Boyle downplayed the masculine homosocial dimension of the neoliberal multitude leaving us with the grin of his isolated but digitally connected androgynous heroes, for Nolan a strong masculine biopolitical community remains the condition of possibility for realizing private consumer fantasies. Without its safety net, the unbridled *jouissance* that neoliberal capitalism solicits in the people can lead to chaos and (self-)destruction, a bad infinity clearly marked as feminine. This is why Nolan is hesitant to simply embrace digital media. He

supports the simulacrum's powers of the false only insofar as they are grounded in the bourgeois white male body.

For Boyle cynicism means the viewer's/protagonist's emancipation from generic forms of life that reach an autoimmune crisis in the postmodern smart film. Nolan, by contrast resurrects the masculine generic as the mind game film that lays out the algorithms of filmmaking as audience manipulation to the open but invites the cynical viewer to participate in them anyway, *insofar as they are false* so that they can secretly hold onto their inner authenticity confirmed by their restraint of not seeking (and not speaking) the truth. This is why mind game film's contract with the viewer is not ironic. There is no shared laughter and mockery of the clichés of Hollywood filmmaking, only a cold pathos of taking it all for real while knowing very well that it's not. While Boyle offers his viewers an amoral spectatorship where truth is indistinguishable from a lie, Nolan prefers an immoral contract where truth and falsity remain distinct options but only an idiot or a madman would choose the truth.

If Boyle's version of neoliberal capitalism is a frictionless cyber-idyll, the horizontal networked existence of a connected multitude, Nolan's ideal is rather what Žižek called capitalism with "Asian values," that is, a blatantly hierarchical authoritarian form of power.¹²⁸ After all, Batman himself can only save the liberal-decadent Gotham after his oriental training, just like Cobb needs the Japanese businessman Saito to make him a good father again. What should be emphasized here is that the desire for such non-democratic capitalism is not nostalgic but future oriented, reflecting the current reality that it is China whose GDP is projected to surpass that of the US in the near future while economic growth in the liberal west is stagnating. This is the paradigm forming the male protagonists even in those Nolan films that don't

¹²⁸ Jonathan Derbyshire, "Interview with Slavoj Žižek," *New Statesman*, Oct 29, 2009, accessed Jan 8, 2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2009/10/today-interview-capitalism>.

explicitly fetishize the orient. *Insomnia*'s Will Dormer, for instance, is played by Al Pacino whose iconic roles include both megalomaniac criminal oligarchs (*Godfather*, 1972; *Scarface*, 1983) as well as honest cops "above reproach"¹²⁹ fighting late capitalist decadence (*Serpico*, 1973; *Heat*, 1995). Some of his films (typically noirs) even have him play the two archetypes simultaneously in a split personality (*Cruising*, 1980; *Sea of Love*, 1989). We could say that his screen persona embodies the postmodern crisis of Oedipal masculinity, its inevitable sliding into the position of the primordial father, a move that creates nostalgia for a now extinct benevolent fatherhood. Nolan, instead of looking back melancholically, offers a cynical synthesis of the antinomies at the heart of Pacino's roles, having him inaugurate a new epoch of patriarchy by lying out of an "ethical" duty. The return to American frontier masculinity of settler colonialism in the science fiction *Interstellar* (2014) is similarly presented as a future oriented project, as a means to save humanity from a zero growth economy forced on it by global warming.¹³⁰ Arguably, even Nolan's Victorian period drama *The Prestige* (2006) resurrects a pre-liberal rugged masculine individualism properly separated from the feminine sphere as a precondition for the effective use of new crowd-pleasing (and crowd-controlling) technologies, ultimately that of the cyberspace allegorized in the film as wireless electricity and teleportation. As a double protagonist film about two rival magicians, *The Prestige* tells a cautionary tale about the narcissist Angier buying a teleportation machine from the inventor Nikolai Tesla that replicates rather than transports an object to another location, making his Transported Man stage trick to result in a growing number of human doubles. Although he ends up developing an automatized mechanism for killing them, what he cannot comprehend and what his masochist rival Borden knows all too well, is that masculine sovereign violence is not the byproduct of a good magic

¹²⁹ McGowan, *Christopher Nolan*, 71.

¹³⁰ Eileen Jones, "Reactionaries in Space," *Jacobin*, Dec 10, 2014, accessed Jan 8, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/interstellar-review/>.

trick (allegorically: a good society of control) but its very basis.¹³¹ Without it one would end up with the uncontrollable multitude of the people ruining the show (we see the first double of Angier causing him trouble, demanding higher wages, etc.) Borden knows this because his version of the Transported Man relies on his twin brother—possibly the product of his own earlier visit to Tesla the film alludes to—whose existence he keeps a secret even from his wife, driving her to suicide by making her shared by two men rather than letting her in on the project.

On the other hand, despite their differences, at the end of the day both Nolan and Boyle affirm what could be called the chronotope of cynical neo-noir: the post-historical metropolis where the neoliberal entrepreneur of the self floats around in his monadistic bubble. According to the anonymous authors of the Invisible Committee, the metropolis is the new territoriality of global capitalism that collapses the modern distinction between city and countryside into a new fluid, transparent, neutral, and uniform space. Corporate non-places collide with the rhizomatic architecture of urban sprawl, simulated replicas of former neighborhoods and rural resorts push out the poor into constantly displaced shanty towns in an endless process of gentrification and low intensity class warfare.

[But] the metropolis is not just this urban pile-up, this final collision between city and country. It is also a flow of beings and things, a current that runs through fiber-optic networks, through high-speed train lines, satellites, and video surveillance cameras,

¹³¹ And doesn't this recall the difference between Heidegger's famous characterization of the Holocaust as the "manufacturing of corpses in gas chambers" and Agamben's insistence that this apparently automatized necropolitical machine was based on sovereign decisions of individuals? This means that perhaps Nolan has the same blindness about the nature of fascism that Heidegger had, attributing it to modern technology running amok that can be prevented through an authentic existential relation to one's self instead of letting its contours dissolve into the indistinct masses of industrial modernity. Heidegger didn't understand that it was the very "inner greatness" he praised in the Nazi movement of the 30s, their sovereign insistence for an existential revival of the German *bios* that directly led to the death camps. In a similar way, Nolan seems to be in denial about his own indirect condoning of fascism, attributing the excessive violence of the late capitalist world instead to the masses who want too much democracy. On Heidegger's relation to Nazism see Thomas Sheehan, "Heidegger and the Nazis," *The New York Review of Books*, 35, no. 10 (1988): 38-47.

making sure that this world keeps running straight to its ruin. It is a current that would like to drag everything along in its hopeless mobility, to mobilize each and every one of us. Where information pummels us like some kind of hostile force. Where the only thing left to do is run. Where it becomes hard to wait, even for the umpteenth subway train. With the proliferation of means of movement and communication, and with the lure of always being elsewhere, we are continuously torn from the here and now. Hop on an intercity or commuter train, pick up a telephone-in order to be already gone. Such mobility only ever means uprootedness, isolation, exile. It would be insufferable if it weren't always the mobility of a private space, of a portable interior. The private bubble doesn't burst, it floats around. The process of cocooning is not going away, it is merely being put into motion. From a train station, to an office park, to a commercial bank, from one hotel to another, there is everywhere a foreignness, a feeling so banal and so habitual it becomes the last form of familiarity. Metropolitan excess is this capricious mixing of definite moods, indefinitely recombined. The city centers of the metropolis are not clones of themselves, but offer instead their own auras; we glide from one to the next, selecting this one and rejecting that one, to the tune of a kind of existential shopping trip among different styles of bars, people, designs, or playlists. "With my mp3 player, I'm the master of my world." To cope with the uniformity that surrounds us, our only option is to constantly renovate our own interior world, like a child who constructs the same little house over and over again, or like Robinson Crusoe reproducing his shopkeeper's universe on a desert island-yet our desert island is civilization itself, and there are billions of us continually washing up on it.¹³²

¹³² The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 52-55.

Without exploring its class dimensions, Patricia Pisters calls this networked existence mobilizing the subject's affective economy the "brain-city," or "brain-world," represented by digital cinema's neuro-images.¹³³ I have referred to it as the cynic's isolated connectedness in the previous chapter, which applies to Nolan's and Boyle's heroes as well, with Boyle putting more emphasis on connectedness (deterritorialization through the digital) and Nolan on isolation (reterritorialization through a self-made masculine bubble).

¹³³ Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 33.

6 Sovereignty as Perpetual Self-Erasure of White Masculinity in the Films of Nicolas Winding Refn

6.1 Introduction

While Nicolas Winding Refn is often hailed as a central figure in the New Danish Cinema of the 90s,¹ his later, more cosmopolitan career has a lot in common with Danny Boyle's as their deterritorialized oeuvres map out the affective landscape of global capitalism from a generic western white heterosexual male perspective. Refn was born in 1970 in Denmark as a child of a film director and a cinematographer, but moved to New York with his family at the age of 8, which is why he considers the strongest cultural influences of his youth to be Reagan-era action and horror films—the ones, he fondly remembers, that glorified the violence of American capitalism, allowing him to rebel against his “hardcore Scandinavian socialist” parents.² Ironically, it is precisely his lasting commitment to a US centric global genre cinema that made him an ideal candidate to revitalize the national film industry of his country of origin, adding to it what Mette Hjort calls a “glocal” dimension with his 1996 debut film *Pusher*, a low budget gangster-noir inspired by Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973).³ Unlike his colleagues in the *Dogme 95* movement who had similar ambitions for Danish art house cinema, what Refn advocated for was the creative appropriation of global genre formulas and Hollywood-style marketing techniques targeting specific audience groups.⁴ While this strategy worked in making *Pusher* a hit in Denmark, its global release was still a gamble as a straightforward genre film

¹ See Mette Hjort, *Small Nation, Global Cinema: The New Danish Cinema* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2005), 4.

² Tasha Robinson, “The most important films in Nicolas Winding Refn's path from *Pusher* to the present,” *The Dissolve*, June 15, 2015, accessed April 9, 2016, <http://thedissolve.com/features/5-10-15-20/1065-the-most-important-films-in-nicolas-winding-refns->.

³ Hjort, *Small Nation*, 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 261.

from a small nation was a hard sell in the international festival circuit. It was the British distributor's move of calling Refn "the Danish Danny Boyle" that broke the path in legitimizing him for foreign viewers.⁵

Despite his affection for American genre cinema, however, contrary to Boyle Refn never quite made it to Hollywood. His first English language film *Fear X* (2003) was funded independently, shot in "Hollywood North" (Canada's Winnipeg standing in for Montana) and not only was it a major box office flop, it even made Refn personally indebted for years, risking foreclosure on his family home. He was forced to go back to Denmark and make two sequels to his by then cult movie *Pusher* that eventually restored his good standing financially and as an independent filmmaker, but he hasn't been successful securing Hollywood funding ever since. 20th Century Fox pulled out of his next American project *Drive* (2011) in the last minute, and although the film subsequently won the best director's award in Cannes and brought in 76 million dollar screening revenue worldwide on a 15 million budget,⁶ Refn's plans to follow it up with a blockbuster remake of the 70s sci-fi classic *Logan's Run* fell through due to creative differences with the producers.⁷ Since then, he has continued making English language films (*Only God Forgives*, 2013; *The Neon Demon*, 2016) but with mostly European money and an international cast including Hollywood actors like Ryan Gosling, Carey Mulligan, or Elle Fanning.

⁵ The film since then has been remade twice, once in India and once in England. See Danny Leigh, "Pusher returns—again," *The Guardian*, October 11, 2012, accessed April 9, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/oct/11/pusher-remake-nicolas-winding-refn>.

⁶ "Drive (2011)," *Box Office Mojo*, last modified June 6, 2016, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=drive2011.htm>.

⁷ See James Marsh, "Interview: Nicolas Winding Refn On Sci-Fi And The Genius Of JODOROWSKY'S DUNE," *Twitch*, September 29, 2013, accessed April 11, 2016, <http://twitchfilm.com/2013/09/interview-nicolas-winding-refn-on-sci-fi-and-the-genius-of-jodorowskys-dune.html>.

If Danny Boyle is an “indiestream filmmaker” with a solid if unspectacular position both in mainstream Hollywood and the British independent film scene while Christopher Nolan is a “blockbuster auteur” who has successfully merged his artistic ambitions with that of the major American film studios, Refn remains something like a European art house director “inclusively excluded” from Hollywood who has put on the mask of a genre filmmaker to get there but couldn’t fool the industry’s executives. A generous critic could say that he was unwilling to compromise on what he likes to call his “feminine European sensibilities,”⁸ his non-classical style of filmmaking he facetiously sums up as “I really like it when I don’t really know where things are going.”⁹ As Refn reveals in a documentary about his career, in the initial stages of the creative process he prefers to write down ideas for scenes or just single shots on index cards without having any story prepared to connect them.¹⁰ What interests him is the intensity of sounds and images, their potential for a violence on the senses that is unlike real life violence—a fetishistic quality of cinema he refers to as “unreal realism.”¹¹ “I don’t consider myself a very violent man,” he says, “but I have a fetish for violent emotions, violent images.” [...] “I do think that art is an act of violence.”¹² Justin Vicari usefully contrasts this *ars poetica* to what Mark Fisher called capitalist realism, the cynical claim “to have stripped the world of sentimental illusions and seen it for ‘what it really is’: a Hobbesian war of all against all, a system of perpetual and generalized criminality.”¹³ Refn is a filmmaker looking for new illusions, a new sentimentality even; the aesthetic redemption of the late capitalist world of noir decadence

⁸ “Nicolas Winding Refn: Biography and Film Analysis Part 1-Auteur Theories,” YouTube video, 23:32, posted by “Big Dracula Cinema,” October 26, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaJwb9o8c10>.

⁹ Justin Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn and the Violence of Art: A Critical Study of the Films* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 4.

¹⁰ *The Gambler*, directed by Phie Ambo (2006; New York, Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD.

¹¹ Peter Sobczynski, “Interview: Nicolas Winding Refn on ‘Drive’,” *efilmcritic.com*, September 16, 2011, accessed April 11, 2016, <http://www.efilmcritic.com/feature.php?feature=3293>.

¹² Refn quoted in Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn*, 38., 21.

¹³ Mark Fisher quoted in *Ibid.*, 25.

through cinema's powers of the false. If for Nolan such falsity meant the necessary immorality at the heart of the moving image while in Boyle's reading cinema was an amoral machine, Refn discovers a new morality in the viewer's masochistic submission to the violent affective powers of the cinematic image.

Contrary to Boyle and especially Nolan, Refn has little interest in complex narratives, almost always presenting his stories in chronological order, albeit often with unexplained gaps in the plot and surrealistic interludes in the tradition of David Lynch, Alejandro Jodorowski, or, in his latest film, Dario Argento. When asked about these, he doesn't pretend to have a final interpretation in mind, inviting the audience to "fill in the dots" their own way instead.¹⁴ This democratic approach to interactivity is the exact obverse of Nolan's carefully devised narrative labyrinths where the viewer's cognitive involvement amounts to nothing more than a forced consent to the director's rigid blueprint for the film. As Refn argues, "the idea that you can control art and make the perfect solution is the enemy of filmmaking."¹⁵ Indeed, formally as well as thematically his films lack any moralizing about the postmodern loss of the center, the decline of disciplinary power and patriarchal authority, and seem to embrace an anti-Oedipal and even post-apocalyptic aesthetic. While Boyle and Nolan responded to the white male homosocial's autoimmune crisis by recentering masculinity in the cynic's entrepreneurial self who consciously betrayed and used others for personal gain, Refn sticks to aestheticizing the neoliberal collapse of trust in the male bond and affirms it as the paradoxical sovereign-image of western sovereignty's never ending self-deconstruction. If Boyle and Nolan's heroes needed to cynically perform a Pascalian wager to attune their bare lives to the new deterritorializing rhythms of

¹⁴ R. Kurt Osenlund, "Interview: Nicolas Winding Refn," *Slant Magazine*, July 17, 2013, accessed April 11, 2016, <http://www.slantmagazine.com/features/article/interview-nicolas-winding-refn-2013>.

¹⁵ "The Director Behind "Only God Forgives" and "Drive" | Meet Nicolas Winding Refn," YouTube video, 7:03, posted by "The Creators Project," July 19, 2013, accessed April 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnLEllBcLEc>.

capitalism they didn't necessarily understand, Refn's characters, on the contrary, take retrospective cognisance of the fact that their bodies had already been submitted to a pattern that is fundamentally self-destructive, and they can only accept their fate in an inevitable yet strangely redemptive self-sacrifice. As he puts it, "there is no negative, only positive. If you hate something so much you must really love it."¹⁶ This way, however, far from overcoming cynicism, Refn ends up glorifying the inoperative, dying white male body as the authentic agent of neoliberal deterritorialization.

6.2 The Autoimmune Crisis of the Action-Image in Refn's Early Films

Like Boyle's *Elephant* or Nolan's *Doodlebug*, Refn's first film *Pusher* is also about the autoimmune crisis of white western heterosexual masculinity, depicting how the unwritten laws connecting the members of a homosocial community turn destructive to their well being in a neoliberal environment. Frank, a small time drug dealer in Copenhagen gets in trouble with his Serbian supplier Milo when, chased by two policemen, he drops the heroin he took from him on credit into a pond to avoid incarceration. We never learn for sure who called the police on him—whether his partner Tonny was the informer or his old prison buddy Hasse set him up for a fake drug buy as part of a deal with the authorities. In any case, the bond of trust that holds together the fragile symbolic economy of the city's masculine underworld isn't violated by overly ambitious gangsters like in the genre's Hollywood incarnations from *Scarface* (1932) to *The Usual Suspects* (1995), but by the intervention of the state apparatus itself severing men's ties to their criminal brotherhood, throwing their intimate relationship with the territory of the city off balance. It is the sudden appearance of the drug squad that blocks Hasse's car from cruising the streets of the metropolis in an attempt to synchronize with the rhythm of its traffic and look

¹⁶ "Full Nicolas Winding Refn Interview - Cannes 2013," YouTube video, 21:55, posted by "FSinterviews," May 30, 2013, accessed April 12, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4_m4BrTPB0.

inconspicuous during the heroin deal. In the ensuing on foot chase the shaky, handheld camera tracks an anxious Frank running from the lawmen like an athlete, but his somewhat overweight body cannot keep up with the frantic pace of the power pop soundtrack: arriving at the edge of a lake on his last breath he lets gravity pull him into the water. The detectives catch up with him, but, although he gets rid of the dope right in front of their eyes, they cannot charge him with anything without hard evidence. The true function of the police in the film turns out to be not determining the particular crime for which the justice system could impose a certain amount of punishment and thereby uphold the law of disciplinary power but making Frank guilty beyond any measure, having him throw away the object (empty the bag of heroin) that could serve to assess the quantity of his guilt as well as his debt to his creditors. This literally turns the discrete object of his desire into the Lacanian *objet a*, the embodiment of lack that he will be doomed trying to fill in for the rest of the film.¹⁷ The cops know this and let him go assuming that since he owes the drug money to someone his despair over his inability to pay it back would eventually drive him into their hands as an informer. This is how, as Agamben stresses, the state of control deals with crisis in general; it doesn't try to solve social problems like crime but lets them proliferate while managing their effects, to the point where the law itself becomes directly complicit in its own transgression, perpetuating lawlessness in a permanent state of exception.¹⁸ Among the criminals it is the drug lord Milo who represents this new post-disciplinary superego of control: the moment Frank confesses to him that he lost his heroin, instead of punishing him based on the principle of equivalence he arbitrarily increases his debt from 120.000 to 180.000 Crowns and gives him an unreasonably limited time to deliver. As a result, the temporal horizon

¹⁷ If classical noirs like *Double Indemnity* depicted *objet a* derailing the linear narrative progress of the film as a fetish object like Phyllis Dietrichson's ankle bracelet, drugs, the ultimate fetish objects in Refn's film are a stand-in for the void from the very beginning.

¹⁸ See Giorgio Agamben, "From the State of Control to a Praxis of Destituent Power," *Roar Magazine*, February 4, 2014, accessed April 28, 2016, <https://roarmag.org/essays/agamben-destituent-power-democracy/>.

of the protagonist's life built on exchanges of trust shrinks drastically; his future is cancelled by an imminent catastrophe he can now only try to postpone as his ability to control time through measurable labour becomes suspended. The political economy established by this new technique of governance is that of neoliberalism, based on a never repayable debt/guilt that makes people incessantly active yet always precarious, unable to ever balance the sheets.¹⁹

This duality underlies the film's narrative form as well. On the one hand, *Pusher* qualifies as a Deleuzian action-image in which each step the hero takes to pay back his debt modifies the situation he was previously in, and the new situation pushes him towards a new action.²⁰ As a hopelessly indebted man Frank has no choice but to start collecting the petty loans he himself handed out in his social network, transforming his bonds of trust in the community governed by a fiction of equality and shared futurity into monetized power relationships between creditor and debtor demanding immediate repayment, thereby gradually destroying the form of life he shared with these people that has been the condition of possibility for his own financial solvency. The chronologically unfolding story is a sequence of his encounters with various junkies and other lowlifes of Copenhagen who are either unable or unwilling to pay him anything, provoking his increasingly more violent but ultimately impotent outbursts that do nothing but further alienate him from his friends. That is to say, his situation certainly changes from episode to episode, but instead of getting him closer to his objective it changes from bad to worse, turning him more and more into an isolated noir hero driven towards his death. The trajectory of Frank's narrative is therefore a spiral one, representing an autoimmune crisis of the generic and more specifically of the action-image insofar as his violent acts, by turning against the biopolitical community that

¹⁹ On the relationship between neoliberal debt and guilt see Maurizio Lazzarato, *Making of the Indebted Man*, trans. J. D. Jordan (Amsterdam: Semiotext(e), 2012) as well as Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

²⁰ Deleuze calls this the "large form" of the action image, "SAS' [that] move[s] from the situation to the action, which modifie[s] the situation." Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986), 160.

could guarantee their instrumental function, become increasingly empty gestures of acting out, contributing to the endless postponement of their positive outcome.²¹ The generic forms of satisfaction that followed the action of a successful drug deal at the beginning of the film, the *jouissance* Frank shared with his friend Tonny (hitting on girls together in a bar, talking about their sex lives), Milo (tasting the food he cooked) as well as the junkie-prostitute Vic (getting high and passing out together), are now abandoned for an affect that Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism,”

a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic. What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.²²

In Lacanian terms, cruel optimism is the name for the masculine subject's death drive under neoliberalism where the unary trait he is doomed to repeat to give a zero level of consistency to his existence is the mark of his singular encounter with an unpayable debt, an unfillable object-

²¹ For Andras Balint Kovacs spiral narrative trajectories are characteristic of some European art films made between 1950 and 1980 like *Germany Year Zero* (1948) or *Jules and Jim* (1962). They are “stories in which the initial problem, although partially solved, triggers another conflict that reproduces the initial problem in a different situation. The characters go through a series of attempts to resolve the problem but each time they reach only a temporary solution. They constantly replicate new situations where the same problem remains to be solved. The conflict reemerges over and over again. The solution in these stories is typically not the elimination of the conflict but the elimination of the characters who cannot solve the conflict.” Andras Balint Kovacs, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 80. As I will show, Refn's version of the spiral is different insofar as the character is never fully eliminated; the problem rather disappears through its normalization as an aesthetic spectacle.

²² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 24.

cause of desire symbolized for Frank by the plastic bag emptied out of heroin. Cruel optimism is therefore an example of glorification: it's an attachment to the sovereign power apparatus that is quasi-religious rather than merely instrumental. This is why after a series of fiascos to round up the money, despite his growing panic he nonetheless returns to Milo with an optimistic facade, forcing a compliant smile on his face when the man eventually takes his jewelry and watch (the apparatus for the measurement of time) counting them well under what they are worth to cover a fracture of his debt. Then, when a moment later he receives a phone call from yet another of his unreliable debtors, his reward for being cooperative earlier is to get beaten up and tortured by Milo's henchmen.

Pusher therefore represents a different kind of crisis of the action-image from what Deleuze envisaged in his cinema books: not the breakdown of the sensory motor scheme of the classical Hollywood movement-image into pure optical and sound situations through the time-image of postwar art cinema in which characters become incapacitated to act, but the exposure of an atemporal, meaningless death drive as the motor of the chronological narrative progress of the movement-image itself.²³ What Angelo Restivo writes about the classical noir *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), that it's "a detective film in which there is no real detection, but just a kind of jerking forward of self-contained spasms of action"²⁴ applies to *Pusher* as well: the anticipated moment of reckoning never comes but the *passage a l'acte*, the impulsive violent action that fills its lack

²³ If, as Gregory Flaxman suggests, "the sensory-motor schema insinuates itself in the cinema as a pleasure principle (Lustprinzip)," its autoimmune crisis in *Pusher* reveals its drivenness by a surplus-enjoyment (*jouissance*) beyond the pleasure principle. See Gregory Flaxman, "Introduction," in *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of the Cinema*, ed. G. Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 21.

²⁴ Angelo Restivo, "Into the Breach: Between the Movement-Image and the Time-Image," *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of the Cinema*, ed. G. Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 188-89.

keeps the narrative going.²⁵ If, as David Martin-Jones argues, “[t]he movement-image can be seen to exist on what Deleuze and Guattari referred to as the reterritorialized ‘plane of organization’, while the time-image emerges on its interactive partner, the deterritorializing ‘plane of consistency’,”²⁶ *Pusher*’s autoimmune action-images reveal how the territoriality of the gangster film’s movement-image is already anchored in its own plane of noir deterritorialization. What *Pusher* stands for is not the breakdown of the sensory motor function but the normalization of its crisis into a new neoliberal form of precarious existence.²⁷ Frank doesn’t so much lose his ability to perform actions as he falls out of step with the refrain of the city, of the rhizomatic space of informal social links he shared with his misfit friends. According to Franco Berardi,

[t]he refrain is an obsessive ritual that allows the individual—the conscious organism in continuous variation—to find identification points, and to territorialize herself and to represent herself in relation to the surrounding world. The refrain is the modality of semiotization that allows an individual (a group, a people, a nation, a subculture, a movement) to receive and project the world according to reproducible and communicable formats.²⁸

²⁵ In his seminar on anxiety Lacan distinguishes acting out from what he calls *passage à l’acte*. While the former remains tied to the social symbolic order and should be understood as a message to the big Other, the latter is the sign of the psychotic abandonment of the social link. In biopolitical terms, acting out is immunizing while *passage à l’acte* is autoimmune. In *Pusher*, as in film noir in general, however, this distinction collapses and we have a glimpse at the psychotic core of the social link. See *Jacques Lacan, Anxiety. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book X*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2014)

²⁶ David Martin-Jones, “Schizoanalysis, Spectacle and the Spaghetti Western,” in *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Cinema*, ed. I. Buchanan and P. MacCormack (New York: Continuum, 2008), 75-76.

²⁷ Perhaps *Pusher* also offers a noir meta discourse explaining a phenomenon observed by David Martin-Jones, how “[i]n the 1990s and 2000s [...] mainstream cinemas around the world have begun to produce films that are, broadly speaking, hybrids of Deleuze’s two image categories.” For him, a film like “*Fifty First Dates* is caught somewhere in between movement and time-image, in a suspended moment where, for the most part, characters’ actions are unable to change a situation for the better as they would in the movement-image, yet without their being as entirely incapacitated as characters in the time-image.” David Martin-Jones, “Demystifying Deleuze: French Philosophy Meets Contemporary U.S. Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. W. Buckland (New York: Routledge, 2009), 217; 219.

²⁸ Franco Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 130.

Frank's rhythmic detachment starts with his fall into the pond that marks his symbolic rebirth as an indebted man and gradually turns him into an affectless automaton repressing what Berardi calls sensibility, "the faculty that makes empathic understanding possible, the ability to comprehend what words cannot say, the power to interpret a continuum of non-discreet elements, non-verbal signs and the flows of empathy,"²⁹ "the ability to harmonize with the rhizome."³⁰ It is his growing impatience with his monetarily non-quantifiable human relations that leads to his violent outbursts like beating up Tonny with a baseball bat, destroying the workshop of a friend who cannot pay him, or hitting his prostitute "girlfriend" for showing affections for him. In one crucial scene when he sees her passed out on the couch after shooting a dose of heroin, he starts caressing her legs, but getting scared of the sudden intimacy triggered by his distracted gesture he decides to wake her up (in the middle of the night) by sonically abusing her with loud guitar music. Here as in elsewhere his violence is an attempt to regain rhythmic control over his life while at the same time disavowing its condition of possibility: a refrain shared with the other. He forces the tired woman to witness his performance of a virile solo routine (his self-image) which remains a masturbatory display of masculine *jouissance* as Frank then quickly leaves, avoiding dancing or having sex with her. The blaring rock music continues non-diegetically as he leaves the building, but outside a vertigo inducing series of 360 degree point of view shots reveals the growing panic behind his facade of self-confidence (his nighttime stroll yet again fails to bring any results).

The final scene then translates this loss of spatial orientation into sovereign images of time. After a successful sale of a small amount of stolen drugs for 9000 Crowns in a dance club,

²⁹ Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*, trans. A. Bove et al. (London: Minor Compositions, 2009), 124.

³⁰ Berardi, *The Uprising*, 121.

Frank reneges on his promise to run away with Vic to Spain, planning to offer the money as partial payment to Milo instead in yet another cruelly optimistic decision. The woman, instead of quietly accepting his betrayal like she always has, grabs the money and runs away. Frank chases her outside but she jumps into a cab and disappears. He now stands motionless on the street in the middle of the night, hopelessly out of step with the pumping techno music and the flickering lights of the disco behind him. As a return of the repressed, images of his former friends turning against him pop up in his mind: Milo and his hitman preparing a body bag, the drug dealer he robbed loading a gun, and Vic driving away alone. These crystal images of time capture the zero level of neoliberalism's autoimmune economy of debt as a self-destructive masculine *bios* posited against a feminine line of flight—sovereign-images that re-instrumentalize Frank's body even at the moment of its final collapse into a gesture. The close-up of Frank's half lit face frozen into silent despair, his blank upward gaze into the void is like a cynical homage to Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*. As the "reverse shot" to a black screen before the final credits makes it clear, instead of divine transcendence there is literally nothing for Refn's male hero outside the noir city.³¹

Although he never leaves the force field of the masculine law, contrary to the protagonist of Nolan's films, Frank cannot restore his patriarchal authority to curb the deterritorializing momentum of capital. At the same time he doesn't succeed adapting to it either like Boyle's heroes who after a connective mutation are able move in synch with the machinic rhythm of the neoliberal economy. In Refn's early films, neoliberalism has no refrain; when Frank's bare life becomes detached from the homosocial community of Copenhagen's criminal underworld it

³¹ It's worth contrasting this ending with that of another well known Danish film from the same year, Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* in which the final reverse shot does make God exist within the diegesis. However, as I argue elsewhere, the apparatus of the masculine gaze mobilized by von Trier is no less cynical than the outcome of Refn's film. See Tamas Nagypal, "The Postfeminist Masquerade and the Cynical Male Gaze: The Disavowal of Sexual Difference in Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*." *E-rea* 12, no. 2 (2014)

doesn't turn into an entrepreneurial self like Renton's or Jamal's. And yet, just like the capitalist realists in Nolan's and Boyle's films, he effectively cannot imagine an alternative to the status quo. Instead he masochistically fantasizes about the violent death he will have to suffer so that things can continue as they are.

Both a digression from and a return to *Pusher's* themes, *Bleeder* (1999), the second of Refn's four Copenhagen noirs is a slacker comedy infused with a family melodrama about incest—"[t]wo stories for the price of one" as the IMDb blurb puts it.³² One of the protagonists, Leo, is played by the same Kim Bodnia who was Frank in *Pusher*, and his plotline is about a comparable violent unravelling of his homosocial environment, this time caused by his anxiety about fatherhood. He becomes obsessed with the thought that his friend Louis, the brother of his pregnant girlfriend Louise, is the real father of his unborn child, which puts him on a path of impotent acting out. Violence escalates when he starts beating the woman uncontrollably, to which Louis responds by kidnapping and torturing him, and finally injecting him with HIV—a very literal signifier for the male homosocial's autoimmune disease. It's important to note here that for Eve Sedgwick who coined the term, homosocial means male to male social relationships that, while potentially homoerotic, repress explicit homosexuality.³³ Slavoj Žižek makes a similar argument about patriarchal apparatuses mobilizing homoerotic rituals such as army hazing practices to support an otherwise rigidly heteronormative regime.³⁴ The point is that homoeroticism can have an immunizing function within reactionary ideological regimes only insofar as the performance of the homosexual act itself remains a taboo. And while Refn's film gets close to breaking it, it doesn't, in fact both the grotesquely theatrical HIV injection scene

³² "Bleeder (1999)," *Internet Movie Database*, accessed June 6, 2016, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0161292/?ref=mv_sr_2.

³³ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)

³⁴ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 2008), 31.

and the verbal references to brother-sister incest, that is to say, the autoimmune implosion of *heterosexual* patriarchy only reinforces the homosexual act as impossible. Autoimmune violence is also substituted for gay male sex when the HIV infected Leo shoots Louis in the stomach, and instead of finishing him off he lets his diseased blood drip into his wound before turning the gun on himself. His self-sacrifice is therefore not a subtractive one in Badiou's sense of the term³⁵ because instead of affirming a universal community by abandoning his ties to the homosocial, he perpetuates them in their state of autoimmune dysfunction, purifying and preserving them as the *bios* of dying men.³⁶ Appropriately, we don't see the moment of his death either; before he could pull the trigger the screen dissolves into a red blur.

This noir plotline unfolds against the backdrop of a tight group of male friends, Leo, Louis, Lenny, and Kitjo hanging out after work, doing nothing or watching violent movies in the private screening room of Kitjo's video store. As a counterpoint to the always agitated Leo worrying about the economic future of his family, Lenny, the introvert video store attendant has no ambitions to become anything but a slacker. Despite his social awkwardness it is him who eventually develops a successful romantic relationship with a lonely waitress, Lea, working in a local diner. In not so subtle ways Refn suggests that the temporality of cinophilia can create shared habitual bubbles and protect human bonds from autoimmune self-destruction under the psychic pressures of neoliberalism. Lenny, like his predecessor Travis Bickle, asks the girl out for a first date to the cinema. But unlike Travis or his buddy Leo, he is too nervous to assume a masculine role; after watching her from a distance for a while waiting for him in front of the building he turns around and spends the evening with his male friends instead. They watch a

³⁵ See Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

³⁶ This is why Vicari's assessment of the scene is misleading. For him, the denouement is "drawn straight from ancient mythos, a spectacular sacrifice summoned forth to cleanse inexpiable sin, a blood guilt." Vicari, , *Nicolas Winding Refn*, 72-73. Primordial guilt is not eliminated but normalized after Leo's sacrifice.

horror film, but their homosocial viewing experience is ruined when Leo stands in front of the screen and pulls a gun on Louis as a clear sign of his inability to embrace imaginary over real violence, the passive (“feminine”) pleasures of being acted upon by violent images during the unproductive time of film viewing over the masculine acting (out) on the body of the other. That is to say, for Refn, just like for Deleuzian film theorists like Gaylyn Studlar or Steven Shaviro, the spectator is not Laura Mulvey’s sadistic voyeur occupying the diegetic world’s transcendental lack to gain phallic control over the screen but a masochist playfully regressing into a state of pre-Oedipal submission to a maternal Other of plenitude, a subject position characterized by “fantasy, disavowal, fetishism, and suspense.”³⁷ As Vicari summarizes, “[c]inema is the real mother, or mother-substitute, in *Bleeder*.”³⁸ However, this shift from a phallic to a “feminine” relationship to cinema, from ideologically invested image to “post-ideological” affect, from the territorialized identity of the spectator to her deterritorialized becoming also reflects the historical change from disciplinary societies to societies of control. It is this shift in the form of capitalism that Refn often betrays a rather uncritical ideological investment in (“I don’t make movies, I make experiences,” he quips)³⁹ which complicates his “feminine,” and occasionally genuinely utopian take on the cinema.

In *Bleeder*, it is the law of the mother that Lenny chooses when he refuses to attend Leo’s funeral, or when sitting idly on the pavement with Kitjo in one of the film’s slacker comedy scenes he announces he won’t take a better paying job in a competitor’s video store because he’d have to change buses to get there. As in *Pusher*, agitated bodily posturing in *Bleeder* is

³⁷ Gaylyn Studlar, “Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 4 (1984): 268. On a Deleuzian, masochistic concept of spectatorship see also Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

³⁸ Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn*, 82.

³⁹ “Nicolas Winding Refn & Christina Hendricks Exclusive Interview - THE NEON DEMON (JoBlo.com),” YouTube video, 3:25, posted by “JoBlo Movie Trailers,” June 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDR48s8YZ1E>.

associated with the futile attempt to pick up the accelerated pace of neoliberal life, perhaps best illustrated by Leo and Louis walking fast next to one another at the beginning of the film, seemingly enjoying the synchronized rhythm of their upper body's a masculine swing—an illusory harmony akin to *Elephant*'s autoimmune tracking shots resulting in deadly violence. By contrast, Lenny quickly abandons his manly attempt to walk Lea home from a bus stop sensing how ridiculous his performance is, but as the smile that appears on both of their faces after he turns around and leaves suggests, this is not the end but the beginning of their relationship. When he revisits her in the diner the day after he similarly failed to act like a man on their date, she is not mad at him for standing him up; after Lenny offers to wait there until her shift ends, she agrees to go to another film with him. The final shot frames them standing together quietly, passing the time with some empty gestures like wiping the counter or taking a sip of water. Then, to underline the artifice of the movie set, what appeared to be natural light from the outside is turned off and the two of them are now surrounded by darkness, lit only by two spotlights from above like a noir couple in a classical Hollywood film. The scene then dissolves into red just like before Leo's suicide, creating an equivalence between these two ideologically opposed narrative conclusions insofar as they both mobilize cinema's powers of the false when their action-image threatens to fall apart into pure gestures. In both cases the red screen is a fetish substitute for/protection against an inoperative *real* threatening to reveal itself to the viewer through the act of sovereign violence in the first storyline, and by reflecting on the unproductive time spent in the cinema in the second one.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ In his essay *Fetishism*, Freud defines the fetish as “a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it.” He suggests the fetish object is a result of the disavowal of castration, the confrontation of the lack of the mother's penis—the lack that Lacan later identified as the *real*. Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume 21*, ed. and trans. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 156.

Refn's experimentation with a synthesis between noir and anti-noir formulas continues with his snow noir *Fear X* (discussed in detail in the next section), which opens a new chapter in his career not only as his first English language film but as his first venture into the territory of slow cinema. The Danny Boyle-esque wide angle stylizations and tableau shots of *Bleeder* were already a departure from the gritty, low budget realism of *Pusher* with its shaky camera and lack of artificial lighting. *Fear X* continues on this path but reaches a temporary dead end due to its massive financial failure that forces Refn to take a step back towards a more conventional film form and direct two sequels to *Pusher*. *Pusher 2* (2004), which the director likes to refer to as "the girly *Pusher*,"⁴¹ follows Frank's former partner Tonny (played by Mads Mikkelsen—Lenny from *Bleeder*), after he is released from prison, in his futile attempt to prove his worth to his gangster father Smeden. He finds himself stuck in-between the man's sociopathic male tribe of criminals who don't accept him (they have him ride in the trunk after successful robbery—in the interstitial space within a classical noir non-place) and the women they abuse, exploit, and control through drugs, and who viciously mock him for being an impotent loser (when he cannot get an erection with two prostitutes they laugh at his "hobbit dick"). While in prison, Tonny also became a father without his knowledge, and now his anxiety over child support payments pushes him into risky drug deals. After they fail, he almost strangles his girlfriend when she finds her snorting cocaine during a wedding/bachelor party while leaving their baby on the floor in a dark corner of the bar.⁴² Yet, despite his momentary misogynistic outburst he doesn't comply with Smeden's order to kill the mother of the man's other son, a prostitute asking for too much child

⁴¹ See Danny Leigh, "Pusher returns"

⁴² The apocalyptic scene of a prostitute's striptease to monotonous techno music in front of a whole wedding party including children and the subsequent abandonment of the baby for snorting cocaine in the kitchen is Refn's nod to *Trainspotting*'s use of the dead baby as a symbol of the deadlock of parenthood under neoliberalism.

support. He kills Smeden instead, then picks up his own baby and runs.⁴³ They get on a bus in a hurry to leave everything behind, the last shot showing the back of Tonny's head as they are on the move, inverting the final image of *Pusher*. Nevertheless, we cut to the credits before they could leave the city.⁴⁴

If *Pusher 2* complicates the gender dynamics of the original by feminizing its male protagonist, *Pusher 3* (2005) does the same to the ethnic composition of Copenhagen's criminal underworld by problematizing the hero's whiteness. The main character this time is Milo, the Serbian drug lord from the first film but in a significantly more vulnerable position: he is an aging heroin addict participating in a twelve step program, his young Arab competitors are trying to squeeze him out, his supplier from Amsterdam just gave him fake ecstasy instead of the heroin he ordered, and on the top of it all, he's in charge of organizing his rather spoiled adult daughter's expensive birthday party. The only way he can keep it all together is by smoking a heroin cigarette from time to time, then feeling guilty and running to the addicts' meeting to confess. In one scene he is sitting exhausted in a café when an old friend walks in, offering him some heroin. He says no, but, as the friend notes, his eyes say yes: he takes the dope and smokes it in the bathroom. This is the routine of cruel optimism he lives by that turns negation into affirmation, preventing his escape and perpetuating his pain. The final image sums it up with showing him standing at the edge of his empty pool smoking, the camera facing him in a long shot to capture the magnitude of the void he risks falling into.

Refn also has some clever commentary about the biopolitical regimes of imperial violence intersecting with Milo's neoliberal enterprise. As Hjort points out, one of the

⁴³ The scene is homage to John Woo's heroic bloodshed films.

⁴⁴ Furthermore, the bus seems to be local public transport not a coach.

consequences of New Danish Cinema's glocalization in the mid-90s was what he calls an "ethnic turn," "transforming film culture into a site for public debate about questions of citizenship and belonging."⁴⁵ The *Pusher Trilogy* does this, he suggests, through an ironic exaggeration of Danish stereotypes about the ethnic other, a technique that aims at defusing xenophobia rather than reinforcing it.⁴⁶ This explains why Milo's henchman-torturer is called Radovan, after the chief Serbian orchestrator of Srebrenica massacre killing thousands of Bosnian Muslims in 1995, and for those viewers who may not make the connection immediately Refn throws in a small shrine with the photo of Radovan Karadžić in Milo's house, indicating the war criminal's quasi-religious worship. In the third film which was made after yet another ethno-nationalist conflict in the Balkans, the NATO bombing of Serbia after an (allegedly) attempted genocide of (also predominantly Muslim) Kosovo Albanians in 1999, two Albanian gangsters make their appearance, taking over Milo's heroin supply line and dragging him into the prostitution business. They fulfill the stereotype (and to a large extent fact) of the Albanian mafia taking over the EU's drug trade and human trafficking, exploiting the fact that Kosovars were given refugee status after the war by western countries.⁴⁷ Milo's other competitor, the hotheaded Arab drug dealer Lille Muhammed is also a caricature, playing on the Danish fear of immigrants and islamophobia when announcing his people will take over the old man's territory simply because there are more and more of them. What makes this web of ethnic micro-conflicts complicated is that they are not simply based on the distinction between ethnic (white) Danes and immigrants, but they are overdetermined by often contradictory western imperial objectives. The fact that Milo and his Serbian crew find themselves in a both precarious and powerful position in the

⁴⁵ Hjort, *Small Nation*, xii.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁴⁷ See Jana Arsovska, *Decoding Albanian Organized Crime: Culture, Politics, and Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015)

criminal underworld is not unrelated to the similarly ambiguous role of Serbia in global geopolitics as a staunch ally of Russia and thus the enemy of NATO on the one hand, and the forefront of “Christian” Fortress Europe’s battle against the Muslim threat on the other. In the 90s the clash of civilizations agenda had lower priority for the west than the NATO expansion to the East into the territory of the former USSR, to the point that, after Afghanistan, the US actually deployed Mujahideen fighters (Wahhabi Islamic radicals) both in Bosnia and in Kosovo to advance its interests against Russia and its allies in the region.⁴⁸ After 9/11 the accents changed a little, of course; however, Russophobia (the co-signified of Serbophobia) didn’t disappear as much as Islamophobia appeared by its side. This is how the perfect noir role for Milo opened up by 2005: while his people have been the enemy of the west in the previous decade, the very reason (or rather pretext) for their othered status, the killing of Muslims, now makes them uniquely qualified to defend the borders of western civilization. This is how Milo finds himself in a biopolitical zone of indistinction mandated to reenact, as a sovereign, the torture and murder of Muslim bodies with the help of the by now retired Radovan who comes back to his old habits one more time to help out an old friend.⁴⁹ They kill the Kosovar Rexho, as well as Lille Muhammed, throwing in a Polish pimp as a third who turned violent after a Danish madam refused to buy his underage prostitute-slave—in his case the Danish cultural racism towards Eastern European migrants also conflicts with western imperial interests as Poland, just like Kosovo, is a firm ally of the US. This, of course, is what sovereignty is about: to exclude those who are formally included in the political community while standing in its Agambenian

⁴⁸ See Peter Dale Scott, “The US-Al Qaeda Alliance: Bosnia, Kosovo and Now Libya. Washington’s On-Going Collusion with Terrorists,” *Global Research*, July 29, 2011, accessed June 6, 2016, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-us-al-qaeda-alliance-bosnia-kosovo-and-now-libya-washington-s-on-going-collusion-with-terrorists/25829>.

⁴⁹ The rest of Milo’s crew are decapitated by stomach problems after eating a supposedly authentic Serbian dish made by their boss—yet another example of an autoimmune disease.

zone of indistinction⁵⁰ where the official law and order is suspended (we even see a Danish policeman deliver Muhammed to Milo on the condition that he doesn't hurt him, in other words, that hurting him doesn't implicate him). Refn goes over the top with the scene of biopolitical violence as well, shooting it as an extended homage to his favorite film, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Milo and Radovan slaughter the men like pigs, hang them upside down on meat hooks to bleed them dry, then gut the bodies and chop them into pieces—all this in the backroom of Milo's restaurant on the night of his daughter's birthday feast next door, literalizing the price of a southern immigrant's integration into the symbolic order of Empire.

After the success of the *Pusher* sequels Refn leaves Denmark again, playing it safe this time by directing a couple of indie films in the UK before trying his luck in Hollywood again. The first of these is *Bronson* (2008), a biopic of "Britain's most violent prisoner" Michael Gordon Peterson, better known by his fighting name as Charles Bronson. He was put in jail for armed robbery in 1974 but is still in in prison today due his ultraviolent behaviour, spending most of his life in solitary confinement in various penitentiary and mental health institutions. Refn turns the man into a performance artist of the white male body's blissful self-destruction, a kindred spirit exploring the *jouissance* of extreme violence that serves no purpose outside of itself. Abandoning the documentary realism of *Pusher 2* and *3* he builds on *Bleeder's* Danny Boyle inspired stylized film language with static tableau shots, an oversaturated colour palette, an overbearing soundtrack combining dynamic pieces from Verdi and Wagner operas with hypnotic synth pop, and a Brechtian direct address of the viewer by the protagonist wearing clown make-up, narrating and occasionally singing his life story on a theater stage.

⁵⁰ See Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

This turn to experimental form is part of Refn's increasingly more conscious framing of his cinematic project as schizoanalysis, an endeavour Deleuze and Guattari defined as following "the machinic indices of deterritorialization" as opposed to (a narrowly understood) psychoanalysis that "settles on the imaginary and structural representatives of reterritorialization."⁵¹ As Amy Herzog explains, "[r]ather than interpreting pre-constituted subjects, schizoanalysis maps the nexus of forces that work to make subject formation possible. The goal is to expose the repressive operations of such systems, dismantling them and opening them to unforeseen connections with outside elements."⁵² Applied to the film viewer's experience, schizo cinema emerges out of the crisis of the generic. As Anna Powell argues, it is a technique of filmmaking that "breaks down our immune defences, infecting and living in us on all levels, sprouting new growths of sensation, perception and thought."⁵³ In *Bronson*, Refn chooses resistance to two classical Foucauldian repressive institutions, the prison and the asylum to explore the becoming schizo of the western white heterosexual male subject, the possibility of his body's disentanglement from Empire's biopolitical apparatus. For the protagonist, the prison offers "madness at its very best,"⁵⁴ a permanent opportunity to resist disciplinary power (guards, doctors, prison bureaucrats, the riot police, etc.) through the repeated performance of violence

⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hutley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 316. This, of course, limited view of psychoanalysis is summed up by Ian Buchanan as the analytic discourse that "emphasizes the imaginary and the symbolic at the expense of the real." Ian Buchanan, "Introduction: Five Theses of Actually Existing Schizoanalysis of Cinema," in *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Cinema*, ed. I. Buchanan and P. MacCormack (New York: Continuum, 2008), 8. By contrast, Žižek argues that the Late Lacan's turn towards the real actually overlaps with Deleuze's interest in anti-Oedipal desiring machines. See Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

⁵² Amy Herzog, "Suspended Gestures: Schizoanalysis, Affect and the Face in Cinema," in *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Cinema*, ed. I. Buchanan and P. MacCormack (New York: Continuum, 2008), 64.

⁵³ Anna Powell, *Deleuze, Altered States and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 116.

⁵⁴ As he himself puts it in the film.

for its own sake, without any positive results.⁵⁵ As he puts it in his stage monologue, “I knew I was made for better things. I had a calling. I just didn't know what it is.” “What do I want?” is his recurring question throughout the film for which his violent acts themselves are just variations, addressing the big Other in a hysteric acting out, while at the same time undermining the social link in a psychotic *passage a l'acte*. In other words, his becoming schizo is an autoimmune process not unlike the one Refn's other protagonists like Frank and Leo go through, the result of which is the loss of the hero's ability to talk: the film ends after guards in riot gear beat Bronson into a bloody pulp and lock his naked body into a cage, responding to his inarticulate howling with turning the lights off. Yet, this ending, breaking with the otherwise chronological narration, is then looped back to the beginning of the film where, still accompanied by the protagonist's voiceover, we see him training for the next fight in the very same cell, then the guards reopen the door to brutalize him once again.

In Foucauldian terms, it's safe to say that Bronson's relation to disciplinary power is *agonistic*. It is

“...a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle, less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation.”⁵⁶

[...] “Every power relationship implies, at least in potentia, a strategy of struggle, in which the two forces are not superimposed, do not lose their specific nature, or do not finally become confused. Each constitutes for the other a kind of permanent limit, a point of possible reversal. A relationship of confrontation reaches its term, its final moment

⁵⁵ As Vicari notes, “Bronson is also refusing to internalize the Foucauldian panopticon, the self-censoring structure at the heart of the punitive social order,” meaning that he doesn't confess the reason for his violence. Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn*, 143.

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” trans. L. Sawyer, *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 790.

(and the victory of one of the two adversaries), when stable mechanisms replace the free play of antagonistic reactions.”⁵⁷

As Brent Pickett notes, in *Madness and Civilization* Foucault suggests that before the modern era, discourses of reason and unreason had such an agonistic relationship, each with their own autonomous meaning serving as the other’s limit, co-existing in the same discursive space, often entering a dialogue with each other. With the rise of bourgeois reason, however, unreason was increasingly transformed into madness, a mere pathological lack of its opposite to be excluded from meaningful discourse as such, separated from it in a never ending process of interrogation where abnormal bodies were made to confess the *rational* truth of their deviation.⁵⁸ It is only through confessional techniques of power that madness was constructed as a site of absolute otherness, fixed as the unconfessable remainder of the “stable mechanism” of reason. By contrast, Refn’s film turns back the modern notion of madness into unreason, restoring its agonistic play with the discourse of reason and eliminating the transcendental illusion of its unrepresentable difference responsible for its ontological subjugation.

Ironically, though, it is through its redefinition as autoimmune violence that madness is once again normalized in *Bronson*, becoming immanent to the same field of power that bourgeois reason occupies today, the field that Deleuze called the society of control. This moment of transition from disciplinary to control society is precisely captured in the film (as well as in the real life of Bronson): after spending years heavily medicated in lunatic asylums throughout the 70s, part of a neoliberal anti-welfare state measures of the Thatcher-era they certify him sane in the early 80s and let him out. As his voiceover comments: “Apparently I

⁵⁷ Ibid., 794.

⁵⁸ Brent L. Pickett, “Foucault and the Politics of Resistance,” *Polity* 28, no. 4 (1996): 448-49.

managed to cause the system tens of millions of pounds in damage, and her majesty no longer wanted to pleasure herself with Britain's most expensive prisoner." The expression "pleasure herself" is worth looking at more closely here as it reveals a libidinal link between the body politic of Britain and its unruly ("mad") subject reduced to the status of bare life, medicated into a vegetative state in an asylum. It refers to the masculine *jouissance* gained from excluding the *homo sacer* from the *bios* of the Queen's Empire, the sovereign act performed by the doctors and bureaucrats turning Bronson's incapacitated body into the Lacanian real phallus, inclusively excluded from the community of language users. Under a disciplinary regime, such subject, although bombarded with the normative rhythm of productive life, is prevented from actually synchronizing his or her body with it (this is why women in classical noir had to be punished arbitrarily). In an emblematic scene that functions as a vanishing mediator between the regimes of discipline and control, all the patients of the asylum are locked into a large mess hall, trying to dance to the Pet Shop Boys synthpop song *It's a Sin*—a metaphor both for the old regime's exclusion of undisciplined bodies and the emergent neoliberalism's machinic enslavement/mobilization of that very same excess through an affirmative economy of guilt. The result is a chaotic mess in which everyone is out of step with the beat in their own way, Bronson being the most extreme of all, staggering like a zombie due to the heavy dose of sedatives. Frustrated with his half-paralysis, he turns his head towards the skylight and, in yet another Refnian nod to Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*, he growls inarticulately.

As a sign of the changing times, however, his mad plea to "God" is actually answered: he is released under the new government policies, which redefines his relationship to the Queen's self-pleasuring body politic. When he visits his queer uncle to seek his support, the man introduces him at his house party with the line: "ladies and gentlemen in ladies attire, allow me

to present my favourite nephew, newly relieved of her majesty's pleasure." Not only is the word queen resignified here as a male transvestite, the entire biopolitical apparatus of the British Empire becomes "queered" from here on as an institution held together by gay male desire. When Bronson meets his old flamboyantly queer prison mate who now runs bare knuckle pit fights, the man simply says "let's fuck" instead of "let's talk business" when he wants to hire Bronson as a boxer to beat up "poor gypsies" for money.⁵⁹ Significantly, the hero remains firmly heterosexual in this environment openly queer in performance only (just like in *Bleeder*, actual gay sex remains a structuring absence). It is for stealing jewellery for his girlfriend that he is incarcerated again; to the prison warden's question what he's been doing outside he enigmatically answers: "I've been building an Empire!" And he is quite right; with his release his formerly *homo sacer* body was transformed into neoliberalism's new sovereign, his madness now mobilized to support an increasingly deterritorialized neoliberal Empire. Instead of heavy sedatives, he now receives a gay art instructor encouraging him to express himself. One of his drawings is of a naked male torso bent over on the prison floor; it has multiple heads of Bronson's likeness with phallic noses attached to it, some coming out of his anus and other body cavities while others are linked through twisted umbilical cords. An animated sequence shows this anal machine making repetitive, masturbatory movements, its enlarged penis with a life on its own posing for one of the many surveillance cameras and camera-human hybrids in the room. Various phallic shaped birds, insects, and excremental beings carrying Bronson's body parts move around the fecal spectacle as if they were animated by its self-pleasuring drive. To put this blueprint into practice, the hero then takes the art teacher hostage; tying him to a pole he turns him into a statue-replica of himself while plugging his mouth with an apple, creating a kind of totem figure instituting the taboo of homosexuality. It is necessary so that his homoerotic

⁵⁹ Homage to the Walter Hill/Charles Bronson classic boxing film *Hard Times* (1975).

sadomasochistic play with the prison staff could continue: he puts on black body paint and jumps at the armed guards naked as if to re-enact the colonial resistance to the British army, or perhaps the coal miners' battle with Thatcher's police force. Another time he asks the guard himself he just took hostage to rub his naked body with grease as a preparation for the fight he thereby provoked. In other words, homosexuality, much like madness, is only normalized as the autoimmune violence of western white heterosexual masculine *bios* on itself, as the masochistic complicity with its never ending deterritorialization.⁶⁰ This is how one should read Vicari's observation that in *Bronson* "violence is no longer posed as an explicit denial of inter-male sexuality. In fact, with homoerotic tensions now full blown, so to speak, the violence which they usually, in genre terms, prefigure and summon forth can naturally be full blown as well."⁶¹ Inter-male sex is not so much denied by inter-male violence anymore as it is postponed by it; not repressed but disavowed in a sovereign decision to perpetuate an always pre-coital masculine *bios* through autoimmune violence. Or, to put it differently, homoeroticism in *Bronson* is absorbed entirely into homosocial violence as an *end in itself*, which prevents it from becoming a gesture, pure *means without an end*.⁶²

⁶⁰ As Marco Abel stresses: "Masochism is a practice—one that is not about the hope to overcome enslavement but about regulating the moment of enslavement." Marco Abel, *Violent Affect: Literature, Cinema, and Critique After Representation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 24.

⁶¹ Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn*, 66.

⁶² The distinction comes from Agamben who argues that "what is relayed to human beings in gestures is not the sphere of an end in itself but rather the sphere of a pure and endless mediality." Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), 58-59.

6.3 The Sovereign Self-Erasure of the Sovereign in Refn's Slow Cinema

Period

Bronson is the ultimate film of Refn's first auteurial period dealing with the autoimmune crisis of the action-image under neoliberalism. By finally turning the pursued goal itself into a taboo, it redefines action as acting out/*passage a l'acte*, substituting its instrumental function with a form of unreason that never yields any positive results. Once all pretenses to change the hero's situation are eliminated from the narrative in a process of purification, accents in the film form also shift to the suspense before action sequences, what in Deleuzian terms could be called the interval between the perception-image and the action-image, a place that in the sensory-motor schema of the movement-image is normally filled out by an affection-image linking them, but which is now emptied out to give way to pure optical and sound situations in a time-image.⁶³ Most often throughout the film Bronson's face is frozen into an expressionless state purified of any affect that could betray his motives. He is ready to act but neither he, nor the viewer knows why. On the other hand, since real action never comes, the film deploys static tableau shots, time lags in the middle of dialogues, and slow motion sequences to create a suspended temporality. These are the devices that dominate in Refn's second, post-action or slow cinema period that starts with *Fear X* (2001), and after a little detour back to the action-image continues with *Valhalla Rising* (2009). His new style of filmmaking can be understood as a shift in his approach to an unrepresentable *real* (death, homosexual encounter, etc.). As Žižek usefully argues,

⁶³ As Deleuze argues, in the opsigns and the sonsigns (pure optical and sound situations) of the time-image "[t]he interval of movement [is] no longer that in relation to which the movement-image was specified as perception-image, at one end of the interval, as action-image at the other end, and as affection-image between the two, so as to constitute a sensory-motor whole. On the contrary the sensory-motor link [is] broken, and the interval of movement produced the appearance as such of an image other than the movement-image." Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986), 34.

[there] are two fundamentally different ways for us to relate to the Void, best captured by the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise: while Achilles can easily overtake the tortoise, he cannot ever reach her. [...] We either posit the Void as the impossible-real Limit of the human experience which we can only indefinitely approach, the absolute Thing towards which we have to maintain a proper distance – if we get too close to it, we get burned by the sun – our attitude towards the Void must then be thoroughly ambiguous, marked by simultaneous attraction and repulsion. Or else we posit it as that through which we should (and, in a way, even always-already have) pass(ed).⁶⁴

For Žižek, the former approach is what Badiou called purification, the peeling away of layers of imaginary reality to get to the kernel of the real, while the latter is the method of subtraction that “starts from the Void, from the reduction of all determinate content, and then tries to establish a minimal difference between this Void and an element which functions as its stand-in.”⁶⁵ I’d like to argue, first of all, that this distinction also summarizes what in the previous chapters I called the opposition between the masculine and the feminine form of the death drive. The masculine version emerges as an autoimmune madness immanent to the logic of desire, as a drive to spiral towards the void on a collision course, capturing *objet a*, its fantasmatic stand-in that normally propels the subject’s actions insofar as it remains beyond the horizon of meaning. In the feminine drive, by contrast, the subject circles around this non-signifying remainder, enjoying it in its very meaninglessness without opposing it to the symbolic order. While the former is trying to recover the void as the lost sense grounding the self, the latter embraces it as the lack constitutive of a

⁶⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “From Purification to Subtraction: Badiou and the Real,” in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. P. Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004), 167.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

common sense. In the cinema, the masculine drive reaches its pure form in the sovereign-image while the feminine drive through the decreation of the image into gesture in a subtraction-image.

Harry, the protagonist of *Fear X* lives in a post-traumatic universe: his wife had been brutally murdered by an unknown assailant in the parking lot of the shopping mall where he works as a security guard. He now spends his free time looking through surveillance footage hoping he'd spot someone unusual. He soon gets a hold of a low quality VHS tape showing the homicide itself, but the face of the murderer is too blurry to identify. It would be easy to suggest that his libidinal economy is dominated by a drive to know, much like his cinematic predecessors' in *Blowup* (1966) or *The Conversation* (1974). The hero's attempt to get close to the site of his traumatic loss, however, is not the only way he responds to his encounter with the void. *Fear X* also captures a frozen stillness of Harry's lifeless world with a snow noir imagery, for instance in the slowly turning 360 degree shot of his snowbound street in the suburbs that has a similar function to the final shot of *On Dangerous Ground* (1951): they both express the (im)potentiality of the feminine subject to negate the masculine fantasy of an authentic life, countering the drive to know with a non-imagination, substituting something like a "positively charged void"⁶⁶ for the sovereign subject's fundamental fantasy. These shots operate in a utopian mode of atemporality, circling around an eternally unchanging site, offering an alternative to the capitalist time of abstract labour anchored in sovereign-images. In their very form they are cinematic gestures that negate the logic of suture, erasing the extra-diegetic space of the Absent One. At the same time, Brian Eno's eerie drone ambient score reveals a sublime tension holding this temporary refuge together, emphasizing that it's an artificial construct, there is nothing natural about it. In fact the utopian panning shot works only in opposition to the film's opening,

⁶⁶ A "positively charged void" is how Žižek notoriously describes the universe in the opening monologue of the documentary *Žižek!* (2005). *Žižek!*, directed by Astra Taylor (2005; New York, Zeitgeist Films, 2006), DVD.

Harry's jealousy fantasy of slowly pulling the curtain of his bedroom and watching his wife walk across the street in the snowfall, then disappearing into a mysterious house next door. The two scenes represent antagonistic, feminine and masculine reactions to his wife's death within the protagonist's mind: the drive to spin around a fixed place with a surrounding that is fundamentally lacking as opposed to the drive to cross over to another site where a loss that caused this world's lack had supposedly happened, and relive its trauma by gathering knowledge about it. In another scene, Harry is watching surveillance tapes at home when the video feed gradually turns into static. He keeps staring at the TV screen until his dead wife appears in the periphery of his vision moving about in the kitchen. We see the frame divided from his point of view between the kitchen and the TV, a reverse shot showing his eyes wonder between the two sites, a scene promising access to his fundamental fantasy and a place where fantasy is already traversed, voided. As the woman disappears behind a wall he stands up and follows her into the bathroom, where he relives his memory of finding out about her pregnancy. In Vicari's reading, "*Fear X* seeks to posit some kind of inchoate transcendentalism (in the form of pregnancy, snow, vast landscapes) as an authentic if elusive refuge from duplicitous image and word."⁶⁷ Is this binary, however, really so simple? Isn't the paradox of this scene precisely that it is the electronic noise of the television that stands for a utopian refuge corresponding to 360 shot in the snow earlier while the recollection image activates a masculine drive to inhabit an impossible-lost other place? Crucially, it is not the video electronic image that provides the clues pushing the narrative forward (the blurred face of the perpetrator proves to be a dead end), but Harry's entry

⁶⁷ Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn*, 103.

into his fantasy world, a David Lynchian parallel universe of his memories, dreams, and hallucinations filling in the gaps of his reality.⁶⁸

Ironically, it is an (imaginary) analogue photograph that starts Harry's fantasy-investigation in this alternative world inside his head, an image that unlike the useless CCTV footage he can blow up to find hidden clues in it—a process representing his drive to know rather than an actual indexical link to reality.⁶⁹ Expecting to find traces of his wife's unfaithfulness he uncovers a masculine conspiracy instead the contours of which, however, are unclear: she had to die either because she witnessed the unlawful execution of a crooked cop collectively organized by the male police force, or the cop was silenced by the conspirators after he performed his illegal task of femicide. We learn this from a rather cryptic scene in which the police chief explains to Peter, the cop who was designated to do the cover-up murder, how important the work they are doing is, without saying what it is exactly: “You knew, we all knew and accepted the possibility of this event happening. Innocent people are hurt and killed every day. This is how the world works. We have to keep our focus on our goals, on our ideals. He was a corrupt cop.” Like with most dialogues in the film, there are long pauses between his lines, underlining the presence of the unsayable within the symbolic order. The *real* Harry is faced with in his dream world is therefore the obscene secret of masculine sovereignty, the unbridgeable (arbitrarily bridged) gap that separates the patriarchal *bios* from the bare life of the

⁶⁸ As Donato Totaro argues, Refn's uses what Pier Paolo Pasolini called “free indirect discourse” “where, through a series of interlocked discursive strategies, the author, Refn in this case, gives the viewers the necessary material to imagine the world through Cain's subjectivity (which is not the same as saying that the viewer experiences the world as if he or she were in Cain's shoes). To quote Pasolini, “[free indirect discourse] is, simply, the immersion of the filmmaker in the mind of the character and the adoption on the part of the filmmaker not only of the psychology of his character but also his language” Donato Totaro, “Fear X: An Obsessive Inquiry into Knowledge, Art and Uncertainty,” *Off Screen* 17, no. 3 (2013), accessed June 7, 2016, http://offscreen.com/view/fear_x.

⁶⁹ Lacan called the knowledge that the drive seeks “acephalic,” headless, as it ultimately coincides with subjective destitution, the disintegration of the fantasy scene orienting the subject. See Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II (1954-1955)*, trans. S. Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 169.

subjects supporting it. When he finally asks Peter who possibly killed his wife the question “Why?” the man is unable to respond; he just starts shaking and shoots Harry in the stomach.

The bullet doesn't kill the protagonist, however, as much as it makes him part of the male tribe through a ritual of unsayable violence. When he sees the blood seeping from his wound, his formerly stoic demeanour finally breaks down: he clenches his hand into a fist and, boiling with rage, he goes after Peter. The space around him becomes increasingly de-realized, and as he enters a dark room, we cut to a minute long sequence of abstract red images; pulsating digital shapes with the occasional contours of a female face barely visible,⁷⁰ the dark ambient soundtrack now erupting with a screeching noise as if Harry had disappeared into primordial chaos. When we finally see the reverse shot from inside the room, he is indeed gone; the elevator door he came through is closing and the vast interior is filled with nothing but a mysterious dark fluid. After an abrupt cut, the next scene shows Harry in a hospital bed surrounded by members of the local police. He confesses he killed a man, but he cannot remember his name, and after an inaudible conversation with someone off screen the cops tell him they didn't find a body, therefore no crime had been committed. Another long pause, after which one of them cryptically adds: “We know what happened to you. You cannot change what was. What used to be.” Harry starts crying, for the first time in the film, as a sign that he finally accepted the loss of his wife. A policeman then drives him outside of the limits of the imaginary city to his car somehow parked there, gives him his keys and leaves. Harry throws away the photo-clues of his investigation, gets into his car and disappears into a now empty and arid landscape where the snow has apparently melted.

⁷⁰ In fact it becomes visible only when viewing the scene at a slower than normal speed. See Totaro, “Fear X”

The trajectory of the hero's journey in *Fear X* follows the Hegelian logic of *Aufhebung*, passing through a thesis and an anti-thesis towards a synthesis. He starts from an atemporal position of the feminine drive, gaining a minimal distance from the void of his trauma through subtraction (by embracing lack in the world), he then shifts to the purifying logic of the masculine drive, looking to uncover his fundamental fantasy with regards to his wife, and finally, after he is confronted with the unrepresentable real of his fantasy (arbitrary sovereign violence), he returns to ordinary reality except now it is loss he embraces not lack. That is to say, we move from the feminine non-all of snow noir to masculine noir with a state of exception. In the former, Harry's dead wife is omnipresent in the form of the frozen world itself while in the latter, she is excluded from both the now divided actual (symbolic) and fantasmatic (imaginary) layers of the world and becomes an element of primordial chaos (the real). While femininity is associated with a virtual (potential rather than actual) realm of atemporality in both cases, it is only in the masculine logic that it is separated from ordinary reality into the domain of violence for its own sake grounding the actualized patriarchal *bios*—a separation that turns Woman into one of the names of the (primordial) father.⁷¹ In the feminine mode, by contrast, woman refers not to an ontologically separate Other but to every subject insofar as they have the potential *not* to become sovereign (not to become a man in the Lacanian sense). If in the masculine regime atemporality is associated with a transcendental realm of chaos, in the feminine logic it's always already immanent to this world as the potential of all human beings to stop contributing to the capitalist flow of productive time, to find a *different use* of time.

It is this Lacanian-Agambenian distinction between different uses of the atemporal that Berardi's post-Deleuzian association of atemporality with the sphere of exploitation under digital

⁷¹ On the Lacanian notion of Woman as one of the names of the primordial father see: See Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* (New York: Verso, 1996), 155-59.

capitalism misses. He suggests, first, that since “[t]here is no such thing as a time of virtuality, because time is only in life, decomposition, and the becoming-death of the living, [therefore] [v]irtuality is the collapse of the living; it is panic taking power in temporal perception.”⁷² Second, for him, panic is the symptom of the digitalization and acceleration of sphere of production; it’s a result of psychic overstimulation under semio-capitalism which the human body cannot tolerate.⁷³ The part of the film that follows Harry’s quest for knowledge certainly fits this narrative; he, like the dream-workers of *Inception*, enters his mindscape to perform cognitive labour (in his free time after his shift in the mall), playing the private investigator when the police are unable to find his wife’s killer. In this virtual realm of tautological time, a moment before his subjective destitution into digital chaos, he in fact gets a panic attack; his hyperventilating stops only when his anxiety is overtaken by rage. For Lacan, panic and anxiety in general is caused by the proximity of the maternal other; it’s a fear of engulfment the subject overcomes by introducing lack in her place, like Freud’s grandson did through his Fort-Da game with a cotton reel standing in for his mother.⁷⁴ In a similar way, Harry’s panic and violence are two sides of the same masculine apparatus substituted for the suffocating incestuous unity with the maternal other of the digital, drawing the subject into a vortex of deterritorialized surplus-labour and offering him sovereign violence as the only way out.

On the other hand, however, Berardi’s critique doesn’t apply to the film’s moments of *utopian* atemporality in which time doesn’t so much collapse through panic as it stands still as a result of a double negation of the deterritorializing as well as the reterritorializing impulse of the masculine regime. The Agambenian concept of impotentiality better describes this use of

⁷² Franco Berardi, *After the Future*, ed. G. Genesko and N. Thoburn (Baltimore: AK Press, 2011), 51.

⁷³ Berardi, *Prekarious Rhapsody*, 44-45.

⁷⁴ For Lacan’s account of the Fort-Da game see Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 103. [E. 318-19]

atemporality than the Deleuzian category of the virtual as it places the potential *not* to be(come) at the center of human freedom: for Agamben, “to be potential means: to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential.”⁷⁵ By contrast, Deleuze's notion accounts for potentiality in purely positive terms, as the motor of constant change driving the flux of becoming beyond what is actual that, as Berardi is right to point out, comes dangerously close to the neoliberal ideology valuing the flexibilization and constant reinvention—ultimately a digital mutation—of the self.⁷⁶

It's this latter use of the virtual that leads to the semio-capitalist mental disorders Berardi's identifies that explain the sovereign-masculine dynamics of *Fear X*. He insists that there is a dialectic today between the “[i]ntensification of nervous stimuli [and the] retreat of libidinal investment,”⁷⁷ between the “the pathologies caused by overload (panic, attention disorders, dyslexia) [and] the ones caused by disinvestment (depression and even autism).”⁷⁸ Harry's drift towards panic and murderous acting out exemplify the former,⁷⁹ while his quiet isolation belongs to the latter. We could also say that panic and violence are part of a his

⁷⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, trans. D Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 182. He continues: “if a potentiality to not-be originally belongs to all potentiality, then there is truly potentiality only where the potentiality to not-be does not lag behind actuality but passes wholly into it as such. This does not mean that it disappears in actuality; on the contrary, it preserves itself as such in actuality. What is truly potential is thus what has exhausted all its impotentiality in bringing it wholly into the act as such.” Ibid., 184.

⁷⁶ As Brian Massumi explains, “Deleuze and Guattari, following Bergson, suggest that the virtual is the mode of reality implicated in the emergence of new potentials. In other words, its reality is the reality of change: the event. This immediately raises a number of problems for any domain of practice interested in seriously entertaining the concept. If the virtual is change as such, then in any actually given circumstance it can only figure as a mode of abstraction. For what is concretely given is what is--which is not what it will be when it changes. The potential of a situation exceeds its actuality. Circumstances self-abstract to the precise extent to which they evolve. This means that the virtual is not contained in any actual form assumed by things or states of things. It runs in the transitions from one form to another.” Brian Massumi, “Sensing the Virtual, Building the Insensible,” in *Hypersurface Architecture*, ed. Stephen Perrella (London: Academy Press, 1998), 16.

⁷⁷ Berardi, *Prekarious Rhapsody*, 115.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁷⁹ As Berardi stresses, “explosively violent behavior follows the loss of control over the relation between informational stimuli and emotional elaboration.” Ibid., 115.

purifying attempt to synchronize his bare life with a digital real, while depression comes after the failure of this connective mutation, as a result of a minimal level of subtraction from the hallucinated digital collapse of the organic body. Depression, of course, is not what either Badiou or Žižek mean by subtraction, “the affirmative part of negation” that actualizes a universal collective without exclusions. In Berardi’s words:

[D]epression can be understood in relation to the circulation of sense. Faced with the abyss of non-sense, friends talk to friends, and together they build a bridge over the abyss. Depression questions the reliability of this bridge. Depression doesn’t see the bridge. It falls off its radar. Or maybe it sees that the bridge does not exist. Depression doesn’t trust friendship, or doesn’t recognize it. This is why it cannot perceive sense, because there is no sense if not in a shared space.⁸⁰

Depression is a kind of subtraction without a universal; it negates the shared sense that links together members of a community but neither does it fall into psychosis, nor does it affirm a new utopian collective. Instead, in a performance of cruel optimism it affirms non-sense (non-belonging) itself as a zero level of *sovereign* belonging. This is how Harry can join a masculine *bios* after his non-communication with the policemen, entering a space of depressed solitude by abandoning the signifiers of sense (the analogue photographs representing his relation to a common world) that retroactively annuls the utopian alterity of his snow noir experience. As in *Inception*, the narrative of mourning, the letting go of the hero’s libidinal attachment to his dead wife is an ideologically charged one masking an affirmation of neoliberal capitalism.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 116-17.

Reading depression in Refn's films as a productive pathology sustaining the biopolitical apparatus of control society also frames his use of the slow cinema as organically linked rather than opposed to digitally accelerated forms of storytelling that prioritize the panic moment of the neoliberal self. The term "cinema of slowness" was coined by Michel Ciment in 2003 to identify a countermovement in global arthouse cinema against what he called the "technological fetishism" of contemporary Hollywood film production: fast paced, digitally altered spectacles that undermine the temporality of classical cinema spectatorship with their sensory overload.⁸¹ This binary opposition was then accepted by most critics, regardless of which side of it they positioned themselves. According to Matthew Flannigan, for instance, the viewer of slow films is "[I]berated from the abundance of abrupt images and visual signifiers that comprise a sizeable amount of massmarket cinema, [...] free to indulge in a relaxed form of panoramic perception."⁸² For Steven Shaviro, by contrast, slow cinema is "a way of saying No to mainstream Hollywood's current fastedit, postcontinuity, highly digital style, simply by pretending that it doesn't even exist [...] In a world that has been so profoundly changed over the past 30 or 40 years by globalization, financialization, and technological innovation, it's simply an evasive copout to make movies as if none of this had happened."⁸³ Refn's films help us understand this opposition as part of a dialectic in which the "the employment of (often extremely) long takes, decentred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the

⁸¹ "Angelopoulos in Greece, Nuri Bilge Ceylan in Turkey, de Oliveira and Monteiro (who died a few weeks ago) in Portugal, Béla Tarr in Hungary, Abbas Kiarostami in Iran, Tsai Ming-liang and Hou Hsiao-hsien in Taiwan, Philippe Garrel and Bruno Dumont in France, Souleymane Cissé and Idrissa Ouedraogo in Africa, Sharunas Bartas in the Baltic state, Aleksandr Sokurov in Russia, and several directors in Central Asia have been proponents in recent years of a resistance to the fetishism of technology." Michel Ciment, "The State of Cinema," *Unspoken Cinema*, October 30, 2006, accessed June 7, 2016, <http://unspokencinema.blogspot.ca/2006/10/state-of-cinema-m-ciment.html>.

⁸² Matthew Flannigan, "Towards an Aesthetic of Slow in Contemporary Cinema," *16:96*, no. 29 (2008)

⁸³ Steven Shaviro, "Slow Cinema Vs. Fast Films," *The Pinocchio Theory*, May 12, 2010, accessed June 7, 2016, <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=891>.

everyday”⁸⁴ as well as “the characters’ ‘flat’, affectless manner”⁸⁵ are not expressions of pre-digital nostalgia for the contemplation of the Bazinian real, but, on the contrary, signs of a post-digital depression, reflecting the state of a post-traumatic subject whose terrifying dissolution in the void of the digital has always already happened.

After a detour with the *Pusher* sequels and *Bronson*, Refn returns to slow cinema with *Valhalla Rising* (2009), a digitally shot medieval story about Vikings travelling to America which he classifies as post-apocalyptic science fiction.⁸⁶ The film starts where *Bronson* ends, with the mute warrior One Eye (played once again by Mads Mikkelsen, Refn’s go-to guy for autistic male roles) held captive by a group of pagans who exploit his superior ability to fight in a primitive tribal economy built on raw violence. Instead of remaining trapped as a caged sovereign like *Bronson*, however, he soon breaks free from captivity after slaughtering his masters. His story is therefore not about autoimmune violence but its aftermath; it’s about the post-traumatic subject who has survived the death of the male homosocial and is now wandering around in a post-apocalyptic landscape (the hills of Northern Scotland de-realized through digital filters) in a state of depression, isolated from others. He is then joined by an orphan boy and a group of similarly lost Christian Vikings looking for the Holy Land. They set sails to Jerusalem, but after getting lost at sea in a mysterious fog they arrive to a godforsaken America instead. Threatened by the muteness of an alien world and the arrows of its natives, the Christians’ remaining ambition to colonize the New World slowly dissipates; the men split up and start to wonder around aimlessly, gradually losing their ability to communicate with one another. As images of a Refnian red universe of atemporal chaos keep interrupting the narrative’s

⁸⁴ Flanagan, “Towards an Aesthetic of Slow”

⁸⁵ Ira Jaffe, *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014), 3.

⁸⁶ See James Rose, “Valhalla Rising: A Viking Odyssey,” *Off Screen* 17, no. 3 (2013), accessed June 7, 2016, http://offscreen.com/view/valhalla_odyssey#fn-1-a.

chronological time, some of them fall into madness, some turn on each other, some wait quietly for their death. The final scene shows One Eye and the boy cornered by the natives wearing red warrior paint when the protagonist offers himself as a sacrificial lamb to appease the tribesmen and save the kid from being slaughtered.

As Jean Pierre Dupuy maintains, in every violent founding ritual of the social order there is an intimate relationship between sacrifice and murder: “sacrifice contains the outbreak and spread of murder; though it is in one sense just another murder, it promises to put an end to violence.”⁸⁷ As usual with Refn, we don’t see the final act of murder/sacrifice itself, only its consequences: the natives don’t hurt the boy, who now stands on a cliff alone overlooking the ocean, framed like Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings of romantic depression. The image then fades into blue instead of red, suggesting that One Eye’s act successfully contained the eruption of violence, and the boy can now die peacefully, his body merging with the sea. We even see now, as the hero’s hallucination-image right before his death, a variation of an earlier scene where he tried to build a phallic tower out of rocks to institute some kind of order into the deterritorialized chaos, but the structure fell apart. That scene was cross cut with images of male rape among the Christians, Refn’s most explicit depiction of a homosexual act to date, signalling both the disintegration of the homosocial into a Hobbesian state of nature of all against all as well as its minimal sustenance as autoimmune violence. Now, after One Eye’s self-sacrifice the tower stands erect and we see him submerging into the water next to it in a ritual resembling baptism. His body never resurfaces, however; like the boy, he merges with nature, the final shot is of his floating profile fading in and out of the white mountain fog—an image recalling the snow bound stillness of *Fear X*’s utopian moments. The film therefore ends without any

⁸⁷ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 5.

reterritorialization, embracing instead what speculative realists call the “truth of extinction,” the unavoidable end of, if not the human race, at least its white western male representatives.⁸⁸

At the end, at its generic core, *Valhalla Rising* is not so much a science fiction as it is a kind of meta-western (i.e. a noir-western) about the impossibility of founding the territory of American Empire through sovereign violence. As Robert Pippin argues, “many great Westerns are [...] about the founding or the early, struggling stages of modern bourgeois, law-abiding, property-owning, market economy, technologically advanced societies in transition from, mostly, lawlessness (or corrupt and ineffective law) and war that border on classic state-of-nature thought experiments (or mythic pictures of origins).”⁸⁹ Insofar as westerns thematize the emergence of a sovereign political community out of a lawless zone of indistinction, they come close to film noirs. The difference is that while westerns deal with the historical origins of modern American biopower, noirs focus on its perpetuation in the present. Furthermore, the western as a genre is a post-noir phenomenon in the sense that I defined the term in Chapter 2: it represses the arbitrary nature of law constituting violence, that is, the fundamental equality of the sovereign and the *homo sacer* before the former comes to exclude the latter to stabilize a closed body politic.⁹⁰ Instead of a sovereign decision proper we have a moral negotiation of the boundaries of the white settler community that always already presupposes and represses the original act of arbitrary violence: the colonization of the New World through the genocide of Native Americans. This is why the figure of the sovereign in westerns is so often a post-traumatic subject: a strong but silent male loner with a dark past, like John Wayne’s Ethan in *The*

⁸⁸ On the speculative realist notion of the “truth of extinction” see Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 205-40.

⁸⁹ Robert B. Pippin, “What is a Western: Politics and Self-Knowledge in John Ford’s *The Searchers*,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 225.

⁹⁰ Western is a post-noir phenomenon also in a more literal sense as after the decline of the classical noir cycle many Hollywood noir directors like Howard Hawks, Anthony Mann, or Delmer Daves contributed to the golden age of American westerns in the 50s.

Searchers (1956) who fought in the civil war for the confederacy, helping to massacre African as well as Native Americans. Such hero shows signs of depression precisely because he cannot talk about the unsayable at the heart of sovereign violence,⁹¹ for which reason he tends to remain an outsider even after he successfully strengthens the cohesion of the settler community by killing its enemies.⁹² It is in spaghetti westerns that the trope of the quiet outsider is pushed to its logical conclusion with the figure of the “man with no name,”⁹³ someone whose very existence is erased from the symbolic order—a fate not unlike the one some noir heroes suffer after surviving their sovereign act as living dead like Edward G. Robinson’s Chris Cross in *Scarlet Street* (1945).⁹⁴

What makes *Valhalla Rising* a meta-western is that its noir ending retroactively equates the sovereign’s primordial repression in the western genre (One Eye’s namelessness, muteness and half-blindness) with a sovereign act of self-erasure. It reveals that, to paraphrase Carl Schmitt, the sovereign is the one who *decides* on primal repression.⁹⁵ Refn’s film, of course, is also an anti-western insofar as it reverses the biopolitics of the classical American genre: the community the hero’s sacrificial act helps come together is that of mute natives living in harmony with nature after the elimination of the white colonizers (when they kill One Eye their

⁹¹ Contrary to the noir hero whose voiceover tries to talk about it incessantly, performatively turning sovereign violence into a necessity.

⁹² See for instance Will Wright’s description of the classical plot of the western as “the story of a hero who is somehow estranged from his society but on whose ability rests the fate of that society. The villains threaten the society until the hero acts to protect and save it.” Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 40.

⁹³ See Clint Eastwood’s Man with No Name in Sergio Leone’s *Dollars Trilogy*.

⁹⁴ As Pippin notes, something similar happens to Ethan in the final scene of *The Searchers* after the hero helped to reunite a settler family by saving their daughter from the Indians: “it is somewhat shocking that the characters file by Ethan as if he were invisible. No one hugs him or thanks him and certainly no one invites [him] inside.” Pippin, *What is a Western*, 239. Actually, Refn’s One Eye in *Valhalla Rising* is a mixture of such nameless hero and another spaghetti western character, that of a blind warrior (*Blindman*, 1971), an even clearer example of post-traumatic subjectivity—a figure that also appears in some Japanese chamberas featuring a blind swordsman (*The Tale of Zatoichi*, 1962).

⁹⁵ For Carl Schmitt, “sovereign is he who decides on the exception.” Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. G. Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

bodies lose their red colour and like shadows they disappear into the landscape). However, it's important to bear in mind that, as Žižek stresses,

“[t]his is the fundamental subjective position of fantasy: to be reduced to a gaze observing the world in the condition of the subject's non-existence-like the fantasy of witnessing the act of one's own conception, parental copulation, or the act of witnessing one's own burial, like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. ‘The world without us’ is thus fantasy at its purest: witnessing the Earth itself regaining its precastated state of innocence.”⁹⁶

The post-apocalyptic universe of *Valhalla Rising* is therefore not the utopian alternative of the male homosocial's unravelling in autoimmune panic in Refn's earlier films, as much as it is its transcendental supplement: it is a fantasy that supports the white masculine subject's purifying self-destruction, the never ending downward spiral of his death drive from the other side of the void. It is the fantasy of white masculinity deified, existing, like the God of Christianity, in the pure inoperativity of his glory. This is why the film remains a sovereign-image of cynicism actualizing, as an empty placeholder, the *biös* of western masculinity.⁹⁷

While critics like to call Refn's next film *Drive* (2011) a “stripped-down, ‘pure’ genre piece,”⁹⁸ it is in fact a significantly more mainstream, that is, less abstract variation of the meta-western formula the director developed in *Valhalla Rising*: an L.A. “sunshine noir”⁹⁹ homage to (neo)noir-westerns like Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai* (1967), Walter Hill's *The Driver*

⁹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, “Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses,” lacan.com, accessed September 1, 2013, <http://www.lacan.com/zizecology2.htm>.

⁹⁷ Refn here only pushes the logic already present in Nolan's and Boyle's films to its logical conclusion. The downward spiral of the hero's death drive in *Inception* or *28 Days Later* is also supplemented with a post-traumatic fantasy of original harmony, the formal qualities of which make these scenes ambiguous, akin to an imagined afterlife.

⁹⁸ Jaimie N. Christley, “Drive,” *Slant Magazine*, September 11, 2011, accessed December 21, 2016, <http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/drive>.

⁹⁹ See J. Hoberman, “A Bright, Guilty World: Daylight Ghosts and Sunshine Noir,” *Artforum* (February, 2007): 315.

(1978), or John Woo's *The Killer* (1989). It's a return to the glossy fashion video aesthetic and hip millennial synth pop soundtrack of *Bronson* but without the experimental narration and the heavy dose of irony. Marko Bauer calls it a humourless pastiche nostalgic not of any particular historical period but of postmodernism itself, expressing a commodified desire for stylization and sterilization: the "[o]rgiastic decadence of the Empire."¹⁰⁰ The eponymous hero is now played by Ryan Gosling with a metrosexual deadpan—he is a quiet, nameless, but always stylish outsider, a mechanic/stunt driver during the day and freelance driver for criminals at night. He keeps the latter under control by abiding to a 5 minute window rule: that's how long he'd wait for a client on the job before leaving him behind. Like the hero of *Pusher*, he gets in trouble when the neoliberal economy of debt overtakes his practice based on strictly measured labour time. After befriending his neighbour Irene, a young mother raising her small boy Benicio alone, he offers his help when the woman's husband, Standard comes home from prison owing a favour to some gangsters. The robbery they have to do turns out to be a set-up, they are the designated fall guys for someone trying to steal from a mafia bank. Soon enough all members of the heist team are exterminated except for Driver who is trying to give back money to the mafia head directly in exchange for Irene and her son's life. The crime boss agrees, but he says he cannot promise the same deal for the protagonist. When they meet, the man stabs Driver in the stomach, who stabs him back and kills him, then gets into his car and drives away into the sunset.

As Anna Backman Rogers and Miklós Kiss observe, *Drive* plays with the tension between the Deleuzian movement-image and the time-image. They note how sequences of “dead time” in which hero's everyday routine (waiting, driving, grocery shopping, taking the elevator, walking in hallways) is captured in slowly moving long takes are contrasted to sudden outbursts

¹⁰⁰ Marko Bauer, “Pure West: Drive, Nostalgia for Postmodernism,” *Senses of Cinema* 63 (2012), accessed June 7, 2016, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/pure-west-drive-nostalgia-for-postmodernism/>.

of (violent) action shot with rapid editing techniques.¹⁰¹ What is striking in Refn's application of the slow cinema – intensified continuity (depression – panic) dialectic here is that it's more aestheticized than in any of his previous films. Instead of depicting an ugly downward spiral of the neoliberal subject's autoimmune death drive, Refn now seems to suggest that these contradictory qualities can synchronize in a refrain but only for the post-traumatic body. True, the labour time based microcosm of *Driver* collapses with the intrusion of the neoliberal logic, but we have the feeling that this happened to him before. Unlike the other men around him, he cannot be killed by the homosocial's autoimmune disease *because he is already dead*; he is a living dead who has survived his own subjective destitution, the unnamable encounter with sovereign violence. At first it might appear that he can prevail because, like his predecessors in *Le Samourai*, *The Driver*, or *The Killer*, he times his actions perfectly, surprising his disorganized enemies. Upon closer look, however, it becomes clear that *Driver* lives outside of time, literally embodying the atemporality of the Lacanian drive. He never sleeps; he is always available to help out his friends or just hang out despite working day and night. In short, he is a myth of a perfect neoliberal subject who has already gone through a connective mutation,¹⁰² synching with the digital regime of production and now his task is to push other men into the void as well. Tellingly, he is wearing the jacket of the hero from Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964), which makes him a kind of queer angel of death, signifying his post-traumatic silence as post-coital.

Crucially, what supplements the hero's harmony with the post-territorial rhythm of the neoliberal economy is a fantasy scene from which the classical white male *bios* (including

¹⁰¹ Anna Backman Rogers and Miklós Kiss, "A Real Human Being and a Real Hero: Stylistic Excess, Dead Time and Intensified Continuity in Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive*," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 12, no. 1-2 (2014)

¹⁰² Which makes the lyrics of the title song, "he's a real human being, and a real hero" all the more ironic.

himself) is erased. His self-sacrifice protects a single mother and her son, an interracial family without a father. Like in *Valhalla Rising*, the content of this fantasy is politically progressive, but its very form perpetuates the masculine logic of sovereignty. This is how one can read Refn's proclaimed interest in the hero of myths and fairytales "who comes in and protects the innocent from evil, sacrificing himself for purity."¹⁰³ As Laura Shamas notes, the relationship between *Driver* and Irene follows the medieval logic of courtly love:¹⁰⁴ it's never physically consummated, but centers rather on a ritual whereby the courteous male hero becomes the lady's unconditional servant (first by helping her with groceries and driving her home, then by sacrificing himself for her). For Žižek, courtly love is a prime example of heterosexual male masochism through which "in her very elevation to the undisputed Master, whose every whim the masochist is obliged to obey, the Woman is turned into a puppet effectively controlled by her slave, who controls the game, writing its rules—the explicit asymmetry of the masochist contract (at the level of enunciation: man's subordination to woman) relies on then opposite asymmetry at the level of the position of enunciation."¹⁰⁵ The elementary procedure of courtly love, he argues, is to put the Other through a distancing and dehumanizing abstraction: "the coincidence of absolute, inscrutable Otherness and pure machine is what confers on the Lady her uncanny, monstrous character," which is then followed by an "idealization of the Lady [that] is strictly secondary and narcissistic."¹⁰⁶ We could say that Irene's loving face is such a secondary idealization of the monstrous, mute otherness of the American natives One Eye surrenders himself to in *Valhalla Rising*, both expressing a masculine fantasy about a fully self-contained, non-castrated, or as Žižek put it, "machinic" Other. As Vicari notes, it is her idyllic unity with

¹⁰³ Refn quoted in Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn*, 23.

¹⁰⁴ Laura Shamas - *Drive*. (2011). 239.

¹⁰⁵ Slavoj Žižek, "Notes on a Debate 'From Within the People'," *Criticism* 46, no. 4 (2004): 663-64.

¹⁰⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (New York: Verso, 1994), 90.

her son that Driver falls in love with when he overhears Irene saying “I love you” to Benicio in the grocery store.¹⁰⁷ When the three of them later hang out by the L.A. River, the camera yet again frames the scene of mother and son playing from his perspective, then in the upcoming objective shot the contours of his body disappear in the reflecting sunlight as if to erase him from the diegesis and equate his point of view with the viewer’s transcendental ego. Once again Refn offers the pleasurable self-erasure of the cine-fetishist (a kind of Metzian naive observer) as an antidote to the painful cruel optimism of the neoliberal subject, best exemplified in the film by Driver’s auto shop owner boss (played by *Breaking Bad*’s Bryan Cranston) seeking to make deals with the mafia who once maimed him until he they finally kill him off. Through this aestheticization of (bio)politics, the white male sovereign is erased from the field of representation but he survives as a voyeur, a Hegelian beautiful soul for whom the ruptures of late capitalism can produce aesthetic pleasure.

Refn’s next film, *Only God Forgives* (2013), is a great summary of his second artistic period. It’s another noir-western now set in contemporary Bangkok, following the imperialist destruction of the local community by an American crime family controlling the drug trade and the Thai box scene. The two male heirs of the criminal enterprise, Billy and Julian (*Drive*’s Ryan Gosling) stand for the two trajectories available for white men in Refn’s films. Billy, on the one hand, is a violent sadist who rapes and kills a brothel owner’s 12 year old daughter in an autoimmune outburst (undermining the Thai brothel’s stereotypical immunizing function as a temporary refuge for westerners). Julien, on the other hand, is a quietly depressed man who prefers to be tied up during sex by her Thai girlfriend and has a generally more passive (masochistic) relationship to the natives. The two of them, of course, embody what Bhabha

¹⁰⁷ Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn*, 184.

called the ambiguity of the colonial discourse: the oscillation between the sadistic destruction of the colonized and the fetishization of her oriental otherness.¹⁰⁸ Instead of treating this dialectic as part of the same totality like Danny Boyle does in *Slumdog Millionaire*, Refn simply privileges its latter moment over the former. He opposes an authority figure of oriental wisdom to the western neoliberal superego, the tough but fair local policeman Chang to the insatiable and incestuous maternal *femme fatale* of Crystal. If Crystal's demands of excessive retribution for his son's death exemplify the neoliberal logic of a never repayable debt, Chang represents the principle of equivalence, seeking an eye for an eye to contain rather than escalate the cycle of violence started by Billy.

The film is mostly narrated from Julien's perspective and, along with *Valhalla Rising*, it's Refn's slowest: it's essentially nothing but a prolonged suspense leading up to the highly anticipated, but eventually anti-climactic fight scene between the hero and Chang. When the two finally meet up in a Thai box club for the showdown, the policeman is standing firmly in the center of the room while the camera is slowly circling him, giving us the point of view of Julien who is spiraling around his opponent until he is close enough to engage. The moment they touch it becomes clear he has no chance against Chang: he is beaten severely until he passes out on the floor. This sequence is perhaps Refn's clearest rendering of the masculine death drive on a collision course with the void and the subjective destitution that follows the encounter. Like in *Valhalla Rising* and *Drive*, this masculine drive is not autoimmune anymore like it was in the *Pusher Trilogy* but is pacified through masochistic and here also homoerotic submission to the fetish of an absolute Other.¹⁰⁹ The white male subject's masochistic fantasy of self-erasure is

¹⁰⁸ See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 77.

¹⁰⁹ As Refn discloses in an interview, he used the gesture of a fist opening and closing as a metaphor for a sexualized submission of one man to another (the idea clearly taken from the famous rape scene of David Lynch's *Wild at*

then fulfilled in the final scene where Chang performs karaoke in Thai for a local audience. While earlier in the film the same bar was frequented by westerners and even had a picture of Michelangelo's David on the wall as a stamp of white biopower, the foreigners as well as the picture are now conspicuously missing and the performance lacks any subtitles. The presence of the western subject is reduced to the gaze of the voyeur for whose pleasure the enigmatic scene is constructed: to the viewer outside the diegesis.

While the paradigm of male self-sacrifice seemed to have reached its conclusion in *Only God Forgives*, with his last film to date, *The Neon Demon* (2016), Refn is nonetheless able to push it to the next level through a dialectical reversal, by granting protagonist status to the figure who, as a fetish-Other, drove masculine self-erasure in the earlier films. It's the director's second L.A. noir, now told from the perspective of a female character, Jesse—an innocent looking teenage orphan moving to the city to start a modeling career only to be chewed up and spit out (literally) by the fashion industry. Like Refn's previous films, *The Neon Demon* proudly wears its trash and exploitation influences on its sleeve, perhaps most importantly that of Dario Argento, whose notorious quip "I like women, especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them being murdered than an ugly girl or man."¹¹⁰ could very well have served as the first treatment for the film (that and the Italian maestro's audiovisual tour de force horror fairy tale *Suspiria*). On the surface the final product reads as a postmodern complicitous critique of Hollywood's image production regime in which the fetishistic reification of the heroine's underage body by sleazy male photographers and would be rapists in the diegesis blissfully reproduces the voyeuristic gaze of the cinematic apparatus

Heart). "Summer Talks | Nicolas Winding Refn, 'Only God Forgives'," YouTube video, 1:01:10, posted by "Film Society of Lincoln Center," July 18, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5TKEmF0dbC8>.

¹¹⁰ Argento quoted in Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992), 42.

without any Mulveyian overtones of bad conscience. As Refn puts it in a recent interview, “the more pleasing [the film] is for the eye, the more it penetrates the mind. The more you sexualize something, the deeper it resonates.”¹¹¹ Despite the film’s blatantly male chauvinistic aesthetic, Refn also tries to deconstruct the traditional gender binary of its power dynamic,¹¹² for instance by simultaneously positioning himself on the side of the object in this asymmetrical visual economy, maintaining that Jesse’s character is autobiographical. He describes himself as “narcissistic and self-absorbed,” but also “passive, submissive, sadomasochistic,” and “completely dominated by women”¹¹³—just like his young heroine who, after being called a “natural beauty” in a city held together by plastic surgery, is initiated into full submission to the fashion apparatus by a covenant of young female cannibals who eventually tear her body apart and eat it. Besides reproducing the sadistic-voyeuristic pleasures of the masculine viewer Laura Mulvey associated with classical Hollywood cinema, *The Neon Demon* therefore also explores the “becoming-woman” of that very same subject, his masochistic identification with a body in pieces deterritorialized by the delirious encounter with the cinematic image.¹¹⁴ This latter mode of spectatorship is produced not only by the Cronenbergian body horror of the finale but also through numerous hallucination and dream sequences in which bodies of models become fragmented by mirrors and flickering strobe lights, eventually dissolving into abstract geometrical shapes and a Refnian red chaos.

¹¹¹ Anne Thompson, “‘The Neon Demon’: Nicolas Winding Refn Reveals Why His Cannibal Model Movie Is Autobiographical,” *IndieWire* June 22, 2016, accessed October 10, 2016, <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/06/the-neon-demon-nicolas-winding-refn-reveals-why-his-vampire-model-movie-is-autobiographical-290231/>.

¹¹² Whether it is convincing or not is another matter, see for instance Adam Nayman, “The Neon Demon,” *Cineaste* 41, no. 4 (2016), accessed October 10, 2016, <http://www.cineaste.com/fall2016/neon-demon/>.

¹¹³ Thompson, *The Neon Demon*

¹¹⁴ Becoming-woman is one of the terms Deleuze and Guattari use for the deterritorialization of the body. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 321.

The Neon Demon therefore reveals the speculative identity of two formerly distinct figures in Refn's second period: the self-erasing masculine hero and his feminine fetish object appear now on the same continuum as two faces of one and the same sovereign, one whom the anarchist collective Tiqqun called the "Young-Girl." The Young-Girl, they argue, is not a gendered concept but captures abstract ideals of "Youthitude" and "Feminitude" that are "raised to the rank of ideal regulators of the integration of the Imperial citizenry" insofar as they express post-Fordist capitalism's colonization of the formerly dissociated feminine sphere as well as a purely consumptive relation to the social associated with adolescence.¹¹⁵ In this new figure, sovereignty, not work, appears as the direct source of a commodity's value: "The Young-Girl would thus be the being that no longer has any intimacy with herself except as value, and whose every activity, in every detail, is directed to self-valorization. At each moment, she affirms herself as the sovereign subject of her own reification."¹¹⁶ She is the "living currency [that] has come to take the place of money as general equivalent, that in light of which its value is established. Living currency is its own value and concreteness. The purchasing power of living currency, and a fortiori of the Young-Girl, has no limits."¹¹⁷ In Marxian terms, the Young-Girl is an extreme form of a commodity fetish, one that has detached itself entirely from the socially mediated apparatus of abstract labour, or, more precisely, exists only in a permanent flight from it, in a never ending autoimmune destruction of all value producing *bios*. As Tiqqun's text argues, "[e]very Young-Girl is her own modest purification business."¹¹⁸ "[She] dreams of a body that would be purely transparent to the lights of the Spectacle. In all, she dreams of being

¹¹⁵ Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, trans. A Reines (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 14-16.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

nothing more than the idea THEY have of her.”¹¹⁹ Or, to put it differently, “[s]he aspires to a perfection that would consist in having no body.”¹²⁰ The Young-Girl is an *anorexic* subject trying “in vain [...] to give herself form as bare life,” to be the *bios* of her own *zoe*—a process that eventually leads to her death.¹²¹

In *The Neon Demon*, Jesse embodies such an impossible regulative idea of the Young-Girl for everyone else in the fashion industry. Her first photo-shoot that opens the film already makes this clear by having her pose as a dead body with her throat slit. The camera slowly dollies back from her close-up to reveal the studio, then, after a reverse shot of the photographer we track back towards the set, which, however, is now empty, with only a pool of blood marking the heroine’s presence a moment ago. Like in *Fear X*, the initial subtractive move that establishes a minimum distance from the void (of death) initiates a sequence of purification (starting with the make-up girl wiping the fake blood off the protagonist’s neck) that serves as the narrative trajectory of the film, only to end with a loop back to the beginning with Jesse’s actual death. After she is called a natural beauty by a star photographer, she becomes the object of envy of the other models who—despite their eagerness to subordinate themselves to the industry’s anorexic Young-Girl standards (in one scene they have a waitress read out the food menu for them only to settle with coffee)—appear imperfect next to her (too old, too many plastic surgeries, etc.). Eventually, three of them (Ruby, Gigi and Sarah) murder Jesse, carve up her body and eat it, as if to perform a postmodern version of the Christian Eucharist through which believers would glorify God by ritualistically merging his body with their own. Like with other forms of cynical sovereignty, necropolitical violence on the other’s bare life coincides here

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 127.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 129.

¹²¹ Ibid., 128. The authors suggest that “anorexia could be seen as a tragic caricature of the disconnected, self-sufficient female, unable to affiliate and driven by an obsessive desire for power and mastery.” Ibid., 124.

with the glorification of oneself as the monadic embodiment of the heavenly *oikonomia* (the self-purifying economy of the Young-Girl). The stabilizing effect of this sovereign moment, however, doesn't last long: the girls' feeding frenzy soon turns into bulimic excretion and vomiting.¹²² We see Ruby, now alone, lying naked in the moonlight while a pool of simmering blood starts to ooze from her body, until the camera settles on her (possibly dead) face frozen into ecstasy.¹²³ The other two go to a photo-shoot the next morning, but Gigi, having to wear a tight girdle, soon starts dry heaving and runs for a bathroom break. When Sarah finds her in a room with swastika patterned wallpaper, she vomits up one of Jesse's eyes, then starts to slice her belly up with a pair of scissors crying: "Get her out of me!" In Lacanian terms, she vomits up the gaze of the Other as *objet petit a*, the fantasmatic embodiment of the void the subject can never incorporate as long as she is alive. As the Tiquun book puts it, "the Young-Girl manages only to express the void, the living void, seething and oozing, the humid void—until she vomits."¹²⁴ After she dies, Sarah picks up the eye and swallows it with mild disgust and bemusement on her face, then walks away with a determination to go back to work. We then cut to the final credit sequence with her walking in the desert alone, but after a cut she disappears altogether and the film ends with a fade to black as the sun sets. To quote Tiquun again, "[t]he apparent sovereignty of the Young-Girl is also the absolute vulnerability of the separated individual."

6.4 Conclusion

It is self-erasure in front of a self-contained, machinic Other that constitutes the white masculine subject's sovereign act in Refn's films. While in his first auteurial period the hero

¹²² Demonstrating how "anorexia is the truth of bulimia." Ibid., 127.

¹²³ "The Young-Girl aims at total inexpressivity, at ecstatic absence." Ibid., 126.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

anticipates his moment of disappearance in panic after his autoimmune process of purification leaves him isolated from the male homosocial community, the later films treat the encounter with the digital void as something that has always already happened by normalizing the state of masculine depression. While the early films are about self-destructive protagonists with a sickness unto death, the later ones feature men (and finally women) who have survived their symbolic death and hover around namelessly in an atemporal universe as beautiful souls, angels of death. Films of the first period are about neoliberalism's overstimulation of the male body, the fundamentally autoimmune demand for hyperproduction that undermines the social basis of masculine productivity: the homosocial community. Films of the second period, by contrast, increasingly aestheticize and glorify the very anti-social dimension of neoliberalism: the former films' spasmodic movement from one anxious acting out to the next is now synchronized into a new designer aesthetic through the meta-language of slow cinema. Refn's heroes still oscillate between violent outbursts and depressed withdrawal from the social, but this oscillation now has a rhythm: it constitutes a zero level territoriality through which the white masculine subject, by becoming Young-Girl, can appropriate the atemporal void of the digital, turn it into *his* (or indeed *her*) productive machine.¹²⁵

At the end, then, Refn's theatrics of sacrificing the body of the white masculine sovereign is a cynical one that serves to perpetuate his rule through other, deterritorialized means. It's a Pascalian ritual that aims to restore his (and the viewer's) belief in the glory of this world through the aestheticization of its destruction and the subject's alienation from it. As Žižek reminds us, "sacrifice and castration are to be opposed: far from involving the voluntary acceptance of castration, sacrifice is the most refined way of disavowing it, i.e. of acting as if one

¹²⁵ Depression and masochism are productive here in the sense that they are presented as the necessary building blocks of sovereignty.

effectively possessed the hidden treasure that made me an object worthy of love...”¹²⁶ And, as Freud already observed, the elementary function of the fetish is precisely to prevent the (masculine) subject from encountering the real of castration (for Freud, the fact that the mother doesn’t have a penis, for Lacan, the inconsistency of the symbolic order). Refn’s sacrificing of the masculine sovereign and his fetishization of the machinic-digital, that is, non-castrated Other are therefore two sides of the same coin, components of a new ~~bi~~os of neoliberal biopower.

¹²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 73.

7 The Exhaustion of the Sovereign-Image: The Neo-Noirs of David Fincher

7.1 Introduction

Let us summarize our findings so far about the cynical form of the sovereign-image in contemporary North Atlantic film noir. I called ‘sovereignty’ the knot that ties together necropolitical violence, immunization, and glorification, corresponding to the Lacanian registers of real, imaginary, and symbolic, as well as the Hegelian singular, particular, and universal—one phallic-masculine apparatus of power with three topological layers. Cynicism refers to the historical moment when the rhetoric of a substantial link between these separate levels is abandoned and the arbitrariness of the sovereign procedure is laid out in the open. Under the auspices of the neoliberal paradigm of self-entrepreneurship, noir’s new sovereign isn’t seeking to cover up the incommensurability of his bare life (the excess of his *jouissance*) with the *bios* of a hegemonic (male homosocial) community but aims to bypass the level of generic immunization altogether, establishing his private-monadistic economy as the glorious mirror image of a transcendental *oikonomia*. This is why the *premise* of cynicism is post-ideological. In contemporary neo-noir, the cynic occupies the place where classical noir’s nurturing woman *qua* subject-supposed-to-believe and the *femme fatale qua* subject-supposed-to-enjoy once were: devalued through their exclusion from the apparatus of abstract labour yet fetishized for that very reason. In the neoliberal post-work society where these formerly excluded positions are reframed as the source of biocapitalist value, they become two sides of the cynic’s libidinal economy connected through a Moebius-strip that performatively transforms his idiosyncratic *jouissance* into living currency through Pascalian auto-suggestion into self-belief. Cynicism seems to

function as a self-glorifying machine, giving value to the body out of thin air, selling not one's socially constructed labour power but his dissociated bare life, his privatized surplus-enjoyment in the post-ideological marketplace in which the principle of equivalency is suspended. Such a neoliberal market, instead of mediating between commensurable units of reified labour, is merely there to express the "intrinsic" value of singular commodities. As a form of cinema, the cynicism-image offers itself as a new transcultural meta-language for a supposedly post-historical, post-ideological era of global capitalism, a cinema for everyone but no one (group) in particular. The cynicism-image is the suture of the neoliberal cinematic apparatus, interactively mobilizing the spectator as the sovereign arbiter of the film's biopolitical value.

The critical wager of this dissertation has been, however, that the self-enfoldment of the cynic is an ideological fantasy and that *bios*, the particular social mediation of life's bioeconomic value under Empire, is not so much eliminated but repressed in these films, only to return in various forms of western masculinity's hybrid hegemony: hard-bodied and hetero-bourgeois in Nolan, flexible and androgynous in Boyle, and always (on the verge of) becoming-queer and becoming-woman in Refn. The different *failures* of these masculine heroes to cynically collapse *bios* and *zoe* (to present their bare life as its own *bios*) can be mapped on a Greimasian semiotic square (Figure 5):

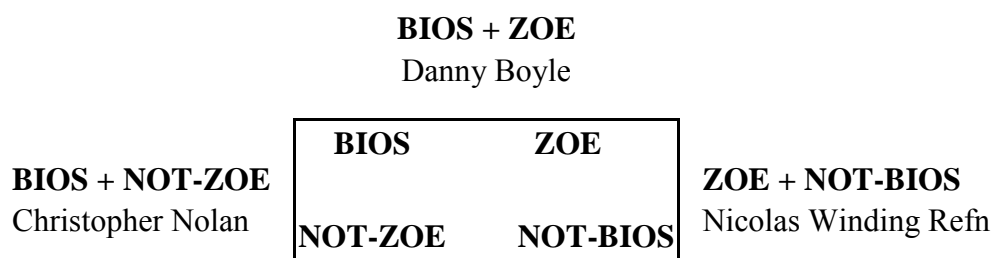


Figure 6.

As I have argued in Chapter 3, Boyle's films conceive of the neoliberal cynic as an isolated subject who is nonetheless connected to a multitude of fellow monads indirectly through the digital protocols of networked capitalism. The director therefore resolves the fundamental antagonism between *bios* and *zoe* by affirming both at the same time, which is why in the semiotic square he occupies the place of the "complex term," a synthesis between two contrary elements (*bios* + *zoe*). For Jameson, such synthesis is always an ironic caricature of a properly dialectical one, having "[the] cake both ways" as a result of getting fixated too much on a particular content behind the opposing terms instead of letting their conflict unfold on the formal level.¹ In Boyle's case, *zoe* tends to signify individual consumption, while *bios* refers to the liberal multicultural ideal of diverse consumers in frictionless coexistence—the two of which can only be synthesized in an ironic caricature of collective life.

We can see now how Nolan's solution that re-introduces the classical patriarchal *bios* to manage the multitude's life under digital capitalism is at a higher level of dialectical abstraction insofar as for him, the re-masculinization of the social (as well as the post-classical Hollywood narrative) results from a *formal* necessity to tame individuals' autoimmune drive after the value of their singular bare life. In our semiotic square he therefore stands for the positive deixis combining the affirmation of the positive seme (*bios*) with the negation of the negative seme (*zoe*). On the other hand, Refn's resolution of the neoliberal *bios* – *zoe* antagonism, while entering a similar level of abstraction, moves in the opposite direction. His films attribute formal necessity not to the return of the paternal metaphor but to an endless autoimmune self-destruction of the social link, which he posits as the ~~form of life~~ perpetually resisting the

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), 177-179.

system's Oedipal reterritorialization. In our Greimasian field, he thereby performs a negative deixis, affirming the negative term (*zoe*) while negating the positive one (*bios*). The limitation of both of these approaches is their fetishistic valorization of the particular content of their affirmed seme: for Nolan, the white heterosexual male bourgeoisie who is supposed to rule over the multitude by their superior cynical wisdom, and for Refn a bare life uncorrupted by western white male influence like that of native americans, the people of Thailand, or the Young-Girl (ultimately: the ~~Young-Girl~~). To put it differently, their weak point is that they don't go far enough with their formalism, that they keep separating *bios* qua form of life from *zoe* qua bare (formless) life, unable to think their contradiction together in what Agamben calls a form-of-life, a life that is not caught in the sovereign apparatus of power.²

It is this form-of-life that the fourth, yet to be explored position in our Greimasian semiotic square should bring us insofar as it offers a synthesis of the negation of both semes in a "neutral term" (not-bios + not-zoe). As Jameson summarizes, neutral means

[n]either one nor the other, without any third possibility in sight. This neutral position does not seek to hold two substantive features, two positivities, together in the mind at once, but rather attempts to retain two negative or privative ones, along with their mutual negation of each other. [...] They must neither be combined in some humanist organic synthesis, nor effaced and abandoned altogether: but retained and sharpened, made more virulent, their incompatibility and indeed their incommensurability a scandal for the

² As Agamben writes, "[b]y the term form-of-life [...] I mean a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life." Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), 3-4.

mind, but a scandal that remains vivid and alive, and that cannot be thought away, either by resolving it or eliminating it.³

For Jameson, such double negation is the form of utopia par excellence, a view—as Rudolphus Teeuwen points out—he shares with structuralists like Roland Barthes or Maurice Blanchot. For Barthes, Teeuwen notes, the semiotic square’s neutral synthesis is utopian insofar as it brings about a certain weariness of the mind and “a celebration of the good for nothing.”⁴ Similarly, Blanchot praises it for inducing “an enormous fatigue, a weariness, a sort of trance,” a “lack of exactness” in signification he referred to as “uncommunication.”⁵ In Agambenian terms, all these authors saw a profane potential in the neutral term, a possibility for an inoperative use of binary oppositions. I will argue that noir cynicism can be neutralized in a similar way and that the films of the seemingly conventional Hollywood director David Fincher are worth examining for traces of such dialectical fatigue of sovereignty.

What, then, makes Fincher different from his fellow midcult auteurs of Empire discussed in the previous chapters, besides being the only American born among them? As someone who (unlike the others) became famous for his commercials and music videos, he is often seen as a “technical artist” primarily interested in the new modalities of cinema emerging with the digital revolution, someone who has pioneered techniques like the virtual camera cutting through bodies and objects (*Fight Club*, 1999), shooting an entire film on a hard drive (*Zodiac*, 2007), projecting an actor’s face on another’s head (*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, 2008), or compositing phone messages on the top of the image of people typing them (*House of Cards*, 2013). As Mark Browning puts it, Fincher’s work “focuses very explicitly on what movies can show and how

³ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 180.

⁴ Rudolphus Teeuwen, “An Epoch of Rest Roland Barthes’s “Neutral” and the Utopia of Weariness,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 80 (2012): 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

they do that,”⁶ often drawing attention to the cinematic artifice like his commercials starring Hollywood celebrities playing themselves (*The Director*, 1993; *The Run*, 2005; or *Downtown*, 2013), various *mise-en-abyme* themed music videos redoubling the screen or the frame (Paula Abdul, *It's Just the Way that You Love Me*, 1989; Billy Idol, *L.A. Woman*, 1990; Nine Inch Nails, *Only*, 2005), and films reflecting on the *mise-en-scene* as a construct (*The Game*, 1997), even trying to “alienate” the viewer through direct address or splicing the image of (allegedly) the director’s penis into the film stock (*Fight Club*, 1999). Accordingly, Fincher likes to position himself as something of a Hollywood Brechtian, asserting that “[s]ome people go to the movies to be reminded that everything's okay. I don't make those kinds of movies. That, to me, is a lie. Everything's not okay. [...] You have a responsibility for the way you make the audience feel, and I want them to feel uncomfortable.”⁷

For scholars like Neil Archer, however, his play with the medium is not so much a modernist exercise as it is a neo-classical move, a prime example of what David Bordwell saw as contemporary Hollywood’s tendency for “an audacious style that parades virtuosity while remaining within the ambit of a stable system.”⁸ There is indeed another side to Fincher the auteur whose primary interest is not to disrupt but to strengthen and purify the classical Hollywood narrative, to make it flow more seamlessly after a digital upgrade. On various DVD commentaries Fincher claims that filmmaking is “all about parsing out information,”⁹ and that his “process is a process of limiting, trying to figure out the rules what not to do.”¹⁰ He is known

⁶ Mark Browning, *David Fincher: Films that Scar* (Praeger: Santa Barbara, 2010), 179.

⁷ Brian Mockenhaupt, “The Curious Case of David Fincher,” *Esquire* 147, no. 3 (2007): 159.

⁸ Bordwell quoted in Neil Archer, “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (2009/2011) and the new ‘European Cinema,’” *Film Criticism* 37, no. 2 (2012): 10.

⁹ *Zodiac*, directed by David Fincher (2007; Los Angeles: Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.

¹⁰ *Seven*, directed by David Fincher (1995; Los Angeles: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD.

in the business as an obsessive compulsive “control freak”¹¹ making his actors do dozens of takes until the repetition erases, as he puts it, their “muscle memory” and they start to become their role.¹² “He wants puppets. He doesn’t want actors that are creative,”¹³ one critic writes, which seems to rhyme with his avoidance of close-ups and preference for a steady, machinic rhythm of the narrative using static shots and dollies rather than handheld camera, and (digital) compositing instead of classical shot-reverse shot sequences. Along these lines, Daniel Kasman and Ignatij Vishnevetsky talk about the process based aesthetic of Fincher’s films: “[he] seeks mechanisms that allow him to show a *series of things*—usually construed as events, usually construed as specific meetings between people” stretched out in time like stages of a police investigation (*Seven*, *Zodiac*), a lawsuit (*The Social Network*), or encounters between lovers (*Benjamin Button*). “This technique eliminates the need for full-fledged, evolving scenes of melodrama and replaces it with a montage-based cinema of this happened and then this happened and then this.”¹⁴ Or, as Vishnevetsky puts it, “Fincher converts drama into data, and then orders it in sequential order.” “The result is a constant sensation of convergence, of piece falling into place”—one editor even compared him to a Swiss watchmaker—supported by the films’ visual style of “hyperrealistic lighting” and an “authoritatively crisp framing.”¹⁵

As a “process-based” filmmaker, Fincher’s work seems to exemplify what Sean Cubitt calls neobaroque film in which self-enclosed monad-like worlds unfold according to an underlying pattern which protagonists are trying to decipher—a process which the films turns

¹¹ James Swallow, *Dark Eye: The Films of David Fincher* (Richmond: Reynolds & Hearn, 2003), 32.

¹² “David Fincher: A Life in Pictures Highlights,” YouTube video, 13:03, posted by “BAFTA Guru,” Dec 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpHIZEm6058>.

¹³ Mockenhaupt, “The Curious Case of David Fincher,” 159.

¹⁴ Daniel Kasman, “David Fincher and the Sad Facts.” *Notebook* October 1, 2010, accessed October 19, 2016, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/david-fincher-and-the-sad-facts>.

¹⁵ Ignatij Vishnevetsky, “In the Process of the Investigation: David Fincher and ‘The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo’,” *Notebook* December 13, 2013, accessed October 19, 2016, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/in-the-process-of-the-investigation-david-fincher-and-the-girl-with-the-dragon-tattoo>.

into a spectacle (as in *Groundhog Day*, 1993; *The Truman Show*, 1998; or *The Matrix*, 1999). He sees the neobaroque film as a symptom of a general algorithmic mutation of Hollywood cinema whereby “image becomes composition, narrative becomes pattern, and the whole comes to a moment of gestalt coherence.”¹⁶ This “subjection of hyperindividuals to artificial worlds,” condemning them to ahistorical repetition in windowless monads signals, according to Cubitt, the disappearance of the modern subject once capable of temporal existence (change) “into the arabesques of spectacular coincidence.”¹⁷ By contrast, what I have called cynical neo-noir is more like a meta-commentary on such neobaroque enslavement of the self that makes it clear that far from disappearing, the sovereign subject keeps returning in neoliberal capitalism, making biopolitical decisions about society’s future much like his modern predecessor did. Fincher, I will argue, should also be placed within this dialectic: he is both the author of algorithmic processes and of the subject’s sovereign excess over them, an antinomy visible in his films through the co-presence of digital and analogue media; an austere, crisp, corporate style and an abject, trashy, grunge aesthetic; hypercontinuity editing and “Brechtian” alienation effects. What distinguishes him from his fellow cynics is that instead of picking either or both sides of this antinomy, he shows both of them as a dead end, amplifying their dialectical tension, thereby decreating the sovereign-image linking them together.

¹⁶ Sean Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 243.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

7.2 From the Crisis of Masculine Glory to the Contradictions of the Sovereign-Image

Like Boyle's *Elephant*, Nolan's *Doodlebug*, and Refn's *Pusher*, Fincher's first film *The Smoking Fetus* (1984) also explores the problem of autoimmunity. It's a commercial he made for the American Cancer Society, which, as the title suggests, features a fetus smoking inside its mother's womb—a dialectical image juxtaposing the safety of the prenatal immunized bubble with the body's autoimmune death drive pitted against it. This is also the basic conflict in Fincher's first feature *Alien 3* (1992) that starts with an alien parasite causing the protagonist's space pod to crash, putting an end to her cryosleep in her artificial womb. While thematically and aesthetically consistent with his other work, the film almost put an end to Fincher's career in Hollywood due to its financial and critical failure. Always the perfectionist, the young director, high on his recent MTV fame, didn't tolerate the studio's meddling with the production process and ended up walking off the set forfeiting the right to final cut. It was only in 2003, after his later box office hits established him as sought after a Hollywood auteur, that Twentieth Century Fox put together a 30 minute longer "assembly cut" based on Fincher's original notes and released it with the Alien series DVD box set. While not quite a director's cut, it is this version of this underrated film that I will look at here, remarkable in its clear and uncompromising non-resolution of the tension between autoimmunity and sovereign immunization, the contradiction at the heart of Fincher's entire oeuvre.

Alien 3 is set on Fury 161, a prison planet that used to operate as a toxic waste disposal site for the ominous Company, but where now only a small crew watches over shutdown rigs rusting away. Once a colony of 5000 ultraviolet convicts, disease has cut the population to just 25 souls—men who have survived their becoming obsolete and the disintegration of their

industrial habitat by finding solace in apocalyptic Christian fundamentalism. It is this remnant of Fordist patriarchy that the arrival of the female protagonist Ripley threatens with final extinction as she is bringing with her the larva of an alien life form that uses humans as pods to procreate, destroying them in the process. While Barbara Creed's well known psychoanalytic reading of the Alien series (mainly based on *Alien*, 1979) posited the monster as the embodiment of phallic femininity threatening patriarchal communities with its castrating *vagina dentata*,¹⁸ in Fincher's film sexual difference comes to be framed less in horror and more in noir terms. Not only is the male homosocial community already dying on its own by the time the alien arrives, the heroine herself, far from being the amazon of the previous films, is nothing but a living dead waiting for the creature that infected her to burst out of her stomach. There is a pervasive death drive in the air from the very beginning conveyed by the sepia coloured images of rust and decay that eventually levels the differences between various forms of life stuck in Fury 161's biopolitical zone of indistinction (even Bishop, Ripley's benevolent droid asks to be switched off permanently). If, as Creed suggested, in *Alien* the monster stood for the abject excess to be expelled from the human body and (we could add) from the immunized sphere of productive life,¹⁹ *Alien 3* imagines an inoperative community of male abjects, cast out aliens themselves living in anal looking tunnels "at the rats ass end of space" who, as Dillon, the prisoner's religious leader puts it, "tolerate[s] anybody, even the intolerable." No wonder Amy Taubin reads the film as an AIDS allegory.²⁰

¹⁸ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16-31.

¹⁹ The crew of first film's spaceship is depicted as a well-oiled blue collar worker's community, derailed by an S.O.S. signal from an alien spaceship.

²⁰ "Aids is everywhere in the film. It's in the danger surrounding sex and drugs. It's in the metaphor of a mysterious deadly organism attacking an all-male community. It's in the iconography of the shaven heads. Exhorting the prisoners to defy The Company, Ripley shouts. 'They think we're scum and they don't give a fuck about one friend of yours who's died.' an Aids activism line if ever there was one." Amy Taubin, "Invading bodies: Alien 3 and the Trilogy," *Sight and Sound* (July, 1992): 10.

The term tolerance, fashionable in the 90s post-political climate of liberal multiculturalism, is of course deeply ambiguous as one usually tolerates, to quote Žižek, “something one does not approve of, but cannot abolish,” not unlike how the body can develop a tolerance for poison in a small dosage.²¹ This means that tolerance is a category of immunization par excellence,²² which places the enigmatic notion of “tolerating the intolerable” in the autoimmune register of the death drive where the tolerated toxin eventually destroys the body, unless a sovereign establishes a separation from it. Initially, the intolerable refers to the sin of the flesh in the film, the temptation amplified by Ripley, the female intruder disturbing men’s ascetic quest for spiritual purity: a group of convicts almost gang rapes her were it not for Dillon’s intervention with a tire iron. Once the alien reveals itself, however, she is gradually accepted by the community of male sinners with whom she shares a predicament of being abandoned by the Company (with her head shaved like the others’ she even looks like a repenting monk), and the monster takes her place as the tolerated intolerable abject. After the creature kills the prison warden, having experience about how to fight it, Ripley becomes the colony’s de facto leader (the highest ranking male officer has an IQ of 85), and she devises an operation that, although almost undermined by male incompetence, successfully traps the alien in a toxic waste disposal chamber. This isolation of alien bare life with the assistance of the female sovereign’s intellectual labour (echoing the powers of the 80s *femme fatale*) momentarily returns the lost glory to the homosocial community: Fincher shoots the exhausted men walking away from the site of the hard won battle in slow motion, with a medieval aria in Latin as the sound bridge to the following victory ceremony performed by Dillon.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (New York: Verso, 2010), 46.

²² We could say, using Esposito’s categories, that immunization is the tolerance of life in a small dosage.

The men's sovereign moment, however, doesn't last long: escalating the autoimmune madness of the colony's apocalyptic religion, one of the convicts releases the monster he worships as a god—only to be slaughtered immediately. Moreover, after a radio exchange with the suddenly highly involved Company, it becomes clear that they value the alien's life more than that of the humans, willing to sacrifice the entire population to get their hands on such a unique commodity. After Ripley finds out about her noir indistinction from the alien (carrying a larva inside her makes her share the creature's abject status), she convinces the remaining survivors that they, just like her, are already dead: if the creature doesn't kill them the Company will upon arrival to cover up the traces of their discovery. Accordingly, their objective now is not to isolate the alien but to die with it, to embrace it as their own death driven libido-substance (Ripley makes Dillon promise he will execute her once they are done).²³ In other words, if the first hunt for the monster followed the *bios* + *~zoe* formula seeking to exclude the excess of sacred (bare) life from the homosocial community, the second one emerging after its failure inverts this logic into *~bios* + *zoe* and it appropriately ends with Ripley's self-sacrifice (her jump into a molten pit of lead after the alien, with its larva still in her stomach). Yet, unlike the sacrificial act in Refn's films, Ripley's autoimmune leap into the void doesn't restore sovereign power to anyone: only one convict is left alive, mindlessly grinning at his failed corporate masters as they take him away in chains to shut down the outpost for good.

The denouement therefore exposes a fundamental contradiction at the heart of postmodern sovereignty: while neoliberal capitalism fetishizes bare life as the ultimate source of profit, this very paradigm undermines itself by pressuring subjects to endlessly purify themselves

²³ Žižek reads the creature in the Alien films as the example of what Lacan called lamella, the myth of a libido organ beyond castration that "is indivisible, indestructible, and immortal - more precisely, undead in the sense this term has in horror fiction: not the sublime immortality of the Spirit, but the obscene Immortality of the 'living dead' which, after every annihilation, reconstitute themselves and shamble on." Slavoj Žižek, *How To Read Lacan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 62.

into such precious commodities—a quest that can only be realized through suicide. In Lacanian terms, Ripley, like Refn’s ~~Young Girl~~, refuses to separate herself from her *agalma*, *objet petit a* as the hidden treasure at the core of the subject she imagines being valued for by the Other (the Company who wants to surgically remove the alien inside her). By pushing the sovereign privatization of her bare life to the end, Ripley effectively undermines the possibility of its valorization. Unlike *Neon Demon*, however, where the ~~Young Girl~~ lived on as a specter of the capitalist value destroying one body after the next, *Alien 3* imagines the deactivation of this value-form itself (allegorized by the creature). In other words, Fincher’s framing of sovereignty as a contradiction points beyond its apparatus of power relying on the separation of *bios* and *zoe*.

Such undoing of the sovereign isolation of sacred life begins with the release of the alien from captivity. Far from simply worshipping the monster as sacred Other, the mad convict’s act is rather what Agamben calls profanation: “[t]o profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, puts it to a particular use.”²⁴ Profanation is a form of play that “distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it;”²⁵ by extending sacred inoperativity to instrumental processes it transforms them into means without an end.²⁶ This is how the second hunt for the alien, while officially aiming at the creature’s destruction, looks more like a game of tag where the lines between hunter and hunted, hunt and play become blurred. The convicts are running around in the colony’s labyrinthine tunnels, luring the monster their way while others try to shut the doors behind them so the creature ends up in the furnace room along with Ripley, Dillon and, as it turns out, all the others. Point of view shots of the anxious humans are cross cut with subjective shots of the alien (an early example of Fincher’s experiments with unmanned cameras), often misleading the

²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. J. Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 75.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

viewer about their source suturing them (at one point it's two men bumping into each other when we were expecting an encounter with the creature).

The temporality of this process also differs from the chronological time of the action-image dominating the first half of the film that led to a momentary sovereign resolution of the narrative. As characters now assume they are already dead no matter what happens, they are stuck in a strange inoperative time (time without an essential purpose) that remains until the Company spaceship arrives to finish them off, knowing they cannot change their situation for the better. Agamben, in his reading of Saint Paul's Letters to the Romans, calls this "messianic time," which designates neither chronological (secular) time, nor the time of eternity (the end of time), but rather "the time that time takes to come to an end" after the messianic event inaugurated its imminent conclusion.²⁷ The messianic is an operation that brings forth something inherent yet covert in our everyday representations of chronological time:

It is as though man, insofar as he is a thinking and speaking being, produced an additional time with regard to chronological time, a time that prevented him from perfectly coinciding with the time out of which he could make images and representations. [...] [A] time within time—not ulterior but interior—which only measures my disconnection with regard to it, my being out of synch and in noncoincidence with regard to my representation of time, but precisely because of this, allows for the possibility of my achieving and taking hold of it.²⁸

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 67.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

Messianic time is therefore time “in its pure state of potentiality”²⁹ interior to any actual representation of time; it is “the time we take to bring to an end, to achieve our representation of time.”³⁰

Insofar as a film is a representation of time, on the top of its duration it too includes the surplus of messianic time which could be defined, paraphrasing Agamben, as the time the thinking subject takes to achieve her cinematic image of time, which can be inscribed at the level of the plot’s chronological unfolding as the time the film takes to come to an end *after its story is already over*. And one way to reveal this pure potentiality of cinematic time is film noir’s suspension of the action-image in a death driven narrative where the protagonist’s “death on arrival” (like Ripley’s in *Alien 3* or Walter’s in *Double Indemnity*) is the messianic caesura initiating “the time that remains” in which characters as well as the viewer experience the radical freedom of inoperativity. This atemporality of the death drive, as I have argued in the previous chapters, can then be mobilized both for sovereign and utopian purposes; its freedom can be freely disavowed through fatalism, melancholy, or cynicism, or alternatively embraced as pure (im)potentiality. Fincher opts for the latter by drawing attention to the contradictory form of sovereignty: Ripley’s fall into the flames with a Christ-like posture fails to glorify corporate capitalism, offering a spectacle that decreates the sovereign-image instead.³¹

The director’s second feature, the both critically and financially successful *Seven* (1995) continues to explore the crisis of masculine glory and attempts at its sovereign-religious restoration in late capitalism. It’s a serial killer noir set in an unnamed metropolis with biblical levels of crime and decadence, and a gloomy aesthetic created through the silver-retention of the

²⁹ Ibid., 66.

³⁰ Ibid., 67.

³¹ Until the sequel made 5 years later that recreates the sovereign link by resurrecting Ripley as well as the alien inside her.

film stock—a technique that, as Taubin explains, “produces more luminosity in the light tones, and more density in the darks.”³² If *Alien 3* displaced Fordist masculinity’s crisis narrative through feminism, *Seven* does something similar by introducing a racial split within its traditionalist masculine discourse represented by the three male protagonists: the white serial killer John Doe, a Christian fundamentalist seeking mass media attention for his gory murder series themed after the seven deadly sins; the young white detective Mills, hotheaded, homophobic, with a stay at home wife; and detective Somerset, the wise elderly black man who lives alone and can’t wait to retire to the countryside from the corrupt city. Somerset is not the only African American presence in the film, however. As Paul Gromley suggests, *Seven* exhibits signs of a “mimetic contagion” by black culture as it was imagined by America’s white population in the 90s. The film imitates the video aesthetic of true-crime TV series featuring mainly black suspects with its extreme shallow focus providing a paranoid view of the city where danger can come from anywhere at any moment, and through its exploitative display of carnage both revolting and seductive.³³ Similarly, Steven Macek reads the moralizing narrative about the fallen city as a white middle class suburban prejudice “toward a (mostly poor, mostly of color) inner-city understood as essentially unruly and beyond hope.”³⁴ In this sense *Seven* is somewhere half way between classical noir’s foreclosure of urban African American presence and postmodern neo-noirs of black revisionism (*Suture*, 1993; *Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1995) that reveal noir’s former structuring absence. Instead of black identity politics Fincher’s film offers the white imaginary as a contradiction.

³² Amy Taubin quoted in Paul Gromley, *The New Brutality Film: Race and Affect in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Portland: Intellect, 2005), 171.

³³ *Ibid.*, 170-71. This affective appropriation of black culture is acknowledged with a knowing wink when Mills’ wife Tracy invites Somerset for dinner, she puts on an album of Marvin Gaye.

³⁴ Steve Macek, “Places of Horror: Fincher’s ‘Seven’ and Fear of the City in Recent Hollywood Film,” *College Literature*, 26, no. 1 (1999): 89.

Unlike *Alien 3*'s uneven and sometimes (refreshingly) incoherent plot, *Seven* is a feature where the director's perfectionism and obsession with a process based narrative can finally be satisfied. John Doe's well prepared plan arranging for clues and bodies to be found by the police in a timely fashion is also a meta-commentary on his filmmaking process, just like the killer's cry: "wanting people to listen, you can't just tap them on the shoulder anymore, you have to hit them with a sledgehammer" is a snippet of Fincher's *ars poetica* ("I've always been interested in movies that scar").³⁵ The murderer's quest to perform a sacred religious ritual that would restore the glory to America's sovereign biopower undermined by liberal hedonism (the seven sins of the *jouissance*) therefore mirrors the director's attempt to make the classical Hollywood narrative work its magic once again on the postmodern market of images where everything is permitted and no one believes in the Production Code anymore. Yet, although every piece of the puzzle gets into its place in the end, *Seven* is more than a neobaroque (or rather: neoclassical) mind game film causing sublime shock and awe through the algorithmic unfolding of its gruesome plot. In the finale, the serial killer, after giving himself up, requests the two detectives to accompany him to a place in the desert where, he claims, he had buried his last two victims. These are the only representations of the countryside in the film, which is far from the agrarian idyll Somerset is longing for: as the endless grid of electric pylons indicates it had already gone through a metropolitan transformation. Soon after their arrival to the designated location a delivery truck appears and Somerset runs ahead to stop it while Mills is holding Doe at gunpoint. The postman hands over a cardboard box addressed to Mills and after some hesitation Somerset opens it, only to find the severed head of his partner's wife Tracy. Factoring in the shock on his face, Doe starts to confess to Mills what he had done to his wife while Somerset is running towards them, yelling "throw your gun down!" but saying nothing like "don't listen to him, he is

³⁵ Fincher quoted in Browning, *David Fincher*, vii.

lying!” When he arrives back, he doesn’t deny Doe’s claims that Tracy’s head in the box either, which predictably makes Mills shoot the killer dead in a performance of wrath that completes the sacred ritual he orchestrated.

Who, then, is the real noir sovereign of this biopolitical machine closing in on itself in front of our eyes? Since both Doe and Mills killed their victims for substantial reasons (for their “sins”), not arbitrarily, it is Somerset, the man of cynical wisdom and an escapist fantasy whose sovereign decision to open the box triggered the suture of the plot. In an earlier scene, when Mills is assigned to him as partner, Tracy invites Somerset over for dinner to their family home which, after considerable resistance, he finally accepts, just like the woman’s subsequent request to meet for coffee when she tells him about her pregnancy her husband doesn’t yet know about as well as her fears of raising a child in the city. Here, like in the finale, he is posited as the gaze who is supposed to witness the autoimmune tension within white people’s immunized bubbles: the repeated shaking of the Mills’ apartment when a subway train passes by, the abortion talk of Tracy, Doe’s self-destructive loop of necropolitics, or even the apocalyptic medieval literature from Dante’s *Inferno* to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* he is an avid reader of.³⁶ It is this seemingly passive position of the subject supposed to believe (standing in for the film viewer as naive observer) that is revealed to be a result of a sovereign decision in the finale when his cutting the box open exposes his libidinal investment in white autoimmune decadence. His act initiates a sequence of time that remains in which both him and the viewer are forced to experience themselves as radically free subjects because, although they *know* what is about to happen, they also cannot but sense that their observing gaze is somehow included as a condition of possibility for this “necessary” event in the future. True, Somerset plays along predictably, but,

³⁶ As Gromley notes, “[w]hat is interesting about Somerset though is that the knowledge that this movie grants the black character has its source in a humanistic tradition which has predominantly been perceived as white.” Gromley, *The New Brutality Film*, 174.

paradoxically, fulfilling the role of a cynical sovereign to its logical conclusion, experiencing his own long held cynicism about white biopower as a result of a truly free decision actually has the opposite effect on him: it cures him of his cynicism. As his final voiceover summarizes, implying the cancellation of his retirement plans: “Ernest Hemmingway once wrote, ‘the world is a fine place, and worth fighting for.’ I agree with the second part.”

Fincher continues to deconstruct the self-enclosed loop of sovereignty in *The Game* (1997), which posits the inconsistency of biopower within the ruling class of Empire: as an internal crisis of Nicholas Van Orton, a white heterosexual investment banker with a perfect protestant work ethic who more than successfully transformed himself into a manager of finance capital, dedicating his entire life to his job. When his derelict brother gives him a subscription to an exclusive game organized by the clandestine Consumer Recreation Agency as a birthday present, he is not particularly intrigued. After a company representative tells him the game is supposed to “provide what is lacking,” his response is “and what if nothing is lacking?” This way *The Game* reimagines the premise of Frankenheimer’s *Seconds*: the protagonist in both films suffers from a lack of lack, having no state of exception from the sphere of bourgeois operativity: Nicholas relaxes by watching the business news on his couch while eating the food prepared by his maid, and although living alone in his mansion, he considers even the yearly call from his ex-wife on his birthday a nuisance. Playing the game, however, doesn’t give him respite either: he is rather forced into even more frantic activity as his life is suddenly turned into the manipulated *mise-en-scene* of a conspiracy narrative in which he is the designated victim. An ominous superego agency now throws disparaging remarks at him through the TV image of his favourite newscaster; his pen leaks ink on his expensive shirt; he cannot open his briefcase with important legal documents; his acquisition deal is sabotaged; and someone vandalizes his living

room with punk graffiti. In Agambenian terms, a certain amount of inoperativity is introduced into his perfectly functioning life—for his enjoyment, but he is not particularly amused. He nonetheless plays along out of a sense of class duty (in an early scene he overhears the conversation of fellow bankers talking about CRA who then reassure him it was the best thing ever happened to them).

Fincher cleverly puts Michael Douglas in the role of Nichoals, whose stardom, as J. Hoberman summarizes, “depends on his capacity to project simultaneous strength and weakness. He is the victim as hero—a bellicose masochist, aggressive yet powerless, totally domineering while battered by forces beyond his control.”³⁷ As such, he perfectly embodies the contradictions of cynical sovereignty. In the finale, driven into paranoia by the conspirators/game masters, he is cornered on the top of a skyscraper, waiting for a group of armed men to find him and finish him off. As the door opens, he shoots at the emerging figure with his gun, only to recognize in him his brother, bringing champagne and a group of Nicholas’ acquaintances to celebrate the hero’s valiant performance in the game. Triggered by the overwhelming sense of guilt and helplessness that brings back his memory of witnessing his father’s suicide, he jumps off the roof like his father once did to his death, which, of course, turns out to be the move factored in by the CRA. After breaking through a glass ceiling of an elegant gala room with all the characters in the film dressed up ceremoniously, he falls into a giant airbag, and the guests, his brother among them, start clapping. It takes him some time to adjust but soon he continues to play along as if it was his regular birthday party. As Browning notes, “the one emotion we do not see but which he would be fully justified in expressing is anger.”³⁸

³⁷ J. Hoberman quoted in David Savran, *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 206.

³⁸ Browning, *David Fincher*, 168.

While not Fincher's strongest, *The Game*, like *Alien 3* and *Seven*, plays with the effects of an extreme narrative closure on the viewer, this time without a diegetic stand-in to reject the sovereign loop. For this reason, it's almost like a parody of the mind game film genre, revealing itself as an artificially constructed world whose claims to realism seem entirely absurd from the extra-diegetic outside. Its monadic self-enclosure appears to us as an internal matter of the one percent, something the ordinary viewer cannot relate to. As an exercise in ideology critique, it maps a neoliberal power apparatus that Alexander Galloway calls ludic capitalism, "one in which flexibility, play, creativity, and immaterial labor [...] have taken over from the old concepts of discipline, hierarchy, bureaucracy, and muscle."³⁹ For Agamben, this only brings out to the open tendencies inherent in capitalism from its onset, that "[it] is nothing but a gigantic apparatus for capturing pure means, that is, profanatory behaviors,"⁴⁰ that the motor of the modern sovereign power is not instrumental reason but the controlled and limited exercise of inoperative play, the primitive accumulation of humanity's common gestures into a separate sphere of glory managed in the film by a Veblenian leisure class.⁴¹

The director's next feature, *Fight Club* (1999), is by far his best known and most analyzed one about the postmodern crisis of masculine glory—a film that renders the fascism of the neoliberal self-purification paradigm as the autoimmune violence of a masochistic boxing/terrorist cult for white, heterosexual, petty-bourgeois men. The hero, the unnamed Narrator, is a young white collar professional stuck in a debilitating damage assessment job for a major auto company, which consists of applying a mathematical formula determining whether a model should be recalled after a deadly accident or not. His complete detachment from the Fordist labour apparatus that employers like his pioneered a century ago is further underscored

³⁹ Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Malden: Polity, 2012), 27.

⁴⁰ Agamben, *Profanations*, 87.

⁴¹ See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: The Modern Library, 1934)

by his insomnia: he drones on in the somnambulistic state of tautological time, unable to tell work and leisure (i.e. consumption) time apart. Fincher sums up his condition in the opening montage sequence, a flashback to fragments of the Narrator's memories linked together by his voiceover, images of him half-asleep in his office, on an airplane, at the doctor, in various self-help groups, and, most famously, composited into a CGI-animated IKEA catalogue that turns into his apartment as he walks around ordering various items on the phone. His mind perceives everything, he complains, as a "copy of a copy of a copy." In Franco Berardi's terms, he suffers from the fatigue of psychic overstimulation under digital (semio-)capitalism.⁴²

This, of course, is merely half of his story because, as we learn only once the final piece of the narrative puzzle is revealed at the end, he suffers from multiple personality disorder. His alter-ego, Tyler Durden, is a grunge glam anarchist who, after burning down his sterile upscale condo, starts squatting in a rotting Victorian mansion, founds a men only bare knuckle fight club *cum* anti-corporate direct action group ("Project Mayhem"), and preaches the cult of real manhood that can be achieved only through self-destruction. If, as a productive member of society the Narrator had been machinically enslaved to the rhythms 24/7 capitalism, his resistance to it as Tyler in turn is autoimmune. What is entirely missing from the film is the level of generic immunization, a community that is not death driven: even the early support groups the Narrator visits faking his belonging are for the terminally ill, and the other faker, Marla, his (Tyler's) occasional lover also has a death wish: she crosses busy streets without looking, takes pills to kill herself, and declares to Tyler (in the original script): "I want to have your abortion." As the Narrator who prefers the company of Tyler—the company of himself—puts it: "If I had a tumor, I'd name it Marla," recalling the interpassive symptomatology of the classical *femme*

⁴² Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*, trans. A. Bove et al. (London: Minor Compositions, 2009), 45-46.

fatale. In other words, we are in the meta-generic domain of film noir, only Fincher puts the classical formula on steroids, turning it into a satire. Noir's "dead on arrival" flashback structure is set up during the opening credits with the frantic neuro(n)-image ride through the Narrator's brain, the virtual camera gradually shifting from microscopic to macroscopic scale, exiting the man's head with a bead of sweat, tracking back to settle on the barrel of a gun in his mouth. The (meta-)genre's characteristic gender dynamics, its repressed homoeroticism and flight from the feminine is mocked through its framing as a Victorian anachronism.⁴³ As for noir's expressionist style of affective realism, not only does Fincher manipulate the film stock to get a dirty, grainy, high contrast look,⁴⁴ he even splices in the image of a penis a few times (and points at it through the Narrator's direct address of the audience), as if to literalize the canonical reading of the noir aesthetic as the expression of phallic *jouissance*. The classical noir theater of self-castration is also made explicit as Tyler, predicting his other half's impulse to sabotage his apocalyptic terror plot, orders the neutering of the Narrator in case he goes to the police. Oedipal themes are also blown over the top: Tyler preaches about his generation of men being abandoned by their real and symbolic fathers, their becoming effeminate like the former wrestler Bob who got testicular cancer from massive steroid use, and the hormonal treatment gave him "bitch tits." (Tyler himself parades around the house in fluffy pink slippers and a woman's robe). Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, *Fight Club* also reproduces the Production Code style tacked on endings of the classical period along with their characteristic cognitive dissonance, having the Narrator shoot himself in the head to get rid of Tyler, then, with a bleeding head wound, he holds

⁴³ As David Greven observes, besides the repressed love triangle between the Narrator, Tyler, and Marla, the hero's crumbling mansion and the resurrection of the 19th century tradition of bare knuckle boxing clubs, Tyler's handmade soap business has also a Victorian-era referent in the cult of masculine artisanship. David Greven, *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 167.

⁴⁴ "We talked about making it a dirty-looking movie, kind of grainy. When we processed it, we stretched the contrast to make it kind of ugly, a little bit of underexposure, a little bit of re-silvering, and using new high-contrast print stocks and stepping all over it, so it has a dirty patina." Fincher quoted in Swallow, *Dark Eye*, 143-44.

hands with Marla while they are witnessing the conclusion of Project Mayhem's terror plot: the demolition of the headquarters of various financial institutions.

Fight Club provoked an incredible number of academic responses, a vast number of them highly critical either of the film's reactionary gender dynamics (seeing its masochism as a ruse in the glorification of white male fascism),⁴⁵ or of its pseudo anti-capitalism limited to a hip consumerism bashing instead of reflecting on class and relations of production.⁴⁶ What these readings share is a certain paranoid view of the America's white patriarchy as indestructible, able to co-opt forms of life that appear the most fiercely antagonistic to it. Krister Friday claims that this new man in *Fight Club* is the product of what Sally Robinson called "the dominant or master narrative of white male decline" in the 90s. "In the context of the cumulative 'threats' of identity politics, minority gains in the academy and in the workplace, the decline of single wage earner households, and a waning of the white male's monopoly on political power, these narratives have sublated the aforementioned cultural shifts into a new identity position—the embattled underdog and/or victim."⁴⁷ This way, she suggests, the very narrative of defeat can serve the purpose of white men staying in power. Perhaps the most succinct summary of this formula is Claire Sisco King's notion of "abject hegemony" that views the masculinity exemplified by *Fight Club*'s

⁴⁵ David Greven, *Manhood in Hollywood*, 160-76.; Andrew Hewitt, "Masochism and Terror: Fight Club and the Violence of Neo-fascist Ressentiment," *Telos* no. 136 (2006): 104-31.; Krister Friday, "'A Generation of Men Without History': *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom," *Postmodern Culture* 13, no. 3 (2003); Claire Sisco King, "It Cuts Both Ways: *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and Abject Hegemony," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 4 (2009): 366-85.; Nicola Rehling, "Fight Club Takes a Beating: Masculinity, Masochism and the Politics of Disavowal," *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 4 (2001): 187-205.; Brian Locke, "'The White Man's Bruce Lee': Race and the Construction of White Masculinity in David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999)," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 17, no. 1 (2014): 61-89.; Jennifer Barke, "'A Hero Will Rise': The Myth of the Fascist Man in *Fight Club* and *Gladiator*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2008): 171-87.

⁴⁶ Henry Giroux and Imre Szeman, "Ikea Boy Fights Back: *Fight Club*, Consumerism, and the Political Limits of Nineties Cinema," *New Art Examiner* (December 2000/January 2001), 32-37, 60-61.; Jacob Mertens, "Parting Words: The Problem with Perfection," *Film International* 12, no. 4 (2014): 143-44.; Mark Bedford, "Smells Like 1990s Spirit: The Dazzling Deception of *Fight Club*'s Grunge-Aesthetic," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 9, no. 1 (2011): 49-63.; George L. Henderson, "What was Fight Club? Theses on the Value Worlds of Trash Capitalism," *Cultural Geographies* 18, no. 2 (2011): 143-70.

⁴⁷ Friday, "Men Without History"

protagonist as “an abject ‘body’ whose perpetuation and expansion depend upon its ability to open up, double itself, and transgress its own boundaries.”⁴⁸ As King writes, “[w]hite masculinity prevails not by expelling that which is Other, but by sacrificing its own fictions in order to absorb, assimilate, and make room for Otherness.”⁴⁹ There is an interesting slippage here between white masculinity and the dialectic of capital itself that, as Deleuze and Guattari argued, expands beyond its former limits through endless cycles of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. It is George Henderson who notes that *Fight Club*’s Tyler is first and foremost an allegory for capital. His urban guerilla acts of vandalizing and demolishing buildings, his moving into a dilapidated area, his ability to extract value from trash (making expensive soap out of discarded human fat) along with his grunge chic outfit stand for capital’s logic of creative destruction (deterritorialization) that precedes urban gentrification and the opening of new fields of consumption (reterritorialization). This is why, the author suggests, “[t]he film offers a non-alternative. It smashes capital in the very ways capital smashes itself, so that what it means to smash has already been invented by capital. Namely, in the capitalist world objects are smashed, not capitalist social relations.”⁵⁰

Yet, don’t such criticisms fall into the trap of what Samo Tomsic calls the vitalist misreading of capitalism, the notion that it’s an autonomous productive machine, a kind of “life without negativity”?⁵¹ This view, Tomsic argues, results from the conflation of the level of production and the level of fantasy that leads to a fetishistic theory of value.⁵² For Marx the highest form of this vitalist delusion was the bourgeois idea of money begetting money, i.e.

⁴⁸ Sisco King, *It Cuts Both Ways*, 367.

⁴⁹ Sisco King convincingly argues against earlier notions of hegemonic masculinity established by R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt that opposed it to “subordinated masculinities.” *Ibid.*, 371.

⁵⁰ Henderson, “What was *Fight Club*?”, 152.

⁵¹ Samo Tomsic, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (New York: Verso, 2015), 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 5-6.

creating value ex nihilo, by multiplying its magical substance. He offered $M - M'$ as the formula of such money fetishism but it might as well describe the ideology of self-made masculinity (what Michael Kimmel calls “marketplace manhood”).⁵³ It is only through neoliberal cynicism, however, that the secret of such fetishism, the indistinction between finance capital and the masculine sovereign, is openly assumed, with the entrepreneurial self operating his own private federal reserve by turning his bare life into living currency. Or, to be more precise, this is the *aim* of the neoliberal sovereign, but his project—and this is what *Fight Club*’s critics seem to forget—is doomed to fail (creating value ex nihilo, after all, is not possible). The real question, therefore, is how this failure is inscribed into the film’s form. Consider, for instance, the scene of the Narrator quitting his job: he beats himself into a living pulp in front of his boss, and when security arrives, he is able to make the scene appear as workplace abuse, the legal settlement of which would guarantee him lifetime income without work. Yet, as we learn in the end, after he settles for a life of idleness and playful self-destruction in the local fight club, while he sleeps, Tyler keeps on working (nightly jobs as a projectionist, waiter, and most importantly as the organizer of a nationwide revolutionary group). His labour time in the apocalyptic movement (a “time that remains” in the Agambenian sense that the Narrator cannot account for) is invisible to the viewer: these blanks are *not* filled in with explanatory flashbacks, we only learn about them indirectly when the hero, panicking what he might have done while not under sovereign self-control, revisits the places he started terrorist cells as Tyler. His effort to close the gaps in his memory and shut down Project Mayhem is therefore an attempt to disavow the messianic time of pure potentiality, the same way as his sovereign act of shooting the Tyler in him, and the

⁵³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, trans. B. Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 256.; Michael S. Kimmel “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” in Michael S. Kimmel, *Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 23-43.

subsequent reassuring of Marla, shocked by his gaping wound, that “everything is going to be fine.” This sovereign disavowal, however, doesn’t work: the next moment the skyscrapers do blow up, startling both of them, initiating a new messianic time by “erasing the debt record,” and “levelling the playing field,” as Tyler put it before. In other words, once again, Fincher’s protagonist, by pushing the neoliberal logic of sovereign self-purification to its logical conclusion, ends up exploding its supposedly closed loop into a contradiction. As the couple stands there watching the CGI spectacle of destruction from behind a glass window now framed as a movie screen, neither claiming, nor disavowing ownership over it, the Narrator merely says: “You met me at a very strange time in my life,” while The Pixies’ song *Where is My Mind* starts playing in the background.

This final frame within frame works as an interface between the analogue and digital elements of the film, but instead of guaranteeing their smooth connection, it rather draws attention to their discord, implying the impossibility of a sovereign appropriation of the digital (before we cut to the end credits, we once again get a splice of Tyler’s penis as a reminder of an analogue excess of bare life). This is in sharp contrast to the use of virtual camera in the film’s opening, the already mentioned brain ride sequence and the following shot that falls from the top of the office building where Tyler is holding the Narrator captive, cutting through the pavement and multiple floors of the parking garage in a split second to settle on various charges of explosives hidden in a van and attached to the building’s foundations. While the first sequence lacks any interpretative guidance and makes sense only retrospectively, the second shot is accompanied by the Narrator’s voiceover explaining it as the setup for Tyler’s “theater of mass destruction” about to commence in 2 minutes. The entire film is thereby framed as the time that remains before the apocalypse, a radically equalizing event anticipated by a fully digital image

sequence. For William Brown, these two shots are examples of digital cinema's flat ontology and post-human political aesthetic: "[t]he ability of the digital camera to pass through bodies suggests that human bodies are 'meaningless', or just a(nother) part of the continuum,"⁵⁴ which creates "an equality among [diegetic] elements."⁵⁵ He sees the film as a whole developing on a similar "a 'schizophrenic' continuum" between fantasy and reality, man and woman, inside and outside, space and time, offering "new modes of thought, new becomings" beyond established identities.⁵⁶ Yet, doesn't such Deleuzian schizoanalytic reading⁵⁷ erase the traces of the dialectical tension in the film, the way in which the Narrator's attempt to suture (or, we could say interface) his body with the digital explodes in a contradiction? What Brown misses is that the digital zone of indistinction of the opening shots is always already supplemented with the sovereign masculine *jouissance* expressed in the Narrator's noir style voiceover that tries to capture its utopian potential for its own capitalo-patriarchal purposes, using the digital to glorify his self-image. It's worth recalling here that in Agamben's theory, glory is the quality of a perfect, self-sufficient, unchanging God who, paradoxically, nonetheless needs sovereign glorification from its earthly subjects imagining him as their flawless ruler. In this sense, the hypercontinuous digital sequences of *Fight Club* Brown praises for lacking lack (lacking a cut) and ontological differentiation are glimpses into a contemporary fantasy about an atemporal God-substance, one that Fincher's film sets up as the neuro-image of its noir hero, that is, the glory of his private sovereign apparatus constituting him as a neoliberal monad. The ending,

⁵⁴ William Brown, *Supercinema* (New York: Bergham, 2013), 66.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁶ William Brown and David H. Fleming, "Deterritorialisation and Schizoanalysis in David Fincher's *Fight Club*," *Deleuze Studies* 5, no. 2 (2011): 275-99.

⁵⁷ See also Kevin Mitchell, "A Copy of a Copy of a Copy': Productive Repetition in *Fight Club*," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 5, no. 1 (2013): 108-31.

however, rather than suturing this sovereign continuum between the Narrator's *zoe* and digital glory in a Deleuzian crystal-image, ends up decreasing it into a dialectical contradiction.

This is also why the political aesthetics of *Fight Club*'s ending is not sublime but rather "stuplime," to use a category developed by Sianne Ngai. The sublime feeling, in its classical Kantian sense, is triggered by the failure of the mind to contain an overwhelming phenomenon (like a storm or a catastrophe) in a sensuous form. This shock and awe is then neutralized, turned into its opposite (tranquility) by imagining its source to be the transcendental moral Law guaranteeing the rational order of humanity.⁵⁸ The experience of the sublime is then like watching a terrifying event unfold from a safe distance, for instance a storm through a windowpane. In Agambenian terms, the Kantian sublime can be described as the sovereign containment, i.e. glorification of chaos. In stuplimity, by contrast, "the initial experience of being aesthetically overwhelmed involves not terror or pain (eventually superseded by tranquility), but something much closer to an ordinary fatigue—and one that cannot be neutralized, like the sublime's terror, by a competing affect." As a result, the stuplime "does not, in the end, confirm the self's sense of superiority over the overwhelming or intimidating object."⁵⁹ Furthermore, by holding the opposing affects of astonishment and boredom together without resolution, "[s]tuplimity also evades the kind of wholly anti-absorptive, cynical tedium often used to reflect the flattening effects of cultural simulacra." It is an "anti-auratic, anti-cynical tedium that at times deliberately risks seeming obtuse, as opposed to making claims for spiritual transcendence or ironic distance."⁶⁰ By its ending *Fight Club* reaches such a stuplime exhaustion of its sovereign-image, holding together its contradictory poles in their comically obvious antagonism

⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant, "Selections from Critique of Judgment" in *Basic Writings of Kant*, trans. A. W. Wood (New York: Random House, 2001), 306-307.

⁵⁹ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 271.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 278.

(the Narrator with a gaping head wound and without pants acting as the reassuring male hero only to be contradicted a moment later; the excluded bare life of Tyler returning as a splice of his penis, etc.).

7.3 States of Sovereign Exhaustion

If the stupefying ambiguity of *Fight Club*'s final sovereign-image allowed many critics to ignore its failure to suture together analogue and digital layers of the film, *Zodiac* (2007) conveys the same irresolvable antagonism as an unmistakable dialectical fatigue running through its entire narrative about the decades-long but ultimately futile manhunt for the Bay area's notorious Zodiac Killer. As Amy Taubin observes, "*Zodiac* is less a film about characters than about processes,"⁶¹ or more precisely about the *becoming* process of its male characters, their in the end failed endeavour to synchronize their lives with the emerging cybernetic paradigm of power allegorized by their quest to crack the serial killer's coded messages and pattern of behaviour. This tension is once again inscribed at the ontological level of the medium itself: while (almost) entirely shot with cutting edge Viper digital cameras, the images were given a more analogue look in post processing not to feel too alienating to the viewer.⁶² A similar discord appears between classical montage sequences and parts of "intensified continuity"—in Brown's, not in Bordwell's sense of the term, that is, digital editing techniques that avoid cutting through the use of compositing, CGI time lapse scenes, or impossible tracking shots with a virtual camera.⁶³ As a result, at one level, the film seems to unfold in an atemporal, neobaroque universe according to an underlying algorithm indifferent to the scale of human lifetime: the

⁶¹ Taubin quoted in Browning, *David Fincher*, 74.

⁶² See Michelle Schreiber, "Tiny Life: Technology and Masculinity in the Films of David Fincher," *Journal of Film and Video* 68, no. 1 (2016): 6.

⁶³ See Brown, *Supercinema*, 42-46.

Zodiac himself returns in different decades, and the passage of time is often spatialized for a kind of machine vision fit for processing data, as in the time lapse sequence showing the construction of San Francisco's Pan-Am building in a few seconds, the intertitle reading "7 and a half years later," or the blank screen with only a sound montage of news recordings from subsequent years. On the other hand, the film is about masculine exhaustion after decades of failed and mostly unpaid detective work performed by a few exceptional men willing to dedicate their time beyond what is required by their Fordist workplace (a newspaper office or a police station) to chasing the Zodiac's algorithm. As such, they exemplify the new neoliberal entrepreneurial selfhood emerging in the 70s, which in turn makes them lose their job and family (San Francisco Chronicle cartoonist Robert Graysmith), their job and mental health (Chronicle columnist Paul Avery), or their job and reputation (Inspector David Toschi, once the real life model for Detective Callahan of the *Dirty Harry* films). While at the level of the diegesis the men's autoimmune efforts seem to pay off at the end, connecting enough dots to find a likely killer, the concluding intertitle makes their failure unequivocal: DNA testing proved their candidate was not the Zodiac.

For Sam Dickson, this inability to locate the villain serves as an allegory for the lack of indexical referent in digital cinema the film itself pioneers with some anxiety.⁶⁴ In biopolitical terms, this missing index refers to the absent (real-impossible) sovereign who could suture together an apparatus of digital biopower, making neoliberalism's productive algorithms coincide with masculine bare life. Like in *Fight Club*, the contradiction between these two levels is exposed through what Galloway calls an "interface effect," the becoming visible of the

⁶⁴ Sam Dickson, "Zodiac and the Ends of Cinema," *Senses of Cinema* 78 (March, 2016), accessed October 31, 2016, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2016/feature-articles/zodiac/>.

boundary between “two different mediatic layers within [a] nested system”⁶⁵ the “moment where one significant material is understood as distinct from another significant material.”⁶⁶ For Žižek, the cinematic interface effect signals the breakdown of the classical suture’s shot – reverse shot logic where a chain of signifying images continuously folded the viewer (the “Absent One” or “lack” of the diegesis) into the narrative. “[T]he interface effect occurs when [...] signifying representation fails. At this point, when the gap can no longer be filled by an additional signifier, it is filled by a spectral object, in a shot which, in the guise of the spectral screen, includes its own counter-shot.”⁶⁷ This spectral distortion within the shot is the result of the Lacanian *objet a*—the becoming absent (becoming the *gaze* of the Absent One) of which was a condition of possibility for a classical Hollywood scene’s imaginary coherence—falling back into the image as its stain of the *real*. And since *objet a* is nothing but the subject in objectal form (the fantasmatic piece of the subject that had to be cut off for the ego to maintain its coherence), the elementary form of the interface effect, Žižek asserts, is “the subject somehow enter[ing] his/her own picture,” like the protagonist giving a speech in front of his own giant poster in *Citizen Kane* (1941).⁶⁸ In *Zodiac*, this occurs for instance in the scene where a local TV talk show host is trying to have the killer call him during a live broadcast to lure him into giving himself up. The scenes of preparation in the studio are already split by an interface effect: in one shot we see the anxious Detective Toschi in the control room, separated by a glass window from the set visible both on the monitors looked at by the technicians next to him and as a reflection on the windowpane he is gazing through. Nevertheless, the image of the set is then sutured by a reverse shot of various characters watching the show with anticipation on their television set. When the

⁶⁵ Galloway, *Interface Effect*, 31.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 54.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

presumed killer calls in, however, the scene collapses once again into an interface: instead of a cut to the Zodiac we see the studio set from behind the TV camera directed at it, with the scene redoubled in the tiny monitor of the cameraman. Predictably, the police sent to the caller's location discover that the call was made from a lunatic asylum.

The killer is therefore not merely the structuring absence of the film as Dickson would have it as the absence of such signifying absence, the lack of a lack that could be sublated, sutured through phallic signification. He is the symptom of the sovereign-image, the specter of pure bare life like the xenomorph in *Alien 3* or Tyler in *Fight Club* that resists to be isolated and co-opted by sovereign power into its abject hegemony.⁶⁹ For a serial killer film, *Zodiac* conspicuously lacks the genre's obsession with wounds as indexes of authenticity that would replicate what Mark Seltzer calls our "pathological public sphere" turning trauma into a spectacle.⁷⁰ Not only do we have little to no gore, the blood shown is CGI, and when the presumed killer claims a murder by enumerating the details of the violence suffered by the victim, it turns out to be a verbatim reiteration of what appeared on the news. We also don't learn anything about the Zodiac's traumatic past as all the suspects with their pathologies of everyday life are eventually cleared by forensic evidence. While somebody certainly committed the murders, the Zodiac Killer in Fincher's film is just an empty signifier grouping them together around a nonexistent pattern.

If in *Zodiac* the figure of the sovereign who could suture human life and digital algorithm together is ultimately missing, in *The Social Network* (2010) he seems to be all too present: the protagonist is none other than Mark Zuckerberg (played by Jesse Eisenberg), inventor of Facebook, the number one biocapitalist interface of our time. Like *Fight Club*, the film maps the

⁶⁹ In this sense *Zodiac* is also the anti-*Taxi Driver*.

⁷⁰ Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," *October* 80 (Spring, 1997): 3-26.

connective mutation of the male body, but this time in the upper echelons of neoliberal biopower. The setting is Harvard, the 21st century meritocrats' laboratory of pure innovation, the breeding ground of what McKenzie Wark calls "the vectoralist class," the new post-Fordist rulers of global finance and information flows.⁷¹ Accordingly, the main antagonists are the old and the new ruling classes themselves, the high born and well-connected aristocrats with their centuries old symbolic rituals of inoperativity (a cappella singing groups, rowing clubs, freshman hazing), and the new creative class of computer programmers and venture capitalists for whom glory lies not in the exclusive ceremonies of high society but in the dissemination of the digital code they own. For the vectoralists like Zuckerberg and his investor Sean Parker, Harvard's traditionalist social milieu is a relic of the past, which is why they eventually move to Silicon Valley to start their tech company, where they party with Young-Girls (a little too young in the case of Parker) instead of aging aristocrats who represent the Oedipal-disciplinary regime. The old world's now superfluous masculine ideal is parodied in the muscular bodies of the (former) Harvard boat race champion Winklevoss twins,⁷² who, although they come up with its core concept, imagine Facebook as an ivy-league university yearbook, applying their elitistic prejudices to the new medium, unable to think the inherent populism of the digital's flat ontology. It is their lawsuit against Zuckerberg that connects various flashbacks to the past into a linear narrative, a classical cinematic device illustrating the old power apparatus leeching off new capital. Beyond the plaintiffs, Fincher also mocks the bloated army of lawyers on both sides with Zuckerberg repeatedly ignoring them during the hearings, considering the whole process a waste of time compared his ground-breaking work on Facebook.

⁷¹ McKenzie Wark, "The Vectoralist Class," *e-flux*, August 29, 2015, accessed November 1, 2016, <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/the-vectoralist-class/>.

⁷² I owe this point to Schreiber, *Tiny Life*, 12.

Instead of simply glorifying the victors or expressing nostalgia for the old ruling class, *The Social Network* is first and foremost about the excess of inoperativity that neither can control. The film depicts Facebook's predecessor, Facemash as the obscene underside of the life of the Harvard bourgeoisie, as a program Zuckerberg wrote in a moment of misogynistic vengeance after his girlfriend broke up with him. His website that allowed for the rating of the university's female students against one another got so popular it caused Harvard's servers to shut down—a symbolic victory over a disciplinary institution unfit for the digital age (when the Winklevoss twins later seek out the president of the university to support their legal claim against Zuckerberg based on the Harvard's centuries old student code of conduct, the man doesn't know how to deal with the issue seriously). Yet, the same way as the Winklevoss twins boat racing reveals itself to be an empty gesture (that is, inoperativity without glory) when they lose, Zuckerberg himself is left in disconnect from his own apparatus of power despite settling his lawsuits to his advantage. In the last scene, he is sitting in front of the interface he invented, trying to add his ex as a Facebook friend. The shot – reverse shot sequence between the close-up of his distracted face and his Facebook profile, however, ends without a suture: he keeps clicking on the refresh button with no result, the repetition revealing his gesture as a means without an end.

If the process leading to sovereign exhaustion in *Zodiac* was a never ending investigation and in *The Social Network* a never ending trial, in *Gone Girl* (2014) it is a couple's separation procedure that doesn't want to come to an end. The film, more explicitly than *The Social Network* or *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) is an allegory for the post-2008 crisis of capital: the opening montage of a North Carthage, Missouri showing empty streets, boarded up storefronts, abandoned warehouses, and FOR SALE signs on various real estate already makes it

clear that we're in recession territory. This way, when we subsequently learn that the male protagonist Nick's wife Amy had disappeared that morning, her absence works as a signifier for capital flight. More precisely, Amy is the embodiment of neoliberal capital taking the form of the Young-Girl: she became moderately wealthy from the royalties of the "Amazing Amy" children's book series her parents wrote about her quite literally as a young girl. As relatively successful magazine writers, she and her husband started out as New York hipsters, synchronizing their lives through hedonistic rituals of ironic consumption (at one point they buy each other the same gift for their anniversary, both thinking of the same inside joke, to which Amy reacts: "We're so cute I want to punch us in the face."). Then the financial crisis hit, making Nick lose his job, and when his father fell ill they were forced to move back to the man's hometown. Amy became a bored housewife and Nick took a job as an adjunct professor teaching English at the local college—not enough to support the family, which is why he had Amy use her trust fund to buy him and his sister a bar (named "The Bar" with tedious urban hipster irony, rather unfit for the southern small town clientele)—an investment yet to turn any profit. The growing tension within the couple therefore mirrors the one between two moments of capital's dialectic that normally constitutes its Oedipal apparatus: deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Derailed by the financial crisis, these two have failed to properly synchronize ever since: the surplus liquidity of global finance capital has been reluctant to move into communities to create jobs and build infrastructure, preferring investments into fictitious capital instead (the rentier economy instead of production), which only led to newer and newer crises.⁷³ Perhaps it's no coincidence that Amy mentions Greece as the ideal destination of her flight she

⁷³ See Michael Hudson, *Killing the Host: How Financial Parasites and Debt Bondage Destroy the Global Economy* (Petrolia: CounterPunch, 2015)

never reaches in the end: the collapse of the Greek sovereign debt in 2010 marked the second wave of the global financial crisis that started in 2008.

The film maps this deadlock of today's global capitalism through the generic form of what Stanley Cavell called the Hollywood comedy of remarriage. Cavell describes the classical cycle of these films of (*It Happened One Night*, 1934; *The Awful Truth*, 1937; *His Girl Friday*, 1940, etc.) as "fairy tales for the Depression" because in their depiction of the crisis, dissolution and subsequent restoration of marriage as a civilizational institution they imagine couples capable of transformation and self-perfection through conversation and mutual recognition.⁷⁴ These films, he argues, can be understood "as parables of a phase of the development of consciousness at which the struggle is for the reciprocity or equality of consciousness between a woman and a man, a study of the conditions under which this fight for recognition (as Hegel put it) or demand for acknowledgment (as I have put it) is a struggle for mutual freedom, especially of the views each holds of the other."⁷⁵ Like film noir, the comedy of remarriage has a battle of the sexes narrative attempting to realize the principle of equality formally included in the idea of the bourgeois couple. Unlike film noir, however, where real equality is possible only in death, the remarriage comedy offers a generic script of temporary transgression for both protagonists without turning autoimmune. Common to the genre, according to Cavell, is the initial opposition between a safe but boring married life as a bastion of civilization and a hostile but exciting outside world without law and order.⁷⁶ Symbolic equality opposed to a radical inequality in the real. The quest of the protagonists is then to have a "glimpse at the failure of civilization,"⁷⁷ and

⁷⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 3.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

incorporate the “realm of the demonic”⁷⁸ they experienced into the institution of marriage, but not so much as its obscene underside repressed below the surface as in post-noirs, but as an unresolved tension keeping the relationship alive. “It is a premiss of farce that marriage kills romance. It is a project of the genre of remarriage to refuse to draw a conclusion from this premiss but rather to turn the tables on farce, to turn marriage itself into romance, into adventure, [...] to preserve within it something of the illicit, to find as it were a moral equivalent of the immoral.”⁷⁹

In *Gone Girl*, the dark comedic tension of the remarriage genre is pushed over the top through the film's neobaroque mind game narrative. Amy doesn't just leave Nick to cheat on him, but conceives an elaborate plan to set him up as her murderer through the carefully timed release of clues that not only implicate him as a killer but construct his media image as an unfaithful, violent manchild (she stages a murder scene cover-up by spilling then cleaning up her own blood, writes a fake diary, builds a “mancave” with consumer goods worth tens of thousands of dollars ordered under Nick's name, fakes a pregnancy, etc.). All the details of her scheme are marked on a large calendar attached to the kind of crazy wall we usually see in serial killer's homes in Hollywood films, the timeline ending with the rubric “Amy's death,” depicted in an anticipation image as her actually drowning in a lake. This final event, however, never comes, which makes the entire film yet another noir meditation on the messianic time that remains before the end of time. We could also say that Amy's plan and its chart is an attempt to represent the deterritorializing algorithm of neoliberal capital as a vital force, something that would gain *jouissance* out of the autoimmune self-destruction of the form of life it temporarily attached itself to. In Cavell's terms, it stands for the specter of the demonic codified, for

⁷⁸ Ibid., 219.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 186.

committing evil out of principle by relying on a nihilistic counter-code to the territorialized social-symbolic fiction of marriage. The neo-noir *femmes fatale* of *Body Heat* or *The Last Seduction* who manipulated men for personal gain pale in comparison to Amy whose predecessors rather include apocalyptic figures like the alien monster, Tyler Durden, or the Zodiac Killer.

And yet, just like capital needs reterritorialization to survive, Amy also cannot seem to exist without the social-symbolic institution of marriage. As Cavell observes, the classical remarriage comedy starts with the heroine's "demand for education," which "has to do with the woman's sense that her life asks for some transformation, that she stands in need of creation, or re-creation."⁸⁰ This demand is for an institution that would guarantee real equality, for a use of language that would provide mutual recognition—something that traditional bourgeois marriage in its patriarchal bias cannot do. In *Gone Girl*, Amy recounts how she was formed by her husband into a "cool girl" archetype, adapting to the man's consumer habits, pretending to like the beer he drinks, the movies he watches, and, of course, offering her hairless body for sex whenever he wanted it. In short, she was educated into a postfeminist woman, expected to give up her critical agency and self-commodify for the male gaze out of free will.⁸¹ And her way to explode this neo-patriarchal prison was to become a ~~Young Girl~~, to identify with the neoliberal value-form itself, the life that lies, supposedly, beyond any gendered *bios*. Yet, contradictions arise in this master plan when, in order to lay low, Amy chooses the guise of a battered woman

⁸⁰ Stanley Cavell, "Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly: Bette Davis and 'Now, Voyager,'" *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (Winter, 1990): 216.

⁸¹ Rosalind Gill describes postfeminism as a set of tendencies: "an obsessional preoccupation with the body," "the emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and discipline," "women presented as active and desiring subjects," "a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment," "the dominance of a makeover paradigm," "the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas," "a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference," "a marked sexualization of culture," "an emphasis on commodification and the commodification of difference," "irony and knowingness." Rosalind Gill quoted in Hilary Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 192.

running from an abusive ex. Instead of keeping people away, this gender stereotype in fact draws unwanted attention to her, leading to her actually being beaten and robbed. Similarly, when, out of despair, she repeats the routine with her finance capitalist ex-boyfriend Desi, she finds herself trapped into a the same postfeminist nightmare she had been fleeing from, now amplified to creepy proportions (the man keeps her locked in his heavily surveilled holiday home “for her own protection”). Reaching a deadlock, her plotline finds its way back to the remarriage genre when she watches Nick giving a well rehearsed TV interview to amend his disastrous public image, appearing genuine in the role of a concerned husband, asking Amy to come home. Like in the classical films, the man finds a way to “educate” his wife by *playing* with the idea of marriage, deconstructing its rigid patriarchal hierarchies by profaning its symbolic institution, presenting it, with the help of the utterly corrupt media, as a construct that lacks an operative essence, thereby making it available for free use by his partner. And Amy responds accordingly, fabricating evidence of her abuse by Desi for the security cameras and slicing his throat in an opportune moment when they are not watching, then running back home to her husband in a blood-soaked nightgown to provide a spectacular finale for the TV cameras waiting outside their family home.

This is not to say that with her return, their romance is rekindled, or even that their basic trust in each other is restored. They are rather stuck with one another playing the happy reunion in front of the cameras because they both have a lot to lose by telling the truth—Amy more, of course, but she gradually convinces Nick that he does too (the public would turn against him if he abandoned her now, she reasons). Their staying together is therefore presented as a deadlock rather than a solution, leaving the tension in their interface image earlier in film—in which an unenthusiastic Nick stood in front of “Amazing Amy’s” missing poster at a press conference—

unresolved.⁸² Neither does Amy *qua* neoliberal capital leave with Desi to Greece to abandon the territory of the US altogether, nor does she fully return to the American heartland. The last shot captures this contradiction by showing her respond with an enigmatic smile to Nick's hesitant gesture of caressing her hair, while the man's voiceover, accompanied by the eerie noise music score ponders: "What are you thinking? How are you feeling? What have we done to each other? What will we do?"

7.4 The Co-Immunity of the Matrixial Borderspace

Gone Girl's deadlock results from the failure of sovereign immunization, the impossibility to *imagine* a clearly bounded *bios* for the Oedipal couple—once capitalism's basic territorial unit—a safe productive space set up against the outside threats of lawlessness. Interestingly, Nick's inoperative marriage is measured against his close relationship with his twin sister Carrie, one that the media distorts into a scandal of incest. Knowing that Amy is a sociopath, Carrie is devastated by her brother's plan to stay with his wife after her return. Asking for emotional support, Nick tells her "I need to know that you're with me," to which Carrie responds crying "Of course I'm with you, I was with you even before you were even born." These two immunological bubbles, the incestuous being together in the womb and the purely symbolic unity in bourgeois marriage indicate two limit concepts of Oedipal biopolitics, both threatening its patriarchal hierarchies with the radical equality among the men and women valued differently by its apparatus. Instead of reproducing neoliberalism's monadistic logic of sovereign immunization, they both explode it towards what Peter Sloterdijk calls co-immunity,

⁸² This is not to say that the resolution of the classical films don't have a similar tension in them. As Cavell notes, films like *The Lady Eve* or *His Girl Friday* end without any request for forgiveness being articulated. Cavell, *Pursuit of Happiness*, 182.

the co-existence of heterogenous bodies in a protective bubble the prototype of which is the womb.⁸³

Bracha Ettinger sees such co-immunism as the very form of the Lacanian feminine *jouissance*, a notion she expands on (under the influence of Felix Guattari and Emmanuel Levinas) in an unambiguously anti-Oedipal direction. Her theory has great film-philosophical implications since she grounds it in Lacan's *Seminar XI*, using and critiquing the passages that introduce the shift from gesture to image. As I have argued in Chapter 1, Lacan distinguishes here two ways of relating to the Other in the visual field, both ultimately reducing otherness to an alienated piece of the self. In the first, one encounters the imaginary (small) other as an "evil eye" that, like Medusa's gaze, freezes life into a "gesture." Lacan posits the evil eye as the *fascinum* of the subject's fantasmatic self-image; it is the uncanny element in one's picture that point to an excess beyond it. As Lacan famously claims, this *fascinum*-effect results from a necessary anamorphic distortion of the fantasy-image, the undoing of which would lead to disintegration of the subject's libidinal coordinates. Thus the move to a second, symbolic-Oedipal relation to the Other through a castrating "moment of seeing" which presupposes the *fascinum* (the Other's gaze as *objet a*) as forever lost from the picture, thereby re-activating life as a desiring flow of equally lacking images. In Chapter 1 I suggested an Agambenian rehabilitation of gesture beyond this Oedipal dialectic of imaginary and symbolic as the *real* element of a non-signifying semiotic, our shared, inoperative linguistic substance that the medium of cinema puts forward by decreating the images of Oedipalized everyday life. With different terminology, Ettinger moves in the same direction by introducing a non-Oedipal, feminine relation to the Other, one that doesn't treat its gaze as the little piece of the self, as the *fascinum* to be evicted from the field of vision to avoid paralysis and gain meaning, but as

⁸³ See Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Microspherology*, trans. W. Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011)

fascinace, the affect shared by two not fully bounded, equally vulnerable subjects during their encounter event in the *real*, in the space-time she calls the matrixial.⁸⁴ “As a feminine sexual difference,” she argues, “the matrixial designates ‘woman’ not as the Other but as co-emerging self with m/Other, and *link a* rather than *object a*, not as lack or a figure of rhythmic scansion of absence/presence but as a borderlinking figure of differentiation in co-emergence.”⁸⁵ In what she calls “a matrixial encounter,” “the private subjectivity of the individual is momentarily unbounded. The psyche momentarily melts, and its psychic threads are interwoven with threads emanating from objects, images, and other subjects.”⁸⁶ The bullet time sex scene between Tyler and Marla in *Fight Club* is a case in point—a hallucinatory dream sequence in which the two bodies indeed seem to blur into one another, circled by a virtual camera with no preference for any body part in particular. Nevertheless, although Ettinger, like Sloterdijk, sees the womb as the original bubble of co-immunity, she is quick to add that the matrixial’s undoing of Oedipal separations is about “transgression and not fusion, braiding and not melting.”⁸⁷ She considers such feminine “incest” “that circumvents the phallic law [...] a primordial psychic field of transgressions between several participants who render and temporarily loosen their Oedipal borderlines, thus creating crossings between their traumas and jouissances, phantasms, and even desires, and enabling the trans-scripting of traces of the links in an assembly of the several (in “severality”) outside of linear Oedipal time.”⁸⁸ In other words, the matrixial time-space suspends the sovereign separation between *bios* and *zoe* that grounds the Oedipal regime of biopower and establishes a utopian form-of-life of co-immunism.

⁸⁴ “Fascinace is an aesthetic affect that operates in the prolongation and delaying of the time of encounter-event and allows a working-through of matrixial differentiating-in-jointness and copoiesis.” Bracha L. Ettinger, “Fascinace and the Girl-to-m/Other Matrixial Feminine Difference,” in *Psychoanalysis and the Image: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. G. Pollock (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 61.

⁸⁵ Bracha L. Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2-3. (2006): 218.

⁸⁶ Ettinger, *Fascinace*, 62.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Matrixial co-immunity is present in Fincher's work from the very beginning, and it always appears in conflict with sovereign immunization—an antagonism that divides masculine and feminine forms of the death drive in his film noirs. In his films, the image of co-immunity arises out of a dialectical contradiction of the sovereign-image, as a result of its “exhaustion.” Consider the smoking fetus, the alien creature in Ripley's womb, Nicholas Van Orton's suicidal jump into safety, the “living dead” couple holding hands at the end of *Fight Club*, or the inoperative marriage of Nick and Amy. We could add to the series *Panic Room* (2002), a film, as Dietmar Kammerer argues, about “monadology and motherhood,”⁸⁹ that is, rival (masculine and feminine) paradigms of immunization. On the one hand, the panic room refers to a luxurious state of exception designed for the one percent, the ultimate safe space protecting their class privileges symbolized in the film by government bonds worth millions of dollars hidden in it. Fincher gives a distinctive Oedipal flavour to this bourgeois sphere of immunity by assigning it to a recently divorced single mother Meg and her daughter Sarah whose existence (their ability to buy a New York City mansion with the panic room) is dependent on a wealthy ex-husband's settlement money. Their struggle with three home invaders therefore starts on distinctly class terms, amplified by the fact that Burnham, the burglars' African American leader has worked all his life installing panic rooms for rich people. When the three enter, a virtual camera maps the space they occupy without a cut, marking their intrusion as the threat of the digital's equalizing ontology on the upper classes who withdraw from the house's infected territory into their secured state of exception, viewing the outside through the interface of surveillance monitors. Biopolitics comes into the picture when Meg and Sarah's safe space starts to function more like an extermination camp: the burglars try to gas them through the ventilation system, and they also exploit Sarah's need for regular insulin shots. As a result, when the rigid boundary of the panic

⁸⁹ Dietmar Kammerer, “Video Surveillance in Hollywood Movies,” *Surveillance and Society* 2, no. 2-3 (2004): 471.

room finally comes down, all the invaders find inside representing the glorious life of the one percent is a child half passed out from diabetic shock—a clear disconnect from the financial wealth hidden in a safe next to her. This is when the film’s most characteristic image of matrixial borderlinking occurs: the mother locked outside with a gun begging the burglars stuck inside with the insulin to help her daughter, while one of the invaders, his hand crushed into pulp by the automatic door, is yelling inarticulately. Burnham then plays a similar role to Detective Somerset’s in *Seven*, trying to prevent the autoimmune self-destruction of the white *bios*. He gives Sarah an insulin shot, then, when he has the chance to get away with the bonds, he once again goes back to save Meg and Sarah from the revenge of his white partner he left behind—a selfless act that leads to his arrest. This is why the final shot of the female protagonists discussing the acquisition of their next property on a New York City bench, with the daughter’s head lying in the mother’s lap, is deeply ambiguous. Did Burnham’s gesture save their matrixial bond, or was it a sovereign act maintaining the privileges of the one percent?

The Fincher film that explores the utopian potential of matrixial co-immunism to the fullest is his only snow noir, the adaptation of Stieg Larsson’s Nordic crime bestseller about a misogynistic serial killer, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). As Sarah Niblock observes, while the novel’s Swedish film version sets up an opposition between the misery of the modern city and the domestic family setting of a rural cottage, in the American adaptation Stockholm’s high tech modernism, both civilized and corrupt, is supplemented by a non-idyllic countryside enclosed in perpetual winter—an imagery characteristic of the Hollywood snow noir.⁹⁰ Like so many of Fincher’s films, *The Girl* also maps the tension between capital’s old, territorialized, “masculine” form and its deterritorialized, “feminine” expansion through neoliberal

⁹⁰ Sarah Niblock, “Journalism and Compassion: Rewriting the On-Screen Crusader for the Digital Age,” in *Stieg Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Nordic Noir on Page and Screen*, ed. S. Peacock (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 89.

globalization—opposing paradigms represented also by the two investigator protagonists, Mikael Blomkvist and Lisbeth Salander. While Mikael is played by a muscular Daniel Craig, star of the recent James Bond reboot, thereby an icon of old imperial glory, Lisbeth’s character (Rooney Mara) looks like a typical Young-Girl: petite and anorexic, with a goth-punk appearance and a predilection for self-harm/self-adornment (with piercings and tattoos all over her body). If Craig’s Mikael carries the charms of middle aged (hetero)bourgeois machismo, Mara’s Lisbeth is a queer anarchist—although one that, as Kirsten Mollegaard stresses, goes through a “guy-friendly sexualization,” a postfeminist aestheticization compatible with Hollywood’s patriarchal gender norms.⁹¹ While he is a classical investigative journalist working by interviewing people and mapping the results on a wall of evidence, she is an antisocial hacker with a photographic memory, a kind of cyborg who can turn her brain into a digital database.⁹² The institutions of the old world are epitomized by the remnants of Sweden’s welfare state capitalism: the now fading industrial empire of the Vanger family full of ex-Nazis, the public intellectual Mikael’s ad-free political journal Millenium on the verge of bankruptcy (bailed out by the Vangers), and the state guardianship Lisbeth is forced to endure in the form repeated sexual abuse. This is not to say, however, that the networks of new capital receive a more flattering portrayal: Lisbeth makes a living doing illegal surveillance and computer hacking for a private espionage company, Mikael’s life and journal is temporarily ruined by a lawsuit of the corrupt banker Wennerström he tried but failed to expose, and Harriet Vanger, while emancipating herself from her rapist-murder father and brother through work in London’s City, she fails to report them to the police, contributing to the death and suffering to dozens of innocent women. If the old, disciplinary

⁹¹ Kirsten Mollegaard, “Signs Taken for Warnings: Body Modification and Visual Pleasure in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49, no. 2 (2016): 348.

⁹² On the idea of Lisbeth as a cyborg see Anna Westerstahl Sternport and Garrett Trayror, “The Eradication of Memory: Film Adaptations and Algorithms of the Digital,” *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 1 (2015): 88.

regime of power is shown as nationalist patriarchy bordering on fascism, the new neoliberal society of control in turn is underpinned by post-political nihilism, very much compatible with the same old biopolitical violence. If in the former apparatus the ultimate sovereign figure was Gottfried Vanger, an avowed Nazi, serial killer of local Jewish girls around his family's country estate, in the late 70s (at the onset of the neoliberal era) his son Martin takes over (after killing him), now specializing on the torture and murder of prostitutes and migrant women trafficked to Sweden from all over the world—women nobody cares about.

Unlike Fincher's later male – female double protagonist film *Gone Girl* where the main characters play out a conflict between these two paradigms through their separation process, in *The Girl* the two protagonists' initial trauma caused by the other's apparatus of power (defamation for Mikael, rape for Lisbeth) is what brings them together in a matrixial encounter. The cottage on the Vangers' snowbound island where the two of them, hired by the family's dying patriarch, team up to re-investigate the Harriet Vanger's decades old disappearance is a utopian enclave suspended in-between the two deadly regimes of capital they temporarily left behind. What's stuck in this zone of indistinction is a life wounded and vulnerable, but whose tortured body can also serve as an interface of feminine borderlinking. On the one hand, the local cat being gutted by the Vagners who frown upon the investigation is an ominous sign, on the other, when one of them shoots Mikael with a hunting rifle, his torn up skin will establish a matrixial bond with Lisbeth who's been torturing herself with tattoos and piercings all her life to ease her mental suffering. Although their sex scene doesn't quite reproduce the CGI *fascinace* of *Fight Club*'s, Oedipal boundaries are loosened through reference to another Fincherian trope: incest. Lisbeth is the same age as Mikael's teenage daughter, an avid catholic who has visited her father's cottage earlier. Or perhaps it's more appropriate to consider this feminine "incest"

between the two protagonists, initiated by Lisbeth, as the counterpoint to the masculine one Martin and Gottfried committed against the young Harriet in the form of rape. Mikael's becoming-woman then reaches its apogee when he occupies the place of this sovereign power's feminine Other, when he is trapped in the torture chamber of Martin, tied up like the girls he has killed until Lisbeth comes to his rescue.

At this point, however, the narrative takes a more Oedipal direction with a shift to the action genre. We've already seen Lisbeth playing what Rikke Schubart calls the action hero archetype of the "rape-avenger" earlier when she tortured her state guardian for raping her. Now, however, she gradually slides from a feminist to a post-feminist position, towards another, more conservative archetype: that of the "daughter." As Schubart notes, this figure usually appears in postmodern action films (*Nikita*, 1990; *Kill Bill*, 2003-2004) as a woman with mental problems, struggling to conform to a traditional gender identity, until a male master figure hires her, giving structure to her life by training her into a spy or an assassin who could put on the mask of classical femininity as a weapon.⁹³ The former rape-avenger Lisbeth enters this new role when, before going after Martin, she asks Mikael politely: "May I kill him?" But her real transformation starts after she drives the villain off the road and lets him burn in his car—a cathartic repetition of lighting her own abusive father on fire as child. In order to restore Mikael reputation as a journalist, not only does she hack the accounts of Wennerström, but she makes herself over into the conservative image of a neoliberal *femme fatale*, taking her piercings out and putting on a business suit with a blonde wig, traveling to Switzerland to drain the banker's accounts masquerading as his representative. Her self-given assignment works, so well in fact

⁹³ Rikke Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema (1970-2006)* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 195-219.

that Mikael's newly restored phallic image returns him to the arms of his former, more age and class appropriate lover, putting an end to his matrixial bond with Lisbeth.

Her failure to connect with him in the end is highlighted by the scene of her buying a leather biker outfit for him as a gift, imitating the one Mikael is wearing on an old photo with his (old-new) girlfriend from a time he was still riding motorcycles. The same way as she turned herself into living currency to manipulate global capital flows and restore Mikael's symbolic power as a public intellectual, she now plans to commodify the skin that served as interface of their matrixial borderlinking, forming their bond into the image of the bourgeois couple. Before she could hand the gift to Mikael, however, she sees him together with his ex-girlfriend—a sight that leaves her broken and crying for a moment, only to throw away the clothes and drive away a few seconds later. This way, *The Girl* eventually deconstructs its own Seltzerian pathological public sphere, opposing the wounded skin as commodity fetish, a sovereign subject's interface with capital, to the skin as a threshold of matrixial borderlinking. The ending also decreates the images of the two protagonists' CGI merger in the opening credit sequence where their cyborg-like bodies, formed out of a metallic liquid, are blending not only with each other but various machinic objects (wires, computers parts, motorcycle tyres, etc.). As mainstream versions of the shape shifting Grace Jones in her music video *Corporate Cannibal* (2008), Fincher's figures, with their machinic fluidity and lack of static identity express the neoliberal ideal of flexible self-modulation based on an underlying algorithm of control, what Steven Shaviro sees in the Jones video as the desire for an "absolute identification with capital."⁹⁴ The denouement, like Fincher's other meditations on biocapitalist interfacing, reveals this synthesis to be impossible, throwing

⁹⁴ Steven Shaviro, "Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, *Boarding Gate* and *Southland Tales*," *Film-Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2010): 31.

back Lisbeth's self-commodification as Daddy's Young-Girl into the territory of unpaid cognitive and affective labour exploited by an old-new patriarchal apparatus of sovereignty.

7.5 Conclusion

Fincher's films are not outside of the cynical paradigm of neo-noir. They merely bring out the tensions within its sovereign-image, decreating it into a dialectical contradiction. They do this by overpurifying classical Hollywood's narrative economy to the point of machinic perfection, which in turn amplifies its necessary gaps and fissures—the arbitrariness and fragility of its sovereign suture—as a byproduct. As Kasman summarizes,

These films, which seem so structured, seem elaborately, densely built, like scaffolding, over an emptiness inside, a void where the vitality, the engagement with one's surroundings and with life would normally be. These are stories of hyper-consciousness, a state of mind that roots these poor people in the zeitgeist facts of their times but ironically abstracts them from the ability to live in the present. Everything is a process forward, a movement onwards, an ever-increasingness, the ability to be of the now at the ultimate sacrifice of no longer living in the now.⁹⁵

On the one hand, these films demonstrate that the body's sovereign merger with neoliberal capital's ever productive algorithms is not possible, that such digital acceleration of life spews out the void of the subject as a remainder. On the other hand, this subject left behind by its own body's connective mutation stands for inoperativity outside sovereign biopower, for a state of pure potentiality that that can be a basis of a new co-immunism.

⁹⁵ Kasman, "David Fincher and the Sad Facts"

This, then, is the Greimasian semiotic square “completed” with Fincher’s position revealing the neoliberal synthesis of *bios* and *zoe* as a contradiction (Figure 6):

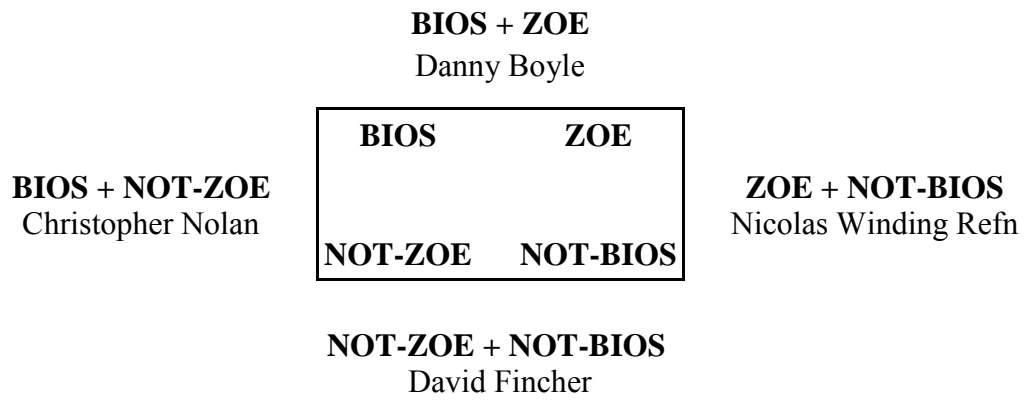


Figure 7.

8 Conclusion

8.1 The Forced Choice of Film Noir

The history of film noir's sovereign-image is the history of what Lacan called the forced choice between "the Father—or worse,"¹ the masculine symbolic order or a psychotic exit from it into a real state of exception: the domain of death driven surplus-enjoyment. In *Seminar XI* he compares this choice to a robber's demand: "Your money or your life!"—the moral of the story being that even if the subject clings to his money (*jouissance*) and decides to give up his life (his social-symbolic place), he will lose his money anyway.² While one has to give up something (*objet a*, full enjoyment) to enter the Oedipal order through symbolic castration, choosing *objet a* will not release the subject from the grip of the Father's law. Retrieving the lost, pre-Oedipal enjoyment is structurally impossible as it's nothing but a mirage constructed by symbolic castration itself.

This forced choice, however, is not to be confused with what the later Lacan in *Seminar XX* calls the choice of sexualization.³ The theory of sexual difference displaces here the inescapable logic of the forced choice—the defining feature of the human condition for the early Lacan—by identifying the very form of its question as a masculine use of language, the purpose of which is to establish the symbolic and the real as separate topological layers of reality, pushing the lack at the core of the masculine subject beyond the horizon of meaning. This is not to say that the feminine subject is not "castrated," that is, incomplete, lacking. It simply means that she doesn't

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Television*, trans. D. Hollier, R. Krauss and A. Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990), 46.

² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 212.

³ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, trans. B. Fink (New York, W.W. Norton, 1998), 80.

become castrated as a result of a forced choice but is always already “not whole,”⁴ which is why for her there is no *objet a* she had lost and seeks to recover from beyond language. One has to decide to be a sovereign (masculine) subject first in order for the forced choice to present itself. Being a man in the Lacanian sense means precisely that the choice of sexualization is overwritten by the forced choice.

In a Hegelian manner, we could speak of noir’s sovereign protagonist’s and implied viewer’s history of coming to consciousness, his gradual awakening to the masculine situation of the forced choice—this unique synthesis between freedom and necessity that finally comes to the surface in the cynic’s enlightened false consciousness supporting the neoliberal cinematic apparatus. Yet, even as a cynic, the noir sovereign knows nothing of feminine *jouissance* because he still disavows the fundamental existential choice of sexual difference—this disavowal is his primordially repressed choice made in front of the abyss of absolute freedom. His cynical enlightenment is therefore limited to mapping the prison of the masculine apparatus from the inside.

In order for the forced choice between symbolic and real to have the appearance of an actual choice, it needs a minimum level of mediation by the imaginary. In Hollywood cinema, genres play this role of ideological mediation insofar as they present an imagined good life of shared transgressions they oppose to other, not properly immunized forms of life. Generic immunization is based on a *chosen*, playful suspension of the principle of equivalence that appears now at the boundaries of its *bios* as the pathology of autoimmunity (enjoying too much) and following the letter of the law all too literally (not enjoyment enough)—two forms of life lacking the capacity of free choice. It is this imaginary *antinomy* (ideologeme in Jameson’s

⁴ Ibid., 7.

terms)⁵ between a playfully lived (chosen) inequality and being enslaved to some abstract, rigid law of equality that serves as an ideological “illusion masking the *real* state of things,”⁶ namely the more fundamental antagonism (*contradiction*) of sexual difference, the *choice* between two incompatible forms of life.

Noir fatalism, by contrast, is rather a meta-ideology that covers over the real when generic ideological binaries of choice fail. As Frank Ruda astutely suggests, fatalism can be defined as “choosing to be unable to choose”—⁷a diagnosis shared by fellow Hegelian Robert Pippin in his analysis of noir heroes who fatalistically deceive themselves into a state of diminished agency.⁸ Due to the crisis of the Oedipal order, film noir’s protagonists are unconvinced by generic expressions of “the Father—or worse” binary: men are reluctant to participate in the games of a homosocial community, and women refuse to play their role in the household. They “choose” (get caught in) the “worse” of their death drive instead. In the masculine order of language, their choice translates to choosing to be unable to choose, abandoning themselves to their bad fate. Their case illustrates how in the eyes of disciplinary society’s panoptic authority, one doesn’t *choose* anti-Oedipal deviance. One *is* (marked as) deviant.

Yet, at least for the masculine hero, the “worse” of one’s deviant fate turns out to be not an anti-Oedipal line of flight but the law of the primordial father: that is, the father not as choice but as fate. The anti-Oedipal escape is looped back to the Oedipal regime through a Moebius-strip, as its obscene underside. While ordinary ideological genre games provide the illusion that

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Routledge, 1983), 61.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso: New York, 2008), 30.

⁷ Frank Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 5.

⁸ Robert B. Pippin, *Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 73.

anyone can be included in them who chooses to play along, classical noir's meta-generic fatalism abandons ideologemes of a choice and with them the pretense of inclusivity, positing a rigid body politic of the hegemonic white male *bios* as the fascistic shadow cast by the multitude of generic discourses. At the level of social performativity, noir's male and female protagonists are identical, equally death driven, deviant. But the *femme fatale* is punished not for what she does, but for what she is. The man's biopolitical expulsion of the woman is not the result of an ideological binary in the generic sense, but of the arbitrary, that is, *sovereign* separation of political life (*bios*) from bare life (*zoe*), communal life *as such* from its sacred remainder. The scandal of the classical noir situation is that this absolute sovereign decision coincides with the absolute lack (disavowal) of freedom, putting the noir hero in close proximity with the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann, the sovereign arbiter of millions' life and death who insisted he had merely been following his Führer's orders.⁹ This way, film noir tries to frame the cinematic apparatus as an "influencing machine"¹⁰ with no space for free will. Film noir is the truth of film genres in the same way as fascism is the truth of liberal democracy: they supplement the ideology of choice with a meta-ideology of absolute obedience to the law of the superego, together forming the sovereign-masculine apparatus of forced choice. The point here is that the generic and the noir (chosen and fated, liberal and fascist) approaches to belonging to a biopolitical community are interconnected; they are building blocks of one and the same sovereign apparatus of power. Yet, film noir is also a utopian formation precisely because of the lack of liberal inclusivity in its fatalism. It shows us that the forced choice between "the Father—or worse" doesn't cover the whole field and as a result, allows glimpses at the more primordial existential choice between "the Father *and* worse (the symbolic father *and* the superego)—or the

⁹ See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006)

¹⁰ Joan Copjec, "The Anxiety of the Influencing Machine," *October* 23 (Winter, 1982): 43-59.

feminine non-all.” If film noir is the symptom/truth of film genres, the feminine non-all is the symptom/truth of film noir, revealing the non-sovereign potential of the cinematic apparatus.

If classical noir’s masculine hero is the one who chooses to be unable to choose, the revisionist hero brings a properly existential decision (of sexual difference) into the noir situation. With regards to the forced choice, he inverts the fatalist’s position by choosing the Father—without what’s “worse” about him: symbolic universality without the mandatory, fascistic enjoyment; democracy without McCarthyism, racism, sexism, etc. This is what I have called the ethics of subtraction. The irony of the revisionist situation is that such naive universalist Oedipalization is not possible anymore and those who overidentify with the symbolic letter of the law become the enemies of the sovereign power apparatus: they are losers all the way (*The Long Goodbye*, *Night Moves*), who are marked for totalitarian surveillance (*The Conversation*) and execution (*The Trial*, *Seconds*) because all they want is to become a decent member of society and don’t have the stomach for the biopolitical violence undergirding it (*Dirty Harry*). It is as a byproduct of sticking to their outdated (inoperative) petty-bourgeois moral code that these men end up subtracted from the sovereign-masculine regime of power and are placed in a feminine subject position. Their moral code is obsolete because the regulative ideal of the new era is increasingly the neoliberal entrepreneur of the self instead of the Oedipalized family and nation that defined the post-war disciplinary society propped up by the obscene underside of noir fatalism. In the America of the 60s and 70s, enjoyment is less and less repressed and is instead directly solicited. If in the classical era the noir hero appeared as an exceptional pervert driven by surplus-enjoyment, in the emerging neoliberal society of enjoyment he stands out rather for the opposite reason: his unusual desire for Oedipal repression. This means that the sovereign decision of masculine sexuation that classical noir repressed is revealed now as an

existential choice in a historical moment when it's not possible anymore in its traditional (disciplinary) form, recalling Heidegger's famous claim that we fully understand what a tool (we might say: apparatus) is for only when it breaks, when its conventional use fails.¹¹ The revisionist noir cycle therefore can be seen as the modernist attempt to *misuse* the classical noir apparatus, to make use of its failure, to use it not as a machine of sacred exceptions supporting Fordist patriarchy but as a profane means without an end.

Postmodern noir's reactionary move then is to turn the revisionist reflection on the declining Oedipal-disciplinary order into nostalgia for its loss through the sovereign device of melancholy. Melancholy can be understood here as the choice to set up a forced choice between an idyllic past and a flawed present. Through a temporal displacement of what once was the only viable option in the masculine forced choice, the former hierarchy between symbolic and real is turned upside down. It is now the symbolic father's universal authority that is shown as impossible (forever lost), and pursuing one's private surplus-enjoyment in a neoliberal flight from Oedipal discipline is presented as the only alternative. As a rule, it is the *femme fatale* who (as a conscious calculation) performs this neo-noir choice of the "worse" over the Father as men tend to be caught in performing a simulacrum of traditional masculinity—a nostalgic image with no symbolic efficiency. In psychoanalytic terms, male noir heroes of the era (like Jake in *Chinatown* or Jeffrey in *Blue Velvet*) are trapped in the mirror stage of their psychosocial development: they are infantilized, unable to grow out of their narcissistic fantasies manipulated by the *femme fatale* (and as such, they allegorically embody the naive observer of postmodern cinema). But postmodern neo-noir's women controlled sovereign apparatus is itself a compromise formation: stubbornly attached to the old, territorialized forms of American

¹¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 105.

capitalism anchored in Oedipal patriarchy while also exploring its new directions of neoliberal deterritorialization. The *femme fatale* can stand for the supra-national impetus of global capitalism and remain something of a patriot precisely through her melancholy, her enigmatic desire the masculine hero/viewer is invited to read as nostalgia for the golden age of the post-war gender consensus—a golden age she remains captivated by while also actively destroying it through her neoliberal entrepreneurship. By contrast, a utopian impulse in postmodern neo-noir becomes discernible when feminine desire is not directed at the past but appears fully immanent to the present, like the indifference of *Manhunter*'s blind heroine to the video footage of a murdered family screened in front of her, or *Long Kiss Goodnight*'s amnesiac assassin's experiments with her muscle memory without remembering the purpose of her gestures.

What distinguishes cynicism from previous forms of noir sovereignty is an awareness of the Moebius-strip topology linking the two sides of the forced choice. For the noir cynic, the choice between “the Father—or worse” is not forced because one or the other option is impossible, missing, or lost. On the contrary, they are both present, but they now appear as two sides of the same coin, two aspects of a new monadistic apparatus of sovereignty. Where in disciplinary societies the forced choice of symbolic castration opposed individual *jouissance* to repression by the social, the cynic only sees two moments of his private life: himself as Father—or himself as *jouissance*. The cynic is the symptom/truth of postmodern identity politics formed as resistance to a predominantly white heterosexual male disciplinary power. In the figure of the cynic, identity politics comes full circle: in its original form he is the western white heterosexual male subject performing his identity against his own authority. When in this new version of the forced choice the noir cynic chooses to give up *jouissance* by symbolically castrating himself, he ends up with a surplus-enjoyment of his drive (*Memento*, *Inception*). When he chooses to recover

his *objet a* instead, his path of self-purification leads him to renounce enjoyment in a self-sacrifice (*Valhalla Rising*, *The Neon Demon*). In cynicism, the Father—or worse turn out to be Hegelian identities of opposites because the forced choice is now fully privatized. The cynic therefore cannot lose, but nor can he ever change: he can merely repeat the algorithm folding his life onto himself that won him the neoliberal competition until he destroys all generic forms of life (including the one he is coming from) like cancer cells destroys the body.

This is why instead of propping up generic communities like classical noir did cynical noir is rather a post-generic (post-identitarian) phenomenon, an appropriate discourse for the monadistic subject of global capitalism, the entrepreneur of the self walking himself to the neoliberal market while imagining being independent from social-ideological mediation. It is only fitting that the first full blown neoliberal subject of film noir, exchanging resistance against panoptic discipline for a paradigm of self-surveillance would be a white heterosexual man—the exceptional identity position of the postmodern noir paradigm that was supposed to express the naive belief in disciplinary power, the privilege of not having to resist it. The emergence of the cynic retrospectively reveals not only that such assumption of early neo-noir was false, but that perhaps postmodern identity politics itself had been nothing but a transitory phenomenon in history, a vanishing mediator between two, Fordist and post-Fordist forms of commodity producing patriarchy. But to choose himself as master, the neoliberal cynic has to side with Empire, the deterritorialized form of capitalism mobilizing the productive capacity of individual affect and cognition. That is to say, Empire is not simply the *bios* of the old white supremacist patriarchy in the era of American globalization; its biopolitical body forms instead a hybrid hegemony valorizing different forms of life. The cynic therefore can be a universal subject only insofar as he brackets his own original *bios* of western white heterosexual masculinity that got

him to where he is and becomes a biopolitical species on his own. The trajectory of the global multitude's cynical mutation passes through white male identity politics, but it points beyond gender, sexuality, and skin colour. The problem, of course, is that global capitalism's post-identitarian project can never be realized; insofar as capitalism relies on the social construction of value, it will always reproduce the sovereign separation between *bios* and *zoe*, productive life and life not worth living. This is also why the full transformation of the US into a deterritorialized Empire is impossible: such aspiration only leads to a terminal crisis of its national institutions and a desperate reassertion of the white male authority that could keep them under control as the sovereign exception to postmodern identity politics.

The films of Danny Boyle, Christopher Nolan, Nicolas Winding Refn, and David Fincher, totalized into a Greimasian semiotic square, can be read as a series of failures of the sovereign power apparatus to perform the cynical collapse of *bios* and *zoe* and produce a truly self-made neoliberal subject beyond white male identity politics. The semiotic square pushes neo-noir's cynical consciousness beyond itself, beyond the ideological fantasy of its self-closure to the point of its inherent contradiction. Insofar as neo-noir is not only a meta-generic but also a meta-cinematic form, such totalizing critique of its sovereign-image pushes the viewer to reflect on the contradictory, masculine and feminine, sacred and profane uses of the cinematic apparatus. For Hegel, human consciousness develops in a dialectical process, in thought's movement beyond its self-positing limits by recognising its inability to close upon itself, thereby opening up repeatedly to the other not yet under its control.¹² According to Timothy Bewes, postmodern cynicism can be described with Hegelian categories as a refusal of consciousness to

¹² See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. G. Di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 347.

go beyond its own limits, as a retreat from truth, a “capitulation to ‘things as they are’.”¹³ He cites Hegel’s three archetypical examples when consciousness “retreat[s] from truth and strive[s] to hold on to what it is in danger of losing” from his *Phenomenology of Spirit*,¹⁴ the three of which, I claim, correspond to Boyle’s, Nolan’s, and Refn’s framing of cynicism. The first expresses a desire to “remain in a state of unthinking inertia,” which describes Boyle’s ironic synthesis between *bios* and *zoe*, a refusal to take their antagonism seriously, perhaps best captured in the director’s freeze frames of the cynic’s grin. The second is the “conceit which understands how to belittle every truth, in order to turn back into itself and gloat over its own understanding, which knows how to dissolve every thought and always find the same barren Ego instead of any content.”¹⁵ This is the territory of Nolan’s clever puzzle narratives fetishizing the sovereign ego setting up labyrinths for his own mind. And finally, it’s possible that consciousness “entrenches itself in sentimentality, which assures us that it finds everything to be *good in its kind*.”¹⁶ This is the attitude of Refn’s romantic aestheticization of the late capitalist world, the perspective of the beautiful soul floating above the apocalyptic madness of his creation. By contrast, the films of Fincher blow up the contradictions of cynicism, forcing consciousness to move beyond its sovereign limits. Through the lens of his oeuvre we can see the thinly veiled contradictions within the other filmmakers’ formulas, appearing now as nothing but futile attempts to avoid the traumatic real of sexual difference. Our totalizing critique of noir cynicism can reveal the fundamental indeterminacy at the core of the cinematic apparatus, and by undoing the forced choice of the sovereign-image bring the viewer back to the radically free

¹³ Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (New York: Verso, 1997), 196.

¹⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Milner (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), 51. [§80]

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

existential decision whether to use cinema as a tool of sovereign self-enfoldment or as a collective means without an end.

8.2 The Sovereign-Image as Primitive Accumulation

In the neoliberal society of the spectacle soliciting the commodification of its subjects' singular form of life, cinema's sovereign-image exemplifies what Marx called "primitive accumulation," "the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production"¹⁷ by privatizing hitherto common assets as in the 18th century enclosure of British farmland that created the conditions for the industrial revolution. In our case it is the sovereign decision that transforms the multitude's common gestures *qua* means without an end screened and withheld *from* the viewer into his means of production by creating the image of a particular *bios* as the condition of possibility of capital accumulation. It is crucial to distinguish this Agamben-inspired definition of primitive accumulation from its vitalist reframing by Jonathan Beller for the post-Fordist era:

Primitive accumulation is now about mounting a belligerent campaign against the source of all value—human creativity itself, now located not just in the body of the worker, but in the mind of all: content producers, weak citizens, janitors and professors, natives, overseas contract workers, whores of all stripes—the general intellect. Wage labor, the exchange of money for subjective power, is not the only mode of exploitation—what falls outside of it and yet still enriches capital is primitive accumulation. Primitive accumulation is not simply the annexing of lands and resources, nor the environmental devastation wrought by corporations, nor the usual privatizations of public trusts

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, trans. B. Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 875

demanded by the World Bank, the IMF, and now the WTO. All of the unpaid work of social cooperation, of attention, is also the active expropriation of the commons—part of the real costs of production, paid for with the living labor/life of disenfranchised masses.¹⁸

Beller's theory turns the cinema into a factory in the attention economy of unpaid cognitive and affective labour, a central apparatus of production in the society of the spectacle. Yet, what he misses is that at its zero level capitalist value doesn't derive from the *hidden* accumulation (machinic enslavement) of human creative activity beyond the traditional (Fordist) system of wage labour (social subjection) but emerges through a purely performative, sovereign imposition of this very division between Fordist and non-Fordist production, traditionally between the Oedipal-patriarchal *bios* of disciplinary power and the feminine *zoe* dissociated from it. Once we impose this sovereign separation on human life, the radical negativity at its core that Agamben calls impotentiality is disavowed, and life as such is reduced to the operativity of becoming (to the injunction of having to be), with bare life standing for an excess of life's productive potential waiting to be actualized (like household labour excluded from the market or the film viewer's unpaid attention). In other words, through the sovereign totalization of the social-symbolic order, capitalist value is imposed on human life as such before its actualization in a particular *bios*, despite the fact that it is only through a particular (traditionally: western white male) *bios* that life's value comes to be actualized (represented and measured). This is why, once neoliberal capitalism subsumes all premodern forms of life under its productive apparatus, far from simply opposing *zoe* as unproductive life to productive communities of *bios*, sovereign power constantly mobilizes the creative vitalism of bare life against established forms of productive life, revealing

¹⁸ Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2006), 294-295.

them as two sides of the same coin of capital accumulation linked through the abject-hegemonic body of the cynic. As such, the cynic's sovereign-image stands for the smallest unit of capitalist value in the neoliberal society of the spectacle.

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