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Symptom of the post-political –  
Terrorism in Contemporary German,  
British and Hollywood Cinema

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the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the ways representations of terrorism in Hollywood, German and British cinema embody what Slavoj Žižek describes as the post-political, that is the current state of denial of alternatives within global politics and a directionlessness within cultural theory, which set in after the apparent defeat of the possibility of a radical alternative to capitalism. Moreover, this thesis proposes that films about terrorism are not only cultural expressions of the post-political, but also show the post-political condition to be problematic, displaying as they do symptoms such as the devaluation of human subjectivity and its concomitant failure to achieve progressive political change.

Žižek's philosophical approach as a method of interpreting the post-political is applied to the films *Munich* (2005), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (2008) *Die Kommenden Tage/The Coming Days*, (2010) *Four Lions* (2010) and *Hunger* (2008). As well as Žižek's work, the writings of other critics and commentators and such as Frank Furedi, Thomas Elsaesser, Kenan Malik and others are drawn on. The aesthetic and formal properties of these films are read against Žižek's texts on ideology critique, which are primarily directed at the post-political. The films shown exhibit expressions of the post-political in notions of empathy and sustainability, campness, and postmodern forms of narrative, which Žižek calls filling in gaps, and Žižek's concept of 'the act'.

By mapping the post-political in Hollywood, British and German cinema this research assays the manner in which screen terrorism is symptomatic of the post-political condition.

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## Abbreviations

APO	Außerparlamentarische Opposition or, English, extra-parliamentary opposition
BRD	German: Bundesrepublik Deutschland or, English, Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DEVGRU	The United States Naval Special Warfare Development Group
DI	Digital Intermediate
ETA	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
FX	Effects (special/sound)
GDR	German Democratic Republic (East Germany)
H.M.	Her Majesty's
HSC	Homeland Security Council
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IS	The Islamic State
NHS	National Health Service
NPD	Narcissistic Personality Disorder
p.o.v.	point-of-view
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
RAF	Rote Arme Fraktion or, English, Red Army Faction
SDS	Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund or, English, Socialist German Student Union

## Introduction

This thesis thematises the duality of film in the post-political and the post-political in film. The aim is to show how terrorism, as a fantasy of the post-political, and terrorists and terrorist deeds, as symptoms of the post-political, are played out in national cinemas. This analysis aims to determine how the experience of post-politics is experienced through the cinemas of Hollywood, the UK and Germany. In order to demonstrate this, the aesthetic and formal properties of terrorist films are read alongside critical work exploring how the post-political shapes social life, including mainly the work of philosopher Slavoj Žižek, but also the writings of critics such as Frank Furedi, Thomas Elsaesser, Kenan Malik and others.

By necessity such a big topic takes in a wide spectrum of authors and ideas. Some time has to be taken to lay the groundwork for the thesis, to establish the themes and their context. This work represents an attempt to synthesise wide-ranging, disparate strands of thought, and advance an analysis of film through a novel prism, that is to engage with film through the context of the post-political as it is described by Žižek.

The concept of the post-political is an attempt by several leftist thinkers, including Žižek,<sup>1</sup> to describe a unique moment in the history of ideas. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the symbolic breakdown of communist ideology that was often held to be the historical negation of capitalism, the notion of the political has shifted profoundly in meaning. In the post-political, the binary opposites that distinguished left and right politics are gone. Instead, a consensus of liberal democracy is the aspiration.

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, 1st edn (London: Verso Books, 1999a) p.198.

Concretely defined by Žižek, the post-political condition describes an ideological ‘deadlock’ that presents itself as the postmodern abandonment of the traditional leftist politics based on universal principles of emancipation.<sup>2</sup>

In the process of abandoning totalising, grand theories, the post-political has also made postmodern dismissals of the concept of human agency and the history-making potential of humanity more common. The post-political, shaped by postmodern sensibilities, is described succinctly by Malik, whose writings are informed by his understanding that easily recognisable, emancipatory leftist politics is a thing of the past. Instead, he points to ‘the abandonment by many sections of the left of their traditional attachment to ideas of Enlightenment rationalism and secular universalism and their growing espousal of multiculturalism, identity politics and notions of cultural authenticity.’<sup>3</sup> Human agency and human exceptionalism (in the Marxian sense of humanity’s ability to shape its own circumstances, and itself) he writes, ‘the attempt to master society, many feel, led directly to Auschwitz and the gulags. The result has been a growth of anti-humanism, of despair about human capacities, a view of human reason and agency as forces for destruction rather than for betterment.’<sup>4</sup>

The turning away from the primacy of human agency that informs the post-political, which Malik describes, suffuses social cultural output which, in turn, reflects the notions of what it means to be a subject in the post-political. This study investigates how films are not only a construct of the post-political that shapes social and political thinking, but also how films thematise and embody the post-political that informs them.

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2 e.g. Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso Books, 2013a) p.1006.

3 Kenan Malik, *About* (2014) <<http://kenanmalik.wordpress.com/about/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

4 Kenan Malik, ‘In Defence of Human Agency’, *Consciousness, Genetics and Society* (Ax: son Johnson Foundation, 2002) <[http://www.kenanmalik.com/papers/engerlsberg\\_nature.html](http://www.kenanmalik.com/papers/engerlsberg_nature.html)> [last access 4 September 2014]

This thesis approaches the complexity of terrorism on screen by utilising Žižek's philosophical approach of ideology critique, which he mainly directs at contemporary post-politics and the apparent historical impasse it presents.

Žižek is one of the, if not the, most ubiquitous of today's leftist social theorists. His book publications (over ninety at the time of writing) and over a hundred articles, seem to indicate that his proficiency as a writer is built on Hegel's idea of transformation of quantity into quality. This method is described by Fabio Vighi as a tactic to cope with the limitations of writing about theory and an attempt to turn the writing process into a revolutionary force in its own right; by obsessively repeating himself in his writing, Vighi says, Žižek aims 'at creating the preconditions for the explosion of amassed and frustrated energy seeking a point of release.'<sup>5</sup> This description of Žižek's quasi-orgasmic writing process not only mirrors Žižek's own, often deliberately crude language, but is also an answer to several of Žižek's critics, such as Sean Homer, who criticise Žižek's unwillingness to go beyond theory and 'always remain unclear, what Žižek is actually arguing for.'<sup>6</sup>

Homer's criticisms are echoed by the Žižek scholars Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher who posit that Žižek's 'analysis of post-politics is acute and his criticisms of radical academia's alternatives are incisive. But [that] Žižek himself sometimes seems uncertain as to what the alternative actually is.'<sup>7</sup> Sharpe and Boucher have similar concerns to those of Ernesto Laclau's criticism of Žižek, contained in the collaborative book written by the political theorists Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* published in 2000. Laclau labels Žižek's critique of capitalism as 'leeres Gerede', empty talk without practical value.<sup>8</sup> He

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<sup>5</sup> Fabio Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010) p.145.

<sup>6</sup> Sean Homer, 'Psychoanalysis, representation, politics: on the (im) possibility of a psychoanalytic theory of ideology?' *The Letter: Lacanian Perspectives on Psychoanalysis* 7 (1996) pp.97–109.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) p.193.

<sup>8</sup> see: Reinhard Heil, *Zur Aktualität von Slavoj Žižek: Einleitung in Sein Werk*, 1st edn (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010) p.139.

formulates Žižek's idea as a non-criticism, already opposing what he himself considers 'anti-capitalist':

But perhaps Žižek has something more reasonable in mind: for instance, the overcoming of the prevalent neoliberal economic model and the introduction of state regulation and democratic control of the economy, so that the worst effects of globalisation are avoided. If that is what he means by anti-capitalism, I would certainly agree with him, but so would most of the 'postmodernists' against whom his polemic is addressed.<sup>9</sup>

Žižek's answer to Laclau is that Laclau's so-called anti-capitalism is no such thing, as it still accepts and operates within the hegemony of liberal capitalism:

In short, Laclau's claim about my anti-capitalism also holds for what he calls the "democratic control of the economy", and, more generally, for the entire project of "radical democracy": either it means palliative damage-control measures within the global capitalist framework, or it means absolutely nothing.<sup>10</sup>

Where Žižek speaks of a possibility that lies outside the given horizon of liberal democracy, Laclau's politics are no alternative to capitalism at all but, as Žižek calls it, merely 'capitalism with a human face.'<sup>11</sup> Vighi describes how it is part of Žižek's theory that ideas alone cannot change reality, but they constitute the initial step in challenging the conditions that make up reality, and it is in this capacity that Žižek sees his job as a philosopher – as a magician who 'has got the hat, but not the rabbit',<sup>12</sup> i.e. he has the theory but cannot deliver a practical result. Yet, the hat is the precondition for a rabbit to emerge. Vighi writes about Žižek's application of theory, 'thought as such cannot reach directly the imperial other, but instead can 'only' posit its own inherent otherness as coincidental with the radical contingency of external

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<sup>9</sup> Ernesto Laclau, 'Structure, History and the political', in: Butler, Judith, Laclau, Ernesto, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso Books, 2000) p.206.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid* p.321.

<sup>11</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.12.

<sup>12</sup> Vighi, 2010, p.143.

reality'<sup>13</sup> – meaning that the job of critical thinking is to be critical about reality as it is, rather than coming up with ultimate solutions. What Vighi is referring to is, indirectly, Marx's eighth thesis on Feuerbach, in which Marx insists that it is not theory that brings about empirical change, but critical human beings, 'All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.'<sup>14</sup> What Žižek offers for theory is a rethinking of radical politics in the post-political, what he identifies as the current status quo of world politics.

Matthew Flisfeder writes in his book *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film*, 'What mostly attracts readers to Žižek's work is his ability to engage and expand on some of the most difficult questions facing theorists today, such as how to engage a critical theory of ideology at a time when we are said to be living in a "post-ideological era".'<sup>15</sup> Žižek's uses post-ideological and post-political interchangeably, while implying that enthusiasts of today's post-political ideology often proudly claim that they are 'post-ideological', whereas Žižek himself would rather dismissively call the state of affairs post-political saying, 'do we not convey the same message when we claim that we are entering a 'post-ideological' pragmatic era, which is another way of claiming that we are entering a post-political order in which the only legitimate conflicts are ethnic/cultural conflicts?''<sup>16</sup>

Žižek is one of a few contemporary critical thinkers who attempt a philosophical approach to rethinking the possibilities of universal humanism in a time of broadly post-political status quo. He fuses the anti-humanism of

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p.145.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, 'Theses On Feuerbach', in: Marx/Engels *Selected Works, Volume One*, progress publishers, Moscow, USSR, 1969, pp.13 – 15. <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) p.3.

<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso Books, 2001a) p.10.

Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian concepts of people's interpellation into ideology, and the humanist philosophies of Hegel and Marx.

However, it is his understanding of the idea of an active human subject, made possible by the virtue of universalist principles, which prevail, and which make his theories a valuable method for this analysis. Žižek's describes how the post-political sees itself as having 'extricate(d) the core of subject's being, its universal essence.'<sup>17</sup> He describes that, in the post-political, ideas of the private and the public individual have become blurred. He draws here on Kant's differentiation of the private and the public use of reason, where the private subject is exercising reason in the limited framework of his/her role in society, whereas the public individual has to be totally free and unlimited in voicing his opinion in order to advance reason for all. Here, Žižek's says, the subject 'asserts the dimension of emancipatory universality OUTSIDE the confines of one's social identity.'<sup>18</sup> The difficulty of becoming a private individual, a political subject in the post-political, is expressed by several films in the following analysis.

This thesis understands contemporary readings of terrorism as fantasies of the post-political. Fantasy in a Lacanian sense forms 'reality by offering an imaginary meaning in response to the Real of trauma or antagonism.'<sup>19</sup> The core of this idea is that fantasy is actually what we understand as unfiltered reality, as reality appears to us, constructed in cultural narratives to give meaning based on people's understanding of how they see themselves in this world. In this sense, ideology is a fantasy. This is not to deny that these fantasies are shaped and conditioned by material realities. Žižek would argue that people are not trapped by how ideology shapes them, in contrast to Althusser. Althusser's subject, as James Heartfield points out, is 'one of

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<sup>17</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Tolerance as an ideological category', *Critical Inquiry* 34.4 (2008d) pp.660–682. online version <<http://www.lacan.com/Žižek-inquiry.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Polity Press, 2003) p.129.

repression, not liberation', and the terms of interpellation 'are an imposition from outside, that impose a given identity rather than liberating the Subject.'<sup>20</sup>

Žižek's subject, on the other hand, emerges out of the contradictions he undergoes him/herself, shaped by and at the same time shaping the world he/she inhabits. As formulated by Kelsey Wood, 'the subject as such, however, is beyond ideological interpellation.'<sup>21</sup> It emerges through the transcendental act of a transgression of the symbolic, which in turn is enabled by the subject's ability to actively embark on this transgression.

Contemporary terrorist acts, in turn, can be categorised as symptoms of the post-political. Generally speaking a symptom is some negative effect that points towards an underlying problem. For Žižek, the symptom is the symptom of capitalist ideology, the 'irrational' element of the existing society.'<sup>22</sup> In short, the symptom is an element of society that can be investigated to reveal the inner workings of its ideology. Todd McGowan distils the function of the symptom in Žižek's theory of ideology critique, in how the Žižekian symptom 'expresses the truth of the system that confronts the system in an external form. The symptom is excluded, and yet this exclusion reveals what the system cannot admit about itself.'<sup>23</sup> Here the difference between a symptom according to Althusser and Žižek needs to be highlighted.

When there is talk about a symptomatic reading it is usually considered in an Althusserian sense. This is how he understood a text, especially Marx, should be read. His aim was to show how Marx's earlier writings were 'ideological', meaning full of subtext that was influenced by other thinkers (most of all Hegel), rather than Marx's own. This, Althusser concluded, only emerged in his later writing. He claimed that Marx's early writing showed

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<sup>20</sup> James Heartfield, *The 'Death of the Subject' Explained* (Leicester: Perpetuity Press, 2002) p.40, emphasis in original.

<sup>21</sup> Kelsey Wood, *Žižek: A Reader's Guide* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). p.22.

<sup>22</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso Books, 1989) p.23.

<sup>23</sup> Todd McGowan, 'Symptom', Butler, Rex, (ed.), *The Žižek Dictionary* (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2014) p.243.



'symptoms', contradictions in thinking, and ideas that showed how the text was not his, but informed by a penetrating ideology. Althusser's method of reading Marx is problematic in several ways. Firstly, Althusser understood this method to be only available to trained intellectuals who would then 'translate' the correct reading of the text for the masses, in his view that ordinary people were blinded by ideology and could not understand their own limitations.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, such a method of interpretation lends itself to a potentially more or less arbitrary reading of a text, motivated not by the purpose of the text itself but by the reader's own ideological prejudices. Žižek's looking for the symptom is therefore not a symptomatic reading, but rather an investigation of the symptoms that sustain the text but that are also outside from it. The symptom, as discussed later, is the thing that presents and represents the contradictions of its own ideology.

This thesis is not a symptomatic reading in an Althusserian sense; it does not aim to expose hidden ideological subtexts within and behind filmic texts. Nor does it look to identify, in a Žižekian way, the symptoms themselves; it does not discuss elements of the films as expressions of the ideological conditions that allow them to happen. This exercise, in itself, is unhelpful as Warren Buckland and Tim Dean have pointed out. However, their criticism is that, 'The aim of unmasking ideology to create political change ... is no longer a sufficient political strategy.'<sup>25</sup> Their take is that recent ideology does not require a comparison with an alternative, not because the conditions for an alternative to capitalism are foreclosed in the post-political, but because there is no need to change the fundamental ideological structure. Rather, in their thinking, Buckland and Dean are not too far removed from Flisfeder's idea of how to employ Žižek's work, that is as a means to 'map' oneself in the coordinates of ideology via film.

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<sup>24</sup> Oliver Davis, *Jacques Rancière* (London: Polity Press, 2013). p.13–14.

<sup>25</sup> Warren Buckland, 'Symptomatic reading in Althusser, *Cahiers du cinéma*, and Žižek', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*; Fall (2013), Issue 55 <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/Buckland-Lincoln/index.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

Flisfeder makes a case that Žižek should be regarded not as a cultural critic but as a film theorist in his own right, who moves away from the understood notion of what film theory is, that is a theory of film, saying 'Žižek's film theory involves not theorising about *film* as such.'<sup>26</sup> Instead, Flisfeder says that Žižek's film theory consists of ideology critique. He describes how Žižek's use of film in his writings on ideology makes him a film theorist whose idea of cinema allows us to perceive the 'very co-ordinates of ideology today.'<sup>27</sup>

According to Flisfeder, 'Rather than theorising film ... film theory must focus on theorising ideology by way of film criticism,'<sup>28</sup> thus directly translating Žižek's philosophy to film studies; doing what Žižek does himself – using film to explain ideology.

However, even though Flisfeder's aims for Žižekian film theory to bring about an 'emancipatory cognitive mapping' of ideology,<sup>29</sup> follows Žižek's own methods of investigating, or mapping, how the self in psychoanalysis finds his/her coordinates within the symbolic order,<sup>30</sup> it is problematic to regard the act of 'mapping oneself' as truly emancipatory. Instead a case has to be made for human agency that lies beyond a 'cognitive mapping', the mere situating of oneself in ideology. Malik argues that a reliance on human agency is a necessity, most of all because it is only through agency that change and betterment for all can be achieved, 'once we accept that human agency – and human reason – are forces for destruction rather than betterment, then we

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<sup>26</sup> In his copious written works as well as in the documentaries *The Pervert's Guide To Cinema* (2009) and *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012) in which he subjects the works of directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch to his analytical scrutiny, Žižek uses films to illustrate his philosophy. For example, in *Pervert's Guide To Cinema*, Žižek describes how the remarkable dynamic of the Marx Brothers is in fact a filmic fantasy of Freud's structural model of the human psyche. Groucho is the superego, the figure of authority, Chico is the ego, the mediator between id and reality, and Harpo represents the id, the anarchic element that always acts upon its drives.

<sup>27</sup> Flisfeder, 2012, p.2.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p.5.

<sup>29</sup> Flisfeder, Matthew, and Louis-Paul Willis, *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p.10.

<sup>30</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.288.

lose the only means we possess for human advancement, whether social, moral or technological.<sup>31</sup> Human agency is to be understood as the means to achieve what Žižek calls the ‘impossible’, that what stands beyond the power of the limits of the collective imagination.

This thesis agrees with Buckland and Dean that a symptomatic reading of film is in itself unsatisfactory, as this single-minded approach does not do justice to the merits of film in its own right. This is why this work utilises the ideological symptoms and fantasies of the post-political – the conceptualisation of terrorism – to analyse how films artistically conceptualise the experience of the post-political. Rather than utilising film to illustrate ideology, Žižek’s methods are used to demonstrate the ideology in film itself. In this case the object of study is how the post-political translates itself into film form through the motif of terrorism. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that it is not enough to instrumentalise film for the purpose of critical theory. Films can be successfully used as ideology critique, as Flisfeder demonstrates. But also, ideology is a valid way of looking at film. Trotsky identified the paradox between the demands of artistic criticism and ideological criticism in his writings on art; ‘Art must make its own way and by its own means. The Marxian methods are not the same as the artistic.’<sup>32</sup> The way the films in this analysis are shown to contextualise the post-political speaks of how the post-political shapes artistic expression, a field of study not articulated by Žižek in these terms. The post-political not only informs film but also, as Trotsky said about poetry, film in and of itself ‘feels the world in a new way.’<sup>33</sup> This new way can be described as post-political vision, expressed in film, that speaks for the duality of film in the post-political and the post-political in film.

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<sup>31</sup> Malik, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> Leon Trotsky, ‘Communist Policy Toward Art’ (1923), *Literature and revolution*. (New York: Haymarket Books, 2005). p.179.

<sup>33</sup> Leon Trotsky, ‘The Formalist School of Poetry and Marxism’, *Literature and revolution*. (New York: Haymarket Books, 2005). p.144.

By establishing terrorism as the ideological fantasy and symptom of the post-political from the start, this thesis aims to illustrate how the ideological foreclosure of political change is affecting the cultural and artistic outputs of this society, as evidenced in particular in national cinemas.

Post-political terrorism is played out with different weights in national cinemas, yet the fundamental theme is a constant: each national cinema and its relation to the symptom and fantasy of terrorism expresses a fundamental desire to narrate its own history at a time when the possibility of human agency in the making of history is called into question. This thesis looks into how this desire to narrate is expressed in Germany, the USA and in the UK. The different national relationships to terrorism influence their respective treatment of the subject through cinema. The analysis considers this respective treatment through three different perspectives: In the USA the impact of the US led 'war on terror' is what creates a post-political overcoming and processing of national history as cinema. The aspect of terrorism in UK cinema that is most noticeable is a desire to narrate the possibility of acting politically in post-political British society, as seen in the light of the change in nature of homegrown terrorism. In Germany, a re-imagining of the past terrorism of the RAF (Red Army Faction), understood as a nation-defining idea that is summed up in the concept of RAF mythos, is utilised to express the preoccupations of Germany in the post-political.

### **Terms, methods, context**

This introductory chapter will establish the context under which the thesis understands the idea that terrorism and terrorists have taken on a new role in the post-political, and how film has become a major way of contextualising the post-political through depictions of terrorism.

In order to set up a critical model for this thesis, this chapter begins with a closer exploration of the emergence of the post-political to then answer the question of why the less antagonistic life of post-ideology is not a positive development. The key premise is that what has been lost with the corrosion of

old ideological disputes is also a vision and the inspiration that the world could be created and re-created differently.

The philosophical approaches of Žižek are helpful here, as he begins to unravel how these ‘post-ideological’ times are in fact nothing but ideological. By establishing a philosophical emphasis on the importance of the Cartesian subject, he provides a philosophical frame within which the post-political can be placed and analysed as an ideology by not only naming and defining the current political climate but also by revealing how the contradictions of the post-political work.

Žižek’s ideas will be supplemented with the sociological understanding of terrorism in the post-political as put forward by Furedi. Taken together, their analyses show that terrorism today is a construct that serves as a means of mapping oneself in the post-political. Furedi describes how the emphasis of personal over universal politics creates a fear of the unknown – and terrorism becomes an expression of this unknown. The chapter goes on to describe how both Žižek and Furedi establish that the reigning societal motivator is a politics of fear, that results in the terrorist becoming an ‘enemy of the state’, as described by Schmitt<sup>34</sup> – a construct supported by the ruling regime that defines the nation state against an imagined Other. An idea that will be looked at in more detail. The chapter continues to explain how this projection of the fear of the unknown into a thing, in this case the thing being the meaning of terrorism, is what Žižek calls an ideological fantasy, with terrorists and their acts as such working as the symptoms of post-political ideology. The ideological fantasy is expressed by what has been coined ‘New Terrorism’, a development that has been criticised as ‘new terrorism theory’ as discussed later in the chapter. The conclusion of this introductory chapter describes how the new ideological fantasy of terrorism has become narrated predominantly through fiction in film and television, forgoing the possibility of it being

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<sup>34</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (1932) <[http://will.rewi.hu-berlin.de/files/WS\\_2013\\_14/Sp 2/Der\\_Begriff\\_des\\_Politischen.pdf](http://will.rewi.hu-berlin.de/files/WS_2013_14/Sp%202/Der_Begriff_des_Politischen.pdf)> [last access 4 September 2014]

analysed in its own terms as ideological fantasy and, ultimately, being situated as symptom of the post-political.

### **The emergence of post-politics**

Recent political and social relations have been shaped in great part by postmodern ideas that emerged most clearly in the later half of the twentieth century. These ideas can be summed up as the overall rejection of meta-narratives, as described by Jean-François Lyotard.<sup>35</sup> Or, in Žižek's words, in postmodernism 'the Hegelian totality of Reason is perceived as the ultimate totalitarian edifice in philosophy.'<sup>36</sup> The consequence of this outright rejection of totality is that the post-political is a historical moment in which 'the Left has accepted the basic co-ordinates of liberal democracy' on the grounds that anything else would by default turn totalitarian in nature.<sup>37</sup> The achievements of the Enlightenment, at its centre the idea of the Cartesian human subject, are problematised, on the grounds that the subject's claim to universal goals, be it in the name of freedom and democracy or fascism, are the same. These ideas 'directly or not come(s) back to this metaphysics of Subjectivity',<sup>38</sup> as it is spelled out in Derrida's deconstructive critique of the human subject, in which he highlights the difference of things especially subjects, instead of their sameness.<sup>39</sup> Here totality and totalitarian are seen as the one and the same. Terry Eagleton writes how Derrida, together with Levinas, think of fascism when they think of solidarity, 'not the resistance movements which fought to overcome it.'<sup>40</sup> Both wrote at a time after the Second World War, when

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35 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

36 Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Four Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London: Verso Books, 2002a) p.6.

37 *ibid.* p.3.

38 E.g. Derrida makes a claim that racism is genetic and an inescapable part of human biology. Derrida, Jacques, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) p.39, 40, emphasis in original.

39 Derrida, p.40.

40 Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell (an imprint of John Wiley & Sons, 2008). p.233.

'human communality has been damaged almost beyond repair, both by its advocates and by its antagonists.'<sup>41</sup> Heartfield, describing Derrida's dismissal of subjectivity, adds that Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe takes Derrida's attack on humanist thinking even further. 'Humanism', says Heartfield in reference to Lacoue-Labarthe, 'is [seen as] a fascism, because humanism puts man at the centre, makes man's activity the substance of history.'<sup>42</sup> In short, collective human enterprise, because it cancels out difference, is seen as inherently corruptive and oppressive.

The main consequence of the postmodern default position is that radical politics are rendered difficult to pursue – emancipatory theories that aim at a 'total' liberation, such as Marxism, are dismissed outright. The political aims of the left, the once oppositional force to capitalism, have changed, in that they broadly accept capitalist state systems as default. The broad tendency of the left is that capitalism has to be managed more fairly, by controlling the excesses of capitalism (by taxing the rich, protecting the environment, etc.). The main strand of leftist politics of the 1990s, as exemplified by Bill Clinton's and Tony Blair's third way politics, Gerhard Schroeder's *Neue Mitte* (new middle), were in a sense logical extensions of Margaret Thatcher's slogan 'there is no alternative' to economic liberalism. In Europe, where leftist politics has a different, historically charged meaning than in the USA, this change was felt in a more profound way. As the traditionally leftist parties implemented the political programme of their conservative opponents, this changed the nature of the role of the state.

The new direction taken by New Labour, is the subject of a study by Tony Cutler and Barbara Waine, which looks into reforms in the NHS and the education sector. Their study shows that the New Labour government not only 'embraced' the already installed managerialism of the previous government, but also implemented this managerialism in the style of a 'political project'

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* p.233.

<sup>42</sup> Heartfield, p.19.

that stands in contrast to the ‘criticisms which Labour made of the public sector reforms of the 1980s.’<sup>43</sup>

Žižek suggests that, through their ruthless implementing of post-politics, the left has managed to become better at capitalism than the conservatives.

In the UK, the Thatcher revolution was, at the time, chaotic and impulsive, marked by unpredictable contingencies. It was Tony Blair who was able to institutionalise it, or, in Hegel’s terms, to raise (what first appeared as) a contingency, a historical accident, into a necessity. Thatcher wasn’t a Thatcherite, she was merely herself; it was Blair (more than Major) who truly gave form to Thatcherism.<sup>44</sup>

In a fairly spontaneous and unplanned fashion, the nature of the state changed, becoming weighted toward the administration of peoples’ personal lives. Any power it now has lies for the most part in its role of playing on and protecting people from their fears. And, as will be discussed later on, in the age of post-politics, fear has become a willingly employed instrument of governments trying to find a political cause.

### **Žižek’s approach to post-politics**

Žižek describes the idea of post-politics (understood as the established modus operandi in Western nations and, by extension, the politics of globalisation) extensively in his book *The Ticklish Subject*, and a detailed look into his definition of the concept is necessary when regarding this definition as a basis throughout the thesis. He writes:

Today (...) we are dealing with another form of the degeneration of the political, postmodern post-politics, which no longer merely “represses” the political, trying to contain it and pacify the “returns of the repressed”, but much more effectively “forecloses” it, so that the postmodern forms of ethnic violence, with their “irrational” excessive character, are no longer simple “returns of the repressed” but, rather,

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43 Cutler, Tony and Barbara Waine, ‘Managerialism Reformed? New Labour And Public Sector Management’, *Social Policy and Administration*, 34:3 (2000) pp.318–332, p 320.

44 Slavoj Žižek, ‘Resistance Is Surrender’ *The London Review of Books*, Vol. 29 No. 22 (15 November 2007c), <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n22/slavoj-Žižek/resistance-is-surrender>> [last access 4 September 2014] p.7.



represent a case of the foreclosed (the symbolic) which, as we know from Lacan, returns in the real. In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists ... ) and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus. Post-politics thus emphasises the need to leave old ideological divisions behind and confront new issues, armed with the necessary expert knowledge and free deliberation that takes people's concrete needs and demands into account.<sup>45</sup>

In Žižek's epigrammatic sketch of the elements that define the post-political the main points are:

1. The notion of a foreclosure, the absolute ruling out of the political antagonism of liberal capitalism. The post-political not simply represses radical politics, but excludes it from consideration and thought.
2. Politics has changed in practice. Instead of making policies based on political principles, the governing bodies make decisions based on 'expert knowledge.' People are managed to the best possible degree with politics reduced to how this management happens and is enforced.

At first glance, the term post-political is an unfortunate choice of phrase, as it seems to imply an impasse within political thinking. If the world is post-political, where do we go from here? However, the term post-political is to be understood as a criticism of exactly this understanding of society as being post politics. Žižek describes it thus,

When I say we live in a post-political world, I refer to a wrong ideological impression. We don't really live in such a world, but the existing universe presents itself as post-political in the sense that there is some kind of a basic social pact that elementary social decisions are no longer discussed as political decisions. They are turned into simple decisions of gesture and of administration. And the remaining conflicts

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<sup>45</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.198 -199.

are mostly conflicts about different cultures. We have the present form of global capitalism plus some kind of tolerant democracy as the ultimate form of that idea.<sup>46</sup>

What the term post-political embodies is a general lack of belief in alternative social models – despite the fact that the post-political world is still determined by the contradictions of capitalism. Or put simply, the idea that the world is no longer determined by class politics is a self-imposed illusion. For some, such as the author of the book *Žižek's Politics*, Jodi Dean, the term post-political, although correct in its observations, is applied wrongly, 'Weirdly ... the very claim for post-politics erases its own standpoint of enunciation: why say post-politics unless you mean it politically?'<sup>47</sup> For Dean the concept of post-politics not only overlooks 'the reality of politics on the ground, but it cedes in advance key terrains of activism and struggle.'<sup>48</sup> Instead she says that, 'our enemy has adopted our language, our ideals, we now lack an ability to say what we want. Instead, our present values become horrific realisations of their opposites, entrapping us in psychotic politics.'<sup>49</sup>

Dean's criticism deliberately dismisses the intended cynicism of the term which in fact highlights the inherent absurdity, the idea of a worldwide consensus, of the post-political. The problematic aspect of Dean's argument rests on of her understanding of contemporary power relations, and the antagonisms these bring about, through the notion of a rightwing appropriation of leftist ideas. However, to an extent it is the left, by abandoning traditional leftist ideals of historical thinking, that played a factor in the collapse not only of the concept of an oppositional left but also of the conservative right in the post-political.

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46 Sabine Reul and Thomas Deichmann talk to philosopher Slavoj Žižek. 'About War and the Missing Center in politics' *Eurozine* <<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2002-03-15-Žižek-en.html>> [last access: Monday 17 October 2011]

47 Dean, Jodi, 'The errors of 'post-politics'', June 11, 2007 <[http://jdeanicite.typepad.com/i\\_cite/2007/06/the\\_errors\\_of\\_p.html](http://jdeanicite.typepad.com/i_cite/2007/06/the_errors_of_p.html)> [last access: Monday 17 October 2011]

48 Jodi Dean, 'Post-politics? No, thanks!' *Future Non Stop* (2011) <<http://future-nonstop.org/c/b122b85eff80835dfd654453d325baob>> [last access 4 September 2014]

49 *ibid.*

The possibility of traditional leftist ideas, and at the same time, conservative politics, is exactly what is abandoned in post-politics. The necessary agents of the traditional leftist struggle do not exist in this function anymore; the coherent organised body of people whose aims, in the words of Žižek, function as

... a metaphoric condensation of the global opposition against Them, those in power, so that the protest is no longer just about that demand, but about the universal dimension that resonates in that particular demand ... What post-politics tends to prevent is precisely this metaphoric universalisation of particular demands.<sup>50</sup>

Even if there was such body, (the Occupy movement or the Spanish protest movement los Indignados are sometimes brought forwards as examples for a functioning leftist activism), what is missing are the theories, the leftist ideas to animate them. Žižek and Furedi's descriptions overlap in their understanding of the lived reality as post-historical. History is no longer experienced as human-made but in how it makes humans – and it is this narrative, to which both the left and the right subscribe, that has dissolved the dialectal antagonisms of left and right politics. Furedi argues that the conventional distinctions between a cultural left and a conservative right have little relevance today as both sides have lost their historically determined antagonism, saying that it was through the 'adoption of anti-historical thinking by the left that has proved so decisive in the shaping of the new intellectual climate. There is no longer a debate between left and right about substantive issues to do with history. The discussion is over what kind of history what kind of identity.'<sup>51</sup> The concept of the post-political is thus, for both Furedi and Žižek, a closing down of the possibility of historical thinking. The left's accommodation to conservative historicism, in which history becomes the determinant of people, was instrumental in the emergence of the

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<sup>50</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.204. emphasis in original.

<sup>51</sup> Frank Furedi, *Mythical Pasts, Elusive Futures: History and Society in an Anxious Age* (London: Pluto Press, 1991) p.250.

post-political climate in which ‘the universal dimension that resonates in that particular’ is foreclosed.

What Žižek aims to encapsulate with the idea of the post-political is not the concept of utopia, in which a ‘perfectly unitary and homogenous collective will render pointless the moment of politics’, as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe point out.<sup>52</sup> Instead, what he describes, with his emphasis on a post-political world view, is that when imagining new ways to think, it should not be pretended that this is an era beyond politics (where capitalism has won and any alternative has lost by default). Žižek’s call is to resist this world view of post-politics, or which Furedi calls the ‘closure of the historical mind’,<sup>53</sup> and instead create new critical ways for a new voice of opposition that takes into consideration this new historical moment.

### **Žižek establishes the acting subject as the fundamental condition for societal change**

Žižek is interested in the constant tension between human beings and their surroundings, between their drives (as described by psychoanalysis) and the demands placed on them by society. His philosophical starting point seems an unmistakably anti-humanist one, in that he identifies himself as Lacanian, basing his thoughts on Lacan’s structuralist psychoanalysis. It is therefore critical to follow his way of thinking to see how he arrives at the resurrection of the active subject. Even though Žižek’s revival of the subject is not a straight acknowledgement of the subject as a ‘self-transparent thinking subject’,<sup>54</sup> (Rather, Žižek finds the subject’s agency in his/her ability to recognise, under specific circumstances described below, the real (or the universal truth) of materialist political economy) his theoretical observations are such that his concepts of ideology critique as well as the possibility to act

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<sup>52</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Verso Books, 2001) p.2.

<sup>53</sup> Frank Furedi, 1991, p.193.

<sup>54</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.2.

upon them are a good starting point to make a case for the necessity of human subjectivity in and of itself. Žižek argues that the human subject is not as a subject fully at the mercy of his/her interpellation, as formulated by Althusser.<sup>55</sup> Instead he follows the idea that the subject is a place of antagonism between the conditions of his/her life circumstances and the negations that make up the contradictions of these circumstances. Still, the point of departure for Žižek is Lacan's psychoanalytical theory of how the subject is constituted.

The symbolic together with the register of the imaginary, and the real, are Lacan's three fundamental dimensions of subjectivity. With 'symbolic order' Lacan describes the subconscious set of rules we live by, 'the objective order (...) of language, law, morality, religion, and all social existence, which is held to constitute the identity of any human subject who enters it.'<sup>56</sup> Or as Žižek describes it 'society's unwritten constitution.'<sup>57</sup> These subconscious rules are in turn, however, created in a material world; the symbolic could be, for example, the patriarchal family or the state. More often, the symbolic order can be substituted for the concept of ideology. Žižek often compares the subjectivisation with the concept of interpellation, the subordination of the self to a greater constellation such as ideology.

But Žižek wants to make a case for human subjectivity as the necessary condition to bring about political change based on collective interests. Žižek refers to a Marxist humanism when he pastiches, in *The Ticklish Subject*, Marx and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 'A spectre is haunting Western academia, the spectre of the Cartesian subject. All academic powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre.'<sup>58</sup> In his work Žižek

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55 Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso Books, 2008b) p.344.

56 Chris Baldick, 'symbolic, the', *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. (Oxford University Press, 2008) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199208272.001.0001/acref-9780199208272-e-1110>> [last access 4 September 2014].

57 Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2011a) p.8.

58 Žižek, 1999a, p.1.

wants to reconcile the loss of the subject, the view of humans as free willing, rationally autonomous beings, from the aims of postmodern theory to abandon the notion of human agency. This question is now, how does Žižek reconcile the humanism of Marx and the anti-humanism of Lacan in his philosophy? In their article, Vighi and Feldner ask this important question, 'Based on the psychoanalytic axiom of the split subject at the mercy of unconscious knowledge, Slavoj Žižek's lesson could be seen as a sobering one: since our desires are never our own but always the other's in as much as they are articulated by the big Other in advance, how can we think freedom and agency?'<sup>59</sup> They articulate the urgent question in Žižek's thinking of how a subject, if it can never know itself as well as his/her unconscious desires, is supposed to experience freedom?

Žižek sees the possibility of change for the subject not in an inherent rationality, but in the active process of reconstituting the self from the social conditions he/she lives in. Vighi describes this mechanism thus, 'Žižek argues that the self must embrace its own absolute otherness (negativity) to become subject, thus endorsing Hegel's view that 'tarrying with the negative' is 'the magical power' through which the subject comes into being.'<sup>60</sup> For the subject to change their circumstances in reality, they have to change the conditions that make up his/her self as a subject within this reality. This does not mean they have to change their outlook on life in a therapeutical way, rather that the conditions of how life structures the subject have to be discarded by the subject, and new conditions constituted out of this. With his conceptualisation of the subject, Žižek unites Hegel and Lacan, in what Vighi and Feldner call a 'dialectics of the subject.'<sup>61</sup> The subject, instead of being a fully formed organic whole 'forever prevented from truly connecting' is inherently connected to the

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59 Fabio Vighi and, Heiko Feldner, 'A Subject that Matters: Žižek's Ideology Critique Today', Žižek and Ideology, *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Vol 4, No 1, (2010) <<http://Žižekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/239/325>> [last access 4 September 2014] p.1

60 Vighi and Feldner, 2010. p.2.

61 *ibid.*

world by the very fact that it is split into the conscious (which knows itself) and the unconscious (which does not know itself).<sup>62</sup> The negativity, or alienation, that is experienced by the self (not knowing one's own unconscious) and the alienation of the self from society are parallel. Only by experiencing alienation is the subject able to contextualise the conditions for this alienation, and in turn emerge as a new subject, hence a 'dialectics of the subject.'<sup>63</sup>

In Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics any knowledge or discourse hinges upon a mechanism for closure. This mechanism is the unacknowledged truth that drives this very same mechanism. For Hegelian dialectics this is to be found in the negation that contradicts a thesis. By means of negativity of thought by the subject the assumed conditions are discarded or dissolved, and he gains a drive to strive towards a new 'wholeness' in a spiral of dialectics or helical change. For Lacanian psychoanalysis this mechanism is to be found in the idea of castration – the traumatic imposition which then leads to the repression of this trauma by trying to compensate for the apparent lack. Like the Hegelian dialectic, the Lacanian subject already carries within its own unreason. The trauma represents the subject itself in its own negation.

### **The impossible**

The ability of the subject to evoke change lies in the possibility provided by the negation, that what is not considered possible, but which at the same time is constitutive of the situation the subject is in. In other words, the possibility lies in the impossibility. In Lacan the real, that which contradicts and disrupts the symbolic order, symbolises the 'impossible'.<sup>64</sup> Žižek insists that it is the very negativity of the impossible where the potential of the real lies. For him,

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Karnac Books, 2004) p.166.

the real offers the dialectical negation of what is considered society, including its limitations.

According to Žižek, the post-political world, shaped by post-modern politics, is responsible for the dismantling of the symbolic order.<sup>65</sup> The negation of capitalist ideology (once the possibility for communism) is understood as impossible; instead capitalist ideology has become a non-negotiable state. The great authority of the other, the representative of the symbolic, is replaced with the complexity and plurality of different readings, where all interpretations are of equal value.

The dimension of the 'impossible', that what is simply not doable, for Žižek is the dimension of a negation of liberal capitalism, is denied in post-politics and this bears real consequences. That which used to be the constitutive other, politics of universal principles (the impossible dimension) has been replaced by another that favours the institutionalisation of individual identity politics. Žižek writes,

One can also put it (post-politics) in terms of the well-known definition of politics as the 'art of the possible': authentic politics is, rather, the exact opposite, that is, the art of the impossible – it changes the very parameters of what is considered 'possible' in the existing constellation.<sup>66</sup> [...] Instead of the political subject 'working class' demanding its universal rights, we get, on the other hand, the multiplicity of particular social strata or groups, each with its problems (the dwindling need for manual workers, etc.) and, on the other, the immigrant, ever more prevented from politicising his predicament of exclusion.<sup>67</sup>

The post-political denies the acting political person, the subject, access to methods of changing his/her situation in a politically meaningful way (a fundamental change of the conditions of society which requires universal principles), and it is this situation that unites the thinking of Žižek, and others

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<sup>65</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.198 -199.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.* p.199.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* p.198.



such as Rancière and Badiou, with other leftist thinkers such as Mouffe.<sup>68</sup> However, Žižek's views are more radical than Mouffe's et al. Žižek's understanding of the social as within a post-political condition also includes his ideas of how to overcome this stagnant moment within politics. He not only makes a case to return to the active human subject, by the way of a political act, which will be looked at in detail in the chapter on the act in *Hunger*. But he also reintroduces the validity of a universal truth of common human interests, that is expressed through partisanship – 'the gesture of taking sides.'<sup>69</sup> This truth has to be articulated from a distinctly partisan position otherwise it cannot be defended as a political gesture. Žižek is blunt, 'If one does not specify the criteria of the different, alternate narrativisation, then this endeavour courts the danger of endorsing, in the politically correct mood, ridiculous narratives like those about the supremacy of some aboriginal holistic wisdom, or those that dismiss science as just another narrative on par with premodern superstitions.'<sup>70</sup>

### **A (post)-politics of fear**

In the post-political, people are considered fluid identities in the context of globalisation, where the defining of one's self depends on the audiences that are addressed at any particular moment – however; they ultimately remain linked by capital. One of the more problematic features of the post-political is the posing of social problems as individual ones, affecting people's identities. What were once considered the realms of the political, such as the realisation of liberty or the production and consumption of material things, have become confined to and defined by the realms of the personal. Often political decisions are more or less implicitly formed in terms of identity politics or personal

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68 Mouffe criticises the post-political condition for its eradication of political poles, and describes how the post-political condition undermines any attempts at democratic change in Mouffe, Chantal, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005)

69 Slavoj Žižek, 'A plea for Leninist intolerance', *Critical Inquiry* (2002b) pp.542–566, online version <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-Žižek/articles/a-plea-for-leninist-intolerance/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

70 *ibid.*

responsibility, and the individual is encouraged to experience life in an individualised way.

Political action is cast in the role of administration and management of people's individual lives. This is why Žižek often calls post-politics 'post-political bio-politics,' where the 'focus on expert management and administration [is] "bio-politics" [which] designates the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives as its primal goal.'<sup>71</sup> Bio-politics is a term Žižek borrows from Foucault to describe how in the post-political, people are not seen as subjects but as 'individuals reduced to bare life', and governments understand their role in administering policies that have direct bearing on people's individual biology.<sup>72</sup> (For example, anti-smoking bans, food recommendations such as five-a-day, injunctions to be active, but also to wear helmets when doing so.) Politics is reduced to the actions of individual behaviour and only requires a state apparatus which functions as manager of these ideas. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas called this experience of a depoliticised public reality, 'civil privatism',<sup>73</sup> in which administrative decisions are made largely independent of citizen participation. By reducing politics to individual experiences, Žižek says how, the only way people can be mobilised to act politically in the post-political is by having their individual life situation threatened,

When politics is reduced to the "private" domain, it takes the form of the politics of FEAR – fear of losing one's particular identity, of being overwhelmed. ... once one renounces big ideological causes, what remains is only the efficient administration of life ... almost only that. That is to say, with the depoliticised, socially objective, expert administration and coordination of interests as the zero-level of politics,

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71 Slavoj Žižek, 'Censorship today: violence, or ecology as a new opium for the masses' *Lacan.com* 18 (2008a): 42–43, online version <<http://www.lacan.com/zizecology1.htm>> [last access 4 September 2014]

72 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, 1st edn (London: Profile Books, 2008g) p.34.

73 Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (London: Polity Press, 1988) p.166.

the only way to introduce passion into this field, to actively mobilise people, is through fear, a basic constituent of today's subjectivity.<sup>74</sup>

Žižek lists the most common fears as:

The fear of immigrants, the fear of crime, the fear of godless sexual depravity, the fear of the excessive state (with its burden of high taxation and control), the fear of ecological catastrophe, as well as the fear of harassment (political correctness is the exemplary liberal form of the politics of fear).<sup>75</sup>

To this have to be added new fears that concern the self in an environment that is perceived as unknowable and uncontrollable, from obsessions around food production and consumption, to how human interactions and relationships are more and more perceived as potentially damaging.<sup>76</sup> The latter example an indicator that shows that human activity is perceived through a 'narrative that is selfish, destructive and toxic.'<sup>77</sup> This politics of fear is thematised by Furedi as a defying feature of the post-political. Often formulated through 'apocalyptic thinking about the environment',<sup>78</sup> (an aspect which will be analysed in more detail in the chapter on *Die Kommenden Tage*), the politics of fear are experienced as a 'culture of fear' in which irrational fears are reproduced by society, and nurtured by the loci of power in order to provide a platform of personal identification. For Žižek it is the politics of fear of the post-political wherein, 'resides the true line of separation between radical emancipatory politics and the politics of the status quo: it is not the difference between two different positive visions, sets of axioms, but, rather, the difference between the politics based on a set of universal axioms and the politics which renounces the very constitutive dimension of the

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74 Žižek, 2008a, emphasis in original.

75 Slavoj Žižek, 'Liberal multiculturalism masks an old barbarism with a human face', *The Guardian* (3 October 2010) <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/oct/03/immigration-policy-roma-rightwing-europe>> [last access 4 September 2014]

76 Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear Revisited*, 4th edn (London: Continuum International PublishingGroup, 2006). p.xiv

77 *ibid.*

78 *ibid.*

political, since it resorts to fear as its ultimate mobilising principle<sup>79</sup> In both Žižek and Furedi's cases, peoples' existential fears have become the self-defining narrative in times when 'the decline of old conventions creates a situation in which individuals feel that they have less control over their lives.'<sup>80</sup> In the post-political fear itself is the object of post-political policies (fear of the other), and so becomes the mobilising principle for politics.

### **Terrorism and its legislation**

In a culture that defines itself through fear of people's impact on one another as well as the environment, terrorism has to be considered a major part of how post-political society constitutes itself. It is defined generally as 'The intentional use of violence, particularly in order to sow widespread fear, for political ends.'<sup>81</sup> A more precise definition would be that terrorism is a form of asymmetric warfare, often directed against civilians directly or with the disregard for the safety of non-combatants. It is understood that the aim of terrorism is to evoke fear, ergo the effectiveness of terror is always conditioned by how much the threat is defined as threatening.

In order to act against the perceived crime of terrorism, it is in the interest of nations to define somehow, on an international level, what terrorism is. This problem is being dealt with piecemeal, gradually, in multilateral treaties.<sup>82</sup> In these treaties, the member states of the UN agree over individual aspects of

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79 Slavoj Žižek, 'Robespierre or the "Divine Violence" of Terror', Maximilien Robespierre and Slavoj Žižek, *Virtue and Terror: Maximilien Robespierre*, (London: Verso Books, 2007b) pp.vi-xiii, p.xxvi.

80 Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear Revisited: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation*, 4th edn (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006) p.76.

81 Simon Blackburn, "terrorism", *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) Oxford Reference. 2008. Date Accessed 18 Jul. 2014 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199541430.001.0001/acref-9780199541430-e-3067>> [last access 4 September 2014].

82 Such agreements have been developed by the UN General Assembly, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

terrorism in order to provide basic legal tools to combat international terrorism in its many forms.<sup>83</sup>

Through the introduction of special legislation to deal with terrorist acts, states make choices about their respective interpretations of what constitutes terrorism and, in consequence, which criminal becomes an enemy of the state (and the people it claims to represent). This construction of the terrorist as enemy of the state is an important step by governments to manifest their individual agendas. Carl Schmitt posits in *The Concept of the Political* that *real-politics* is based on the distinction between friend and enemy. He describes how the construction of an enemy by the state is the implementation of the other as an entity that is a 'public enemy' ('Feind ist nur der öffentliche Feind').<sup>84</sup> This means that an enemy is first and foremost a construct, a '*Gestaltung*', a formulation, of a possibility for the state to act politically.<sup>85</sup>

Schmitt makes a compelling argument for the idea that what and who is

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83 To get around the political mire of what constitutes terrorism, the UN's solution is international agreements on the crimes of terrorism. Rather than attempting to define an ideologically based, universal idea of terrorism, it is defined in UN treaties by its default criminal characteristics which are often interchangeable with those of organised crime. These are objectively criminal offences that happen on an international stage, such as hostage taking, smuggling and dealing weapons, money laundering, violent attacks, etc. There are thirteen conventions and protocols (which are agreements supplementary to a convention) that set out obligations for states in respect to defining international counter terrorist offences. These 'universal treaties adopted by the UN have been the means by which international law defines terrorism.' They also enable the prosecution of individuals suspected of such offences as well as their extradition upon request.

The international community, as represented by the UN, has taken a reductionist approach to combatting terrorism, thus avoiding a greater debate about the multitude of political interests in its definition. Reductionism in this case means making regulations reducible to a set of legal instruments. This approach necessarily rejects the notion that terrorism, in and of itself, can be regulated from the standpoint of a centralised definition. The UN relies on the participation of all states to implement their antiterrorism conventions. This means that the provisions, the legally binding clauses of the conventions, are not exclusive, but complementary to those of national law. If a country already has its own laws in place that deal with terrorism, these laws have to be negotiated with the UN conventions if necessary, and different countries have different experiences with terrorism. Aust, Anthony. *Handbook of international law* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) p.284. Abi-Saab, Georges 'The Proper Role of International Law in Combating Terrorism', Bianchi, Andrea e.d. (2004), *Enforcing international law norms against terrorism* (Oxford: Hart) p.xxii.

84 Schmitt, 1932.

85 Schmitt used the term *Gestaltung* to emphasise that the construction of the enemy idea is a constituting process. The government constitutes its own agenda throughout the ongoing process of constituting an of enemy.

regarded as an enemy of the state is to be understood as a symbolic construct, made up of the interests of the ruling elements. He presupposes the concept of the politics of fear, in which an imagined other is introduced that threatens the individual in order to mobilise him/her to political action against said other.

### **Terrorism as ideological fantasy and symptom of the post-political**

Žižek describes how 'our pluralistic and tolerant liberal democracies remain deeply Schmittean: they continue to rely on political *Einbildungskraft* (power of imagination) to provide them with the appropriate figure to render visible the invisible Enemy.'<sup>86</sup> This constituted enemy of the state is what Žižek would call an ideological fantasy. Fantasy is not non-reality but fantasy structures the social reality itself, by providing a narrative that explains the contradictions of the symbolic in terms of the subjects' desire. Ideology is thus something that is practiced rather than imposed on subjects. One of Žižek's main works is the book titled *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in which he explains how ideology functions as a place that is constituted by, while at the same time constituting subjects, by their striving for this sublime object.

According to Žižek, ideology works by positing the objects of enjoyment for its subjects, points of identification, and providing a freedom to enjoy them. These objects of enjoyment are what Žižek calls sublime objects. Immanuel Kant defined in *The Critique of Judgment* the sublime (*das Erhabene*) as a mixed experience that subjects have of something that makes them feel exalted, fearful and joyous all at the same time. When encountering the sublime, subjects experience a harmony of reason and imagination – the sublime is what evokes passion. The subject assumes that he/she shares this experience of this object with all other subjects.

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<sup>86</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Are We in a War? Do We Have an Enemy?: Love Thy Neighbour', *London Review of Books*, LRB, (23 May 2002c). [Web. 10 August 2014] <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n10/slavoj-Žižek/are-we-in-a-war-do-we-have-an-enemy>> [last access 4 September 2014]

Žižek adds to this idea the Lacanian concept of enjoyment and the Freudian concept of the drives, which both aim at making up for the lack of castration, the experience of alienation in the symbolic. The impulse to seek enjoyment, the pleasure principle, is one of the powerful drives that shape our behaviour – all the time looking for a thing, a sublime object, which Lacan calls *object a*. Since people are never able to fill the gap of castration, they create a narrative that explains to them why this is not happening – a fantasy that explains the gaps in the symbolic structure that shapes their lives. However, Žižek says that ‘when we enjoy we never do it spontaneously, we always follow a certain injunction’,<sup>87</sup> the super ego.

For Žižek the same principle applies to regimes who provide the laws that provide the limitations of enjoyment. However, Žižek argues that, in order to be effective, a regime’s explicit laws must also harbour and conceal a way in which people can still enjoy. This is done, as described by Matthew Sharpe, by implicating ‘subjects in a guilty enjoyment in repression itself, which Žižek likens to the “pleasureinpain” associated with the experience of Kant’s sublime.’<sup>88</sup> Žižek also uses the term *jouissance*, the French term for a particular excessive sense of enjoyment and pleasure, to describe this idea. The written and unwritten laws of a society, which act as super ego, organise people’s enjoyment (and, if they experience too much enjoyment, reign in their *jouissance*) through ideological fantasies that address the subjects’ fears of having their enjoyment taken away by an imagined other.

The political climate of post-politics is such that the state, reduced to a technocratic machine requiring fuel to keep it running, needs constant legitimisation. It achieves this by giving the impression of ‘doing something’ to address the immediate subjective lack expressed by individuals, their individual fears from the unknown that is expressed through a heightened fear from harm from the other. Without an underlying political structure, the post-

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87 Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso Books, 1991) p.9.

88 Matthew Sharpe, ‘Slavoj Žižek’ *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2005) <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/Žižek/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

political state needs – according to Žižek – ‘constant “spontaneous” ideological supplement(s) to post-political administration, as its “pseudo-concretization”, its translation into a form that can appeal to individuals’ immediate experience.’<sup>89</sup> This spontaneous ideological supplement is the way terrorism has been defined for the post political – as an ideological fantasy in the form of the concept of ‘new’ terrorism.

Terrorism has changed qualitatively in the past twenty years. What were once regarded by governments as the main terrorist groups that dominated past national conflicts such as the Red Army Faction (RAF), the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) have abandoned violence; in 1993 the PLO recognised Israel and renounced the use of terrorism. In 1994 the IRA called a permanent ceasefire. And in April 1998, the RAF declared its campaign to be over, announcing that ‘the urban guerrilla in the form of the RAF is now history.’<sup>90</sup> The main reason why these groups gave up organising themselves according to their aim was that with the end of the Cold War, the political framework that ‘had largely organised world affairs (and shaped identities) – both internationally and domestically’,<sup>91</sup> including the national interests of these terrorists groups, ended.

With the decline of political frames of reference for many terrorists groups came a decline in terrorist acts.<sup>92</sup> However, terrorism itself did not

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89 Slavoj Žižek, ‘Afterword. With Defenders Like These, Who Needs Attackers?’, Bowman, Paul, and Richard Stamp, (eds.) *The Truth of Žižek* (London: Continuum International PublishingGroup, 2007d) p.250

90 RAF, ‘Auflösungserklärung Rote Armee Fraktion’ (März 1998) <<http://www.rafinfo.de/archiv/raf/raf-20-4-98.php>> [last access 4 September 2014]

91 Bill Durodié, ‘Terrorism: a homegrown fear’, *Spiked* (11 September 2013) <[http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/terrorised\\_by\\_a\\_lack\\_of\\_meaning/14019](http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/terrorised_by_a_lack_of_meaning/14019)> [last access 4 September 2014]

92 For example, as noted by The Federation of American Scientists (FAS), ‘The number of international terrorist incidents in the Middle East dropped sharply, from 193 in 1989 to 63 in 1990.’ Worldwide, terrorist acts reached their recent low point in the years 1996–98, when the number of attacks was about 300. in: FAS, Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1990 Middle East Overview <[http://fas.org/irp/threat/terror\\_90/mideast.html](http://fas.org/irp/threat/terror_90/mideast.html)> [last access 4 September 2014], Matthew J. Morgan, ‘The origins of the new terrorism’, *125th Military Intelligence Battalion, Schofield Barracks* (2004) <<http://>



disappear but at the same time could also not be situated conveniently in a political framework. Instead, the terrorist acts of the 1990s and after, such as the Oklahoma City bombing and the Tokyo subway sarin attack, both in 1995, as well as the attacks on the Twin Towers in 1993 and 2001, were interpreted as having been, as Matthew Morgan writes, 'dominated by religious overtones.'<sup>93</sup> (Also the politics of Hamas, which filled the political vacuum left by the politically irrelevant PLO, legitimises itself on the grounds of traditionalist, religious values.)

Morgan continues, 'Today's terrorists increasingly look at their acts of death and destruction as sacramental or transcendental on a spiritual or eschatological level.'<sup>94</sup> For many, such as Morgan and terrorism researcher Walter Laqueur,<sup>95</sup> this is a sign that a new breed of terrorists have emerged who seem to have different agendas and means than previous generations.

Furedi, Poynting and Whyte describe a movement to redefine terrorism within world politics that attempts to accommodate so-called 'New' terrorism. This attempt at redefinition is built around what they term the 'new terrorism thesis'.<sup>96</sup> What is stated in this thesis is that the nature of terrorism has changed fundamentally. For example, Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan clearly differentiate between 'New' and 'Old' terrorism;<sup>97</sup> In opposition to 'Old' terrorism',<sup>98</sup> 'New' terrorists are described as 'nihilistic, inspired by fanatical

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[//strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/articles/04spring/morgan.pdf](http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/articles/04spring/morgan.pdf) [last access 4 September 2014]

93 Matthew Morgan J., 'The Origins of the New Terrorism', *Parameters* (the Journal of the U.S. Army War College), 34: 1 (Spring 2004), pp.29–43, p.32.

94 *ibid.*

95 Laqueur has a whole book dedicated to this idea. Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

96 Frank Furedi, *Invitation to Terror: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007) p.26.

Scott Poynting and David Whyte, 'Counter-terrorism as counterinsurgency in the UK 'war on terror'', *Counter-Terrorism and State Political Violence: The 'war on Terror' as Terror* (2012) pp.1–12. p.5.

97 Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*, 3rd edn (Oxford: University Press, 2009). p.526.

98 The 'Old' terrorism had its high point in the 1960s and 70s, whereas today's 'New' terrorism started with the first bombings on the Twin Towers in 1993 and was affirmed, as a new

beliefs and ... They rarely set out aims that appear remotely attainable, they give no warnings, they do not engage in bargaining, they find compromise solutions to problems unappealing; they are willing and even eager to carry out the mass slaughter of non-combatants; and they frequently do not even claim responsibility for their deeds.<sup>99</sup> The impression left by the accounts of 'New' terrorism is that it is unknowable and thus unpredictable, altogether more dangerous than 'Old' terrorism. These are two important new dimensions to the new terrorism thesis.

In contrast to 'Old' terrorism, new terrorism brings with it an understanding of an enemy that is not only more apocalyptic and dangerous, but also less susceptible to traditional forms of control. 'This particular conceptualisation of new terrorist 'groups' as ideologically (as opposed to politically) driven organisations is supplemented with an assumption that they are beyond the boundaries of negotiation or reasoning.'<sup>100</sup> There is a bias towards the supposedly inherent non-negotiability of 'New' terrorism that goes hand in hand with the idea that it is essentially unknowable. The combination of non-negotiability and unknowability emerges as the most fundamental of the characteristics of the 'New' terrorism. Poynting and Whyte describe how the 'new terrorism thesis' has its 'origins in the counter-terror strategies in Latin America in the late 1980s/ early 1990s, supported by a

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phenomenon, by the attacks on 9/11. 'Old' terrorists were typically 'motivated by ideology rather than by ethnic or cultural identity ... they usually had aims that were rationally defensible; and they pursued such aims with some sense of proportionality, ..., their operations tended to focus on, limited geographical areas. In short they wanted many people watching rather than many people dead.' McLean and McMillan, 2009, p.526. Here, one must argue that while spectacle has always been a major characteristic of all terrorism, it is especially so today. *The Historical Dictionary of Terrorism* even calls terrorism 'a form of 'armed propaganda', a potent way not only to communicate but also to send a message in an age dominated by the mass media.' The aim is to create a projection of power and influence that belies the terrorists' actual military might. Anderson, Sean and Sloan, Stephen (2002) *Historical dictionary of terrorism* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.; Lanham, Md.; London: Scarecrow Press) p.3.

99 Anderson and Sloan, 2009, p.3.

100 Burnett, Jonny and Whyte, Dave, 'Embedded expertise and the new terrorism', *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media*, (2003) 1(4), 1–18.

number of key academic experts who are embedded in the US and British military establishment.<sup>101</sup>

The way in which contemporary terrorism is experienced, derives its terrorising quality from a feeling of unpredictability. It is experienced as having no recognisable political patterns, combined with an assumption of knowledge on the side of the terrorist of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) (such as nuclear and chemical devices), apparently making it more dangerous than previous forms of terrorism. This trend can be seen in headlines that treat terrorists' fantasies as a legitimate threat; such as the headline about Canadian terror suspect Ahmed Abassi, whose megalomaniacal idea it was to 'contaminate the air or water with bacteria in order to kill up to 100,000 people.'<sup>102</sup>

The collapse of the old political framework has created a shift in the collective ability to interpret what terrorism means. The perceived change that apparently informs today's terrorists' agenda is understood as unintelligible as well as unpredictable. This is expressed by a public fear of how young men are subjected to radicalisation by an outside force.

The 'war on terror' in particular, as an official statement directed at the enemy, indicates a shift in the understanding of terrorism and the state's relation to its citizens. Through creating a pre-emptive worldwide war on a contested concept, terrorism has become treated as a crime of conspiracy rather than deed, where the crime lies with the incitement of the self to acts of terrorism, rather than the radicalisation and recruitment of others. One token of this re-conceptualisation of terrorism as a corruption of the self is the idea of self-radicalisation; the notion that people can be corrupted by watching online terrorist propaganda and are seduced into becoming 'lone-wolf

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<sup>101</sup> Poynting, Scott, and Whyte, David, 'Counter-terrorism as counterinsurgency in the UK 'war on terror', *Counter-Terrorism and State Political Violence: The 'war on Terror' as Terror* (2012): 12. p.5.

<sup>102</sup> CTV News May 9, 2013 <http://www.ctvnews.ca/world/terror-suspect-discussed-killing-up-to-100-000-with-bacteria-documents-1.1274380>

terrorists' known by the FBI as HGVEs: homegrown violent extremists.<sup>103</sup> (Examples range from Timothy McVeigh and Anders Breivik to Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev.) These terrorists are regarded as impressionable individuals threatened by what can be seen as 'a kind of psychological virus that can afflict the vulnerable and those suffering from psychological deficits.'<sup>104</sup> The terror of the 'lone-wolf' has come to stand for the fear of the unknown/other generated within society which has lost the provisions to bind its subjects together in a meaningful way.

Furedi describes how the idea of radicalisation, as a process that comes from the outside, imposing itself on the impressionable minds of young men is misguided. Rather it is young peoples' disillusionment with post-modern society, combined with the limitations of the post-political that limits subjects to define themselves solely through cultural narratives, that seems to fuel their turn to the radicalism of the internet. As Furedi sums up,

Many young people, who find it difficult to gain meaning from their experience in Western society, react by rejecting Western society. Their Muslim peers sometimes go a step further and express their alienation through the medium of a jihadist outlook. The attraction of this outlook is that it provides a coherent and edgy identity. It offers the cultural resources for the constitution of an Islamic youth subculture.<sup>105</sup>

The 2005 London bombers, says Bill Durodié, provide a good example of how a coherent explanation for their horrific actions eluded the public imagination.<sup>106</sup> Attempts to explain this act through political or psychological frameworks did not hold up to close analysis. The bombers had no proven links to a terrorist network, nor were they an openly persecuted minority. They

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103 FBI podcast, Homegrown Violent Extremism: 02/15/2013 <http://www.fbi.gov/news/podcasts/thisweek/homegrown-violent-extremism.mp3>

104 Frank Furedi, 'Who's afraid of the big bad 'lone wolf'? *Spiked* <<http://www.spiked-online.com/site/article/12138/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

105 Frank Furedi, 'Jihad cool: an Islamist version of Occupy' *Spiked* 1 July 2014 <[http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/jihad-cool-an-islamist-version-of-occupy/15298#.U9tMeVb\\_w\\_s](http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/jihad-cool-an-islamist-version-of-occupy/15298#.U9tMeVb_w_s)> [last access 4 September 2014]

106 Bill Durodié, 'Fear and Terror in a Post-Political Age', *Government and Opposition* (2007), 42: pp.427–450. p.434.

did not attack a governmental institution or politicians – instead they chose to kill indiscriminately 52 civilians. As Malik writes, ‘The London bombers – like those in Madrid, Bali, and New York before them – issued no warnings, made no demands, left no list of grievances.’<sup>107</sup> (The alleged leader of the London bombings Mohammad Sidique Khan, proclaims in his martyrdom video a vague and confused stance towards an enemy he is unable to articulate.)<sup>108</sup>

Durodié writes how as explanations, the bombers’ presumed influences, from foreign mullahs to supposed social backgrounds, always fall short under closer scrutiny.<sup>109</sup> These models fail to address the overall destabilisation in the post-political of the traditional social network. Rather, these quasi-explanations contributed to the public conceptualisation of contemporary terrorism as coming from outside society. Instead, the terrorist should be regarded as what Žižek describes as a symptom of the post-political.

Žižek’s concept of the symptom is not the same as the post-Marxist Althusserian understanding of ‘symptomatic’ that sees the symptom as that which is unsaid by the text, a deterministic hidden depth.<sup>110</sup> Žižek follows Lacan’s understanding of the symptom as one closer to Marx’s ideas. For Žižek, Marx exposed the symptom of capitalist ideology, as he saw ideology not as an imposed mechanism that deliberately hides the true goings on, but is itself conditioned through the material interchanges between subjects.<sup>111</sup> The symptom is then a contradiction within ideology itself.<sup>112</sup> In *The Sublime*

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107 Malik, Kenan, ‘Multiculturalism fans the flames of Islamic extremists’, *The Times* (July 2005) <[http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/times\\_bombings.html](http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/times_bombings.html)> [last access 7 September 2014]

108 BBC News, ‘The Bombers, 7 July Bombings’ (2005) <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/london\\_blasts/investigation/html/bombers.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/london_blasts/investigation/html/bombers.stm)>

109 Durodié, 2007, p.434.

110 Althusser, Louis, and Etienne Balibar. *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster, *London: NLB* 1970 <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1968/reading-capital/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

111 Karl Marx, and Engels, Friedrich *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, 1845–1846. MLWerke <[http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me03/me03\\_009.htm](http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me03/me03_009.htm)> [last access 4 September 2014]

112 For Žižek, Marx exposed the symptom of capitalist ideology. The surplus value that is created in a capitalist society through the exploitation of the worker also creates the symptom of capitalism – the nullification of the notion of freedom of choice within capitalism. Žižek’s

*Object of Ideology*, Žižek demonstrates how Lacan himself insisted that it was Marx who invented the symptom, but it was Žižek's accomplishment to superimpose Marx's concept of surplus value and Lacan's concept of surplus enjoyment i.e. *Jouissance*, 'The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never 'just life': humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things'.<sup>113</sup> The enjoyment that the subject derives from searching for the thing (the unobtainable object of desire that is believed to fill the gap) constantly produces an enjoyment surplus – *jouissance*.<sup>114</sup>

The excessive pleasure of *jouissance* that is experienced is then organised in the symbolic, with the help of fantasy, into a new kind of signifier. This new signifier is then called a symptom – a signpost of the real within the symbolic.<sup>115</sup>

On the one hand, the symptom is the source of one's *jouissance*, and is constitutive of the subject within the symbolic. On the other hand, the symptom is something from which one suffers, something that prevents one from attaining real satisfaction. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek gives an example of such a symptom in the form of the Alien in Ridley Scott's film *Alien* (1979), 'it threatens them (the crew of the Nostromo) and at the same time constitutes them as a closed group'.<sup>116</sup>

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idea is that the way surplus value perpetuates the capitalist system is the same way *jouissance* perpetuates the symbolic order that controls peoples' needs.

<sup>113</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006a) p.65.

<sup>114</sup> *Jouissance* is the contradiction in what is understood to be pleasurable. 'The real par excellence is *jouissance*', says Žižek. *Jouissance* is that which goes beyond mere pleasure to the point when enjoyment becomes excessive or even painful. Pleasure acts as a relief of tension, whereas *jouissance* heightens tension. It could be translated as 'obscene enjoyment'. Žižek, 1989a, p.164.

<sup>115</sup> To distinguish the idea of a medical symptom from the psychoanalytic one, Žižek often uses Lacan's word for symptom – *sinthome* – stressing, the constitutive nature of his understanding of the symptom. When people usually talk about a symptom, 'the implication is that we should not cure only the symptom, but attack its causes directly. The *sinthome*, in contrast, is not a 'mere symptom', but that which holds together the 'thing itself'. Žižek, 1999a, p.176.

<sup>116</sup> Žižek, 1989a, p.79.

Considering the symptom as the element that embodies the contradictions of ideology, in Durodié's analysis the London bombers can be interpreted as symptom of the post-political; their acts were a means to subjectivise themselves in a society that was unable to provide a strong symbolic framework. He describes how the terrorists' acts should be regarded as a senseless acting out:

The real truth, then, about the London bombings may be that they were largely pointless and meaningless. This would suggest a problem entirely opposed to that presented by politicians and officials, media and other commentators alike. The bombers were fantasists – want-to-be terrorists – searching for an identity and a meaning to their lives. They hoped to find it in a global cause that was not their own, but that appeared to give expression to their nihilistic sense of grievance. Islam was their motif, not their motive.<sup>117</sup>

Durodié's reading of the terrorists' motives as a product of a society that fails to provide its subjects with a common meaning, is paralleled by Žižek's argument that, in the post-political, the search for identity within a universal framework, especially for those who are already considered other, is foreclosed.<sup>118</sup>

Durodié's argument is that terrorism has become a shortcut for people who feel excluded from society yet are unable to define themselves outside it. Rather than a means that tries to achieve concrete political change, terrorism has become the crassest form of acting out, against the hegemony of the post-political. As described by Žižek as early as 1994,<sup>119</sup> 'the true target of 'terrorist' acting's out is the implicit violence that sustains the very neutral, non-violent frame.'<sup>120</sup> Acting out is a term used by Lacan which he takes from the German word *agieren*, from *agens* meaning a propelling force. *Agieren* was first used by

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<sup>117</sup> Durodié, 2007, p.429.

<sup>118</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.199.

<sup>119</sup> Žižek wrote this at a time before he spoke of the contemporary political framework as post-politics.

<sup>120</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso Books, 2005a) p.204.

Freud in a psychoanalytical context to mean ‘the enactment rather than recollection of past events.’<sup>121</sup> In Lacan’s definition acting out describes the same phenomenon of a discharge by means of action rather than verbalisation, but also includes the dimension that this acting out is a failure of a subjectivisation. This is more closely looked at in the chapter on *Four Lions*. Acting out is a frustrated way of addressing the Other who has become ‘deaf’ to the subject’s ‘words’.<sup>122</sup> The thrust of Durodié’s as well as Žižek’s arguments can thus be expressed thus: Terrorism in the post-political can be understood, not as a political gesture but, more generally as a symptom of a failure for people to become political subjects.

This idea is also expressed by Furedi, who claims that the only thing new about ‘New’ terrorism is the perception that it’s any more sophisticated or effective than it used to be.<sup>123</sup> Rather, the notion of a ‘New’ terrorism becomes ‘a self-fulfilling prophecy’. He says, ‘The existence of a physical threat of terrorism cannot be denied, but the idea that terrorism represents an existential threat is the product of society’s inability to give meaning to human experience. It is a symptom of a society that has lost its way and lacks the intellectual and moral resources to deal with the routine threats that it faces.’<sup>124</sup>

Instead of a shift in the quality of terrorism there is a shift in the perception of terrorism – this new perception of terrorism becomes the expression of the post-political. It is a shift that finds its expression, more often than not, on the cinema screen.

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121 Colman, Andrew M. "acting out." Oxford Reference. 2009. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Date of access 19 Jul. 2014, <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199534067.001.0001/acref-9780199534067-e-107>> [last access 4 September 2014].

122 Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996) p.2–4.

123 Furedi, 2007, p.42.

124 *ibid.* p.xvi.



### The post-political uses film to contextualise itself

This reinvention of terrorism in the post-political has led to culturally specific re-imaginings of terrorism in different national cinemas. Filmmakers have given on-screen artistic form to the new paradigms of the post-political not merely through technical methods, such as narrative, mise-en-scène and characterisation, but also through a sense that terrorism speaks of our time in a profound way.

Depictions of terrorism in cinema as an area of research has grown enormously in the last ten years. For the most part this new research specialises in looking at the role of terrorism within certain national cinemas. Apart from many contributions to the role of the terrorist in Hollywood films, there are new studies of terrorism in Asian especially Indian films,<sup>125</sup> Middle Eastern cinemas<sup>126</sup> and an ongoing interest in terrorism in diverse European cinemas.<sup>127</sup> This is hardly surprising, since the history of terrorism is often defined by national or cultural movements (e.g. the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain and France). Moreover, many national cinemas have turned the depiction of their perspective on national terrorism into a way of exploring national identity and cultural history. The fascination with terrorism has long been the source for political drama of many national cinemas, including the UK and Germany, who see their own

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125 My selection of recommended writings on terrorism in contemporary Indian/Tamil cinema: Bernd Zywiets, 'Terrorismus in Bollywood. Die Verarbeitung ethno-religiöser und politischer Gewalt im populären Hindi-Film', Susanne Marschall, (ed.), *Indiens Kinokulturen. Geschichte – Dramaturgie – Ästhetik* (Schüren Verlag GmbH, 2008) pp.241–265.

126 Recent writings on terrorism in Middle Eastern cinema: Nouri Gana, 'Reel Violence: Paradise Now and the Collapse of the Spectacle', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28,1 (2008), pp.20–37.

127 Writings on terrorism in European cinema: e.g Italian cinema: Giancarlo Lombardi, 'Screening Terror in Italian Cinema', Pierpaolo Antonello and Alan O'Leary, (ed.), *Imagining Terrorism: The Rhetoric And Representation Of Political Violence In Italy 1969–2009* (London: Legenda, 2009) pp.88–100. This is an example of new writings on new forms of terrorism: Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, 'Eco-Terrorism in Film: Pale Rider and the Revenge Cycle', *Dies.: Ecology and popular Film: Cinema on the Edge*. Albany: SUNY press, 2009, (SUNY Series, Horizons of Cinema.), pp.127–141.

political and ideological dilemmas summed up and played out in the terrorist's struggle.

This thesis examines how the representation of terrorism can be understood as post-political vision, as expressed in film, that speaks of the duality of film in the post-political and the post-political in film. The aesthetics of the post-political, the way the post-political is put on screen, is determined by way national cinemas approach the symptoms of the post-political, especially the symptom of terrorism. Film as such, in its artistic translation, is an experience of the post-political, rather than an index of it. The aim is to illustrate how the post-political generates its own aesthetics and ways of seeing, and that these qualities, in their contradictions and limitations, point to artistic and social possibilities outside post-politics.

The cinemas of Germany, the USA and the UK are chosen as representative of Western nations in which the post-political has become the default of societal operations, and where this mindset is constantly translated into local specific histories of terrorism. This thesis investigates specific films from these countries that demonstrate a discernible and engaging filmic narrativisation of the post-political in their depiction of terrorism. To highlight the importance of how the post-political focuses on its own narrativisation, in the following analysis, one of the two films from each national cinema investigated is set before the age of post-politics, under the conditions of so called 'Old' terrorism. The re-imagining of past terrorism (terrorism seen as a historic event that shaped each nation's history) through the lens of post-politics gives a necessary insight into the need for a narrativisation of the post-political through a re-narrativisation of history.

In order to identify the richest, most potentially meaningful film texts, a great number were viewed and considered as potential candidates for this case study. Each country provided an extensive range of films dealing with terrorism.

Many of these films are referred to throughout the thesis as examples. However, during the research process six films stood out in particular as

providing the most startling insight into the workings of the post-political in national cinemas. The films chosen as representative for each country are *Munich* and *Zero Dark Thirty* for Hollywood cinema, *Hunger* and *Four Lions* for British cinema and *The Baader Meinhof Complex* and *Die Kommenden Tage* for German Cinema.

### Chapter outline

This analysis starts with an investigation of post-politics in Hollywood cinema. Chapter 1.1. looks at how, in *Munich*, the concept of empathy is used by director Steven Spielberg to create an understanding for his characters. The idea of empathy as a post-political device, not only in film but also as a fundamental aspect of post-political morality, is established. The film's narrative, as a metaphor for the 'war on terror,' is investigated in terms of Spielberg's reliance on empathy as a cinematic device and moral guideline. Through the creation of spectatorial alignment with the protagonist Spielberg heightens the empathy for the characters' loss of home.

Chapter 1.2., as part of an investigation of how post-politics is presented in Hollywood cinema, analyses the film *Zero Dark Thirty*. From one perspective the film is indicative of a broader political sentiment and attempt at meaning making, and is bound up with the US elites' attempt to manufacture direction and legitimacy after a period of considerable upheaval. After investigating how the film can be read in the context of its objectives (that is to produce a verisimilitudinous account of the events) the chapter describes how Žižek and Shaviro read *Zero Dark Thirty* in terms of the post-political. Both are concerned with the film's relationship to reality, not in and of itself but as a framing of contemporary post-politics. For Žižek the film constitutes the post-political whereas for Shaviro, it maps it. The two readings approach the film as ideology first and cinema second. This chapter undertakes another reading of the film that reveals the absurdity and camp within 'the war on terror', through engaging with it as a film in the first instance. Looking at and reading the film in terms of Susan Sontag's concept of

camp exposes its aesthetic as an aesthetic with failings bound to the ideological failings of the 'war on terror'. In particular, it is the camp characteristic of a failed seriousness that makes the film a marker of the post-political.

The second part of the analysis examines how in two examples of British cinema, the post-political is represented in terms of a political act. Chapter 2.1. argues that the film *Hunger* which re-imagines the IRA hunger strike at the H-Blocks prison in Ireland, in particular that of the Irish republican Bobby Sands, visualises the possibility of a true act as described by Žižek. The chapter starts with a description of Žižek's concept of the true act in order to illustrate why the radicalism of *Hunger*, goes further than just a re-imagining of the protests at the Maze prison. The chapter is an analysis of how the act is reproduced in the narrative of *Hunger* and how it is possible for the film to create a sympathetic context for the terrorist mindset by evoking an artistic experience of a political act. This makes the content of the film relevant beyond the historical limits of a defused conflict.

Chapter 2.2. proposes that the act has become impossible in the post-political. This chapter analyses how the film *Four Lions* shows its characters trapped in a social landscape, shaped by policies informed by a top down idea of multiculturalism, and are compelled to act out their alienation. The chapter starts by investigating how director Chris Morris creates a comedy that shows up the metaphysical gaps in the post-political by creating access to a shared humanity with the characters.

The third part of the analysis investigates the ways in which post-politics has shaped German cinema, especially how the concept of the RAF mythos, the particularly German idea of the terrorism of the 70s and 80s contextualised in the cultural landscape, plays a major part in its post-political landscape.

Chapter 3.1. looks at the film *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, and its stated aim to demystify the different aspects of the RAF mythos. The chapter will explore the context of the RAF mythos and the role it plays in German culture. By using the dramaturgy of a docudrama combined with the aesthetics

of a feature film, the film demonstrates a particular narrative process, which Žižek would describe as a postmodern filling in of the gaps. The gap in question is between subjective experience and material reality, which is crucial for Žižek's concept of 'touching the real' (the moment when the symbolic dysfunctions itself through its own negation.) This way, the film's formal aspects fill the gaps that lie between familiar, established images and concepts of the RAF mythos, with a subjectivised experience of the historical events, achieved through the film's aesthetic. In this way, the film recreates the RAF mythos in terms of the post-political. The final chapter 3.2. analyses how the film *Die Kommenden Tage* forgoes re-mythologizing of the RAF mythos and instead takes it at face value, incorporating it more or less straightforwardly into its narrative. Žižek's description, of how in postmodern narratives myth is normalised into reality, is explored in order to investigate in the following part how different aspects of the RAF mythos, especially its antiauthoritarian notions, are taken into the narrative of the film. Finally the film's sci-fi aesthetic is analysed in order to illustrate how the mythos of impending economical and environmental apocalypse, perpetuated by a politics of fear, are taken as read – and ultimately normalised – by the film.

## Part I

### Post-politics in Hollywood cinema

This first part of the analysis investigates how Hollywood films show the 'war on terror' in terms of the post-political, showing how in the films *Munich* and *Zero Dark Thirty* their attempt at narrativising the events results in specific film forms.

Furedi describes how contemporary society lacks an intellectual framework for confronting the fear of terrorism. Especially 'Western political elites lack a web of meaning through which they can make sense of the threat of terrorism.'<sup>128</sup> As Durodié writes, 'Those fears are in large measure an expression of social isolation and mistrust, combined with an absence of direction and a crisis of confidence amongst the elite.'<sup>129</sup> The failure to conceptualise the issues at stake is demonstrated by the absence of consensus around even the words to be used in order to describe the meaning of the present conflict and enemy. This is evident, as Furedi point out, when it comes to describing who the enemy is, e.g. the Homeland Security Council (HSC) tries to construct the terrorist as enemy through the term of Universal Adversary (UA),<sup>130</sup> a term so pliable that it allows for any interpretation.

What can be seen as failure of conceptualisation by Furedi (the forming of the idea), Jack Holland describes as a failure of narration (the expression of this idea). He describes how after 9/11 'Politicians, practitioners and media commentators initially struggled to place frameworks of intelligibility over the events. ... Americans lacked a language to describe and regulate the meaning of terrorism at home.'<sup>131</sup> The terrorism of the post-political becomes an

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<sup>128</sup> Furedi, 2007, p.xiv.

<sup>129</sup> Durodié, 2007, p.448.

<sup>130</sup> Department of Homeland Security, 'A Review of the Top Officials', 3 Exercise (November 2005) <[http://www.oig.dhs.gov/assets/Mgmt/OIG\\_06-07\\_Nov05.pdf](http://www.oig.dhs.gov/assets/Mgmt/OIG_06-07_Nov05.pdf)> [last access 7 September 2014]

<sup>131</sup> Jack Holland, 'Screening Terror on the West Wing', in Philip Hammond,. (ed.) *Screens of Terror: Representations of War and Terrorism in Film and Television since 9/11* (Bury:

expression of the loss of the political dimension not only in terms of understanding this very loss but also in expressing it.

Considering this impasse in mapping terrorism in the post-political through traditional means, it seems to almost suggest itself that the inability to describe contemporary terrorism (especially after 9/11) through the traditional frameworks of terrorism, created a platform for a way of understanding that lies in the realm of the imaginative. Furedi points to how Thomas Friedman in the *New York Times* talks about the way terrorism and counterterrorism is understood in terms of ‘imagining evil’ and dreaming up nightmare scenarios, thus ‘encouraging a turn toward speculation and fantasy.’<sup>132</sup> He also describes how directly after 9/11 the White House turned to Hollywood in order to ‘share with the entertainment community the themes that are being communicated here and abroad: tolerance, courage, patriotism.’<sup>133</sup> The Hollywood dream machine became a way of articulating every fantastic scenario imaginable in the same way that the UA became the blank canvas on which to project every enemy imaginable. The ‘war on terror’ especially is imagined through fear of the figure of the irrational, often religious or ideological (if not both) fanatic.

Even before 9/11 the impact of the emergence of terrorism in Hollywood cinema, as an expression of the worldwide downfall of the communist regimes, is evident on screen. From the late 1980s through to the 1990s, Hollywood produced eleven action movies that were constructed around the theme of international terrorism which were also in their annual top 50 at the box office, most notably the *Die Hard* franchise.<sup>134</sup> The depiction of international terrorism in these films would follow a classic Hollywood narrative of a hero

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Abramis, 2011) online version <<http://drjackholland.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/jack-holland-west-wing-chapter-screens-of-terror.pdf>> [7 September 2014] p.3.

<sup>132</sup> Furedi, 2007, p.xvi.

<sup>133</sup> BBC News, Bush adviser meets Hollywood execs (12 November 2001) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1651173.stm>> [last access 7 September 2014]

<sup>134</sup> Helena Vanhala, *The Depiction of Terrorists in Blockbuster Hollywood Films, 1980–2001: An Analytical Study* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2011) p.6 -7.

fighting a stereotyped villain and would serve as an exploration and exploitation of the real life conflicts of the political vacuum the downfall of the Soviet Bloc had created. For example, the Gruber brothers in the 1st and 3rd instalment of the *Die Hard* films are a former West German left wing terrorist/East-German soldier respectively, who are trying to make a life for themselves in a time when their old ideology has lost its meaning.

By committing coordinated suicide attacks, reminiscent of a Hollywood movie, nineteen young Muslims changed the way that America would construct terrorism in the cinema. Many saw in the 9/11 attacks a stunning recreation of life intimating art – the late director Robert Altman spoke of a direct link between Hollywood being directly responsible for the attacks by creating the fantasy in the first place, ‘The movies set the pattern, and the people have copied the movies [...]. Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that [the attack on the World Trade Center] unless they’d seen it in a movie ... I just believe we created this atmosphere and taught them how to do it.’<sup>135</sup>

The profound impact of the real attacks on the cultural narrative of terrorism showed itself in the aftermath as it seems to render any previous showings of terrorism in Hollywood obsolete. The collective shock experienced in America lead to an eerie code of silence when it came to depicting terrorism in the movies. Footage of the Twin Towers became a subject of cultural sensitivity and at least forty-five films that were in production in 2001 were either cancelled, postponed or heavily edited,<sup>136</sup> among them *Collateral Damage* (2002) and later box office hits such as *Zoolander* (2001) and *Spider-Man* (2002). It took five years until Hollywood tackled the attacks on the World Trade Centre head on with Paul Greengrass’s film *United 93* and Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center*, both released in 2006.

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<sup>135</sup> BBC News, ‘Hollywood inspired US attacks’, (17 October 2001), <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1604151.stm>> [last access 7 September 2014]

<sup>136</sup> CNN Entertainment, ‘Uncle Sam wants Hollywood’, (09 November 2001), <[http://articles.cnn.com/2001-11-09/entertainment/hollywood.war\\_1\\_war-effort-film-industry-vietnam-movies/2?\\_s=PM:SHOWBIZ](http://articles.cnn.com/2001-11-09/entertainment/hollywood.war_1_war-effort-film-industry-vietnam-movies/2?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ)> [last access Monday, 17 October 2011]



By then, the cinematic landscape had changed in terms of depicting not only the terrorist enemy but also the Western role in world politics – it now reflected an America that is entangled in an identity crisis in which, according to Philip Hammond, the ‘most common overall theme in Hollywood’s version of contemporary war is that we are all victims.’<sup>137</sup>

In the following chapter this failure to narrate is explicit in *Munich* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, and the films’ respective artistic expression of this failure is described. In *Munich* the terrorism is experienced and expressed through the notion of empathy as a moral imperative of intersubjectivity that is found in the post-political. In *Zero Dark Thirty* the terrorism is experienced and expressed through a camp aesthetic that speaks of how ideology in the film is enjoyed and stylised to excess.

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<sup>137</sup> Philip Hammond, ‘Where did all the goodies and baddies go?’, *Spiked* (7 September 2011) <[http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/11058#.U7GaDhb\\_w\\_s](http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/11058#.U7GaDhb_w_s)> [last access 7 September 2014]

## Chapter I.I

### *Munich*: empathy as a cultural expression of the post-political

#### Introduction

This chapter draws out the preoccupation with empathy that underpins Spielberg's *Munich*'s post-political interpretation of terrorism.

Jodi Dean describes how American democracy today is shaped by what she calls the 'fantasy of politics without politics' where 'everyone and everything is included, respected, valued, entitled; no one is made to feel uncomfortable; everyone is heard and seen and recognised and has a place at the table.'<sup>1</sup> She mentions how Barack Obama's frequent referrals to empathy as a central part of his value system, is consistent with this, "'politics" of unity, empathy, and understanding.'<sup>2</sup> Obama insists that empathy is, 'at the heart of [his] moral code,<sup>3</sup> and his aim is to talk less about the 'federal deficit'... 'But,' he explains, 'I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit'.<sup>4</sup> Some writers go even further, such as psychologist Douglas LaBier, for whom the American nation suffers from a pathological disorder which he has called 'Lack you Empathy Deficit Disorder, or EDD.'<sup>5</sup> 'We are on the cusp of an epic shift,' writes Jeremy Rifkin in his 2010 book *The Empathic Civilisation*, 'the Age of Reason is being eclipsed by the Age of Empathy.'<sup>6</sup> Rifkin's study puts forward the idea that empathy is a biological ('homo empathicus') as well as a

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<sup>1</sup> Jodi Dean, 'Politics without politics', *Parallax* 15.3 (2009) pp.20–36, p.22.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2007) p.66.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Douglas LaBier, 'America's Continuing Empathy Deficit Disorder,' *Huffington Post* (July 2010) <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/douglas-labier/americas-continuing-empat\\_b\\_637718.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/douglas-labier/americas-continuing-empat_b_637718.html)> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (London: Polity Press, 2010) p.3.

cultural achievement of the twenty-first century, and is in fact the ‘invisible hand’<sup>7</sup> that binds and reproduces society (rather than material forces such as the market). Empathy, it would seem, has become to some degree the moral impulse for people to instigate change, either in themselves or others.

The importance of empathy as a post-political imperative in the USA is especially evident in Spielberg’s work as his films express his personal ethics of empathy. These in turn have been shaped by his own post-political appropriation of his Jewish identity. For example, Spielberg describes how his film *Schindler’s List* (1993) shows ‘that profound change can occur when even one person makes a positive choice.’<sup>8</sup> He says this choice is the result of empathy. He continues, ‘The very idea that the best way to teach empathy is with examples of it, so that maybe someday, kindness will be a natural reflex and not just a random act.’<sup>9</sup> For Spielberg, empathy is the instrument through which one must approach another in order to generate a world of goodwill and consideration. What is interesting is how Spielberg approaches the American response to terrorism, i.e. ‘the war terror’, through the lens of empathy, in what look like the coming together of two expressions, or even symptoms, of the post-political – terrorism and empathy – in the medium of film.

This first part will first explore the concept of empathy through the idea of how empathy, as an aesthetic tool as well as a concept, has become a central object of study in film theory. The second part describes how empathy is never an empty tool but has to be contextualised in the historical development of ideas in the twentieth century, especially that of the post-political.

Even though empathy is a central concept in many branches of critical theory, including phenomenology and cognitivism, specific historically-conditioned instances of empathy have not been the subject of much critical

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7 *ibid.* p.37.

8 ‘Steven Spielberg launches project to teach empathy’, *abc* (27 February 2013)

<<http://abclocal.go.com/kabc/story?id=9010048>> [last access 4 September 2014]

9 *ibid.*

analysis in regard to film theory. Therefore a great amount of this first half of the chapter is dedicated to establishing a critical framework for the concept of empathy.

The third part describes Spielberg's own approach to empathy and how it has been shaped by his own Jewish identity in combination with post-politics. This is done by investigating the moral imperatives, as voiced by Hannah Arendt about Adolf Eichmann, that were the result of Jewish persecution during the Third Reich.

The final part will look at how *Munich* exemplifies this Spielbergian take on empathy and how it is exemplary for the role of empathy as a moral guide of how to express oneself ethically and aesthetically in the post-political.

### **Empathy – a theoretical tool**

Cinema is often regarded as a medium for creating and experiencing empathy; engaging with another through empathy sounds like a natural process, especially when watching a film where becoming emotionally engaged with the characters in the story often is part of the experience. Yet the idea of empathy as a cognitive state, and the term empathy itself, are only about as old as cinema itself.

The term empathy was invented as recently as 1909, by the psychologist Edward B. Titchener, in an attempt to translate the German word *Einfühlung* (*Einfühlungsvermögen*).<sup>10</sup> (Translated: to feel into.)<sup>11</sup> The idea itself originated in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Germany as a constituent of the epistemology of the Enlightenment that considered the dimensions of human understanding; one can only feel one self into something if there is a concept of self. The concept of *Einfühlung* became an important tool in the late nineteenth century in the field of aesthetics by Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps, who used the term to conceptualise the relationship between spectator

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<sup>10</sup> Titchener, Edward Bradford, *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes* (New York: Arno Press, 1973) p.21.

<sup>11</sup> After the term was translated into English it was re-translated into German as the word *Empathie*.

and object as an active process of the imagination. The spectator experiences the work of art through his/her ability to 'feel himself into' the object.<sup>12</sup> The experience of the object of the filmic image is also often thought of in terms of empathy.

The argument put forward in this chapter is that empathy, as a human quality, is conditioned by the very idea of what is a human quality – or, what makes us human? This is a highly contested idea in post-politics, reflected by the different debates around the function of empathy in film theory. Are humans just biological beings with innate structures of how we construct behaviour? Or are human beings themselves structuring their behaviour, and if so to what degree? In short, the concept of empathy is to be understood in terms of human agency.

People have the ability to identify with another object or, in the case of empathy, another subject. (What stands to debate is the matter of degree and what this means.) This quality however, is shaped as much by human history as it is by biology. The duality of human beings, as simultaneously being subject and objects in nature, is the obvious defining feature of human exceptionalism. Humans are at the same time biological beings, subject to the laws of physics, but also, as Malik writes observantly, 'reflexive, rational, social beings, who can design ways of breaking the constraints of biological and physical laws.'<sup>13</sup>

The human ability to surmise the content of other minds is such a construct; it is achieved in the duality of, on the one hand biological, and on the other social and psychological factors, that cannot be seen in isolation from one another. Moreover, as this first part will investigate, this duality cannot be understood as outside its historicity, its particular meaning in time and space – what Hegel called *Weltgeist*, and which Marx understood as the

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<sup>12</sup> For a closer analysis see: Jahoda, Gustav, 'Theodor Lipps and the shift from 'sympathy' to 'empathy', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 41.2 (2005) pp.151–163.

<sup>13</sup> Kenan Malik, 'What Science Can and Cannot Tell Us About Human Nature', Wells, Robin Headlam, and John Joe McFadden, eds. *Human Nature: Fact and Fiction: Literature*,

concept of *Menschheit*<sup>14</sup> (humankind), emphasising the materialist conditions under which people make this history. The concept of imagining the other has taken on several understandings throughout history, (the idea of imaging the other being in itself a historically specific formulation of this), and each time this human quality is associated with the specific meaning of its time. The emergence of empathy, as an expression of intersubjectivity, as will be discussed in this part, can be positioned at a particular moment in time. The concept of empathy entered the language at a time when the idea of intersubjectivity over subjectivity was regarded as the more preferable option.

Empathy, can be seen as a theoretical concept that assumes that there is a way of accessing an object, by projecting one's self, and one's own human experience, into the object. It is an aesthetic tool through which, 'a spectator was said to appreciate a work of art empathically, by projecting his personality into it.'<sup>15</sup> With little other contextual information about an object people can still create a somewhat personal relationship with it. Film, by its nature as a visual object, shows its subject matter, and can thus only provide limited information about it (unlike, for instance, a novel where the character's innermost thoughts are available to the reader). Often filmic, visual information is carefully selected through editing, sound, mise-en-scène, framing etc, and what the audience is permitted to know is chosen to achieve certain emotional affects. (Affect is to be understood as a something that is or is being carried out for emotional gratification. 'In film studies, feeling responses to cinema and films, whether prompted by performances of

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*Science and Human Nature*. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006). p.164–184, online version <<http://www.kenanmalik.com/papers/human.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

14 Karl Marx, 'Die Revolution in China und in Europa.' (20 Mai 1853) [*New-York Daily Tribune*, Nr. 3794 14. Jun3 1853, Leitartikel] *MLWerke* <[http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me09/me09\\_095.htm](http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me09/me09_095.htm)> [last access 4 September 2014]

15 Sarah Richmond, 'empathy', in: *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199264797.001.0001/acref-9780199264797-e-727>> [last access 4 September 2014]

characters' emotional states and/or evoked by cinematic elements such as closeups, music, and mise-en-scene.')<sup>16</sup>

Empathy has been addressed in the context of film since the beginning of the twentieth century. In Soviet Russia, Sergei Eisenstein created montage effects that were intended deliberately to manipulate the audience's empathic engagement in order to create *ecstasy*, or as he called it 'pathos'.<sup>17</sup> In Eisenstein's formulation, 'the spectator is lifted outside of himself (...) to an intense intellectual and emotional identity'.<sup>18</sup> Eisenstein wished for the spectator 'to experience deep emotions and enthusiasm ... a maximum emotional upsurge to send him into ecstasy, and for this he created a 'formula' which will eventually excite the desirable emotions in him (the spectator).'<sup>19</sup> Eisenstein's idea of pathos has more in common with Brecht's idea of *Verfremdung* or estrangement rather than empathy. For both artists the aesthetic processes that their art enabled was based on an emotional identification of the spectator with a material reality outside the artistic object, the play or the film, itself. The audience thus becomes part of a dialectic that involves them being confronted through art with an antithesis, which is always the contradiction of capitalism, that makes the audience gain new insights and personal spiritual enrichment. This process is however dependent that the spectator is outside a totally immersing identification with the object. What is evoked is not as much an *Einfühlen* in the object as a means of personal catharsis, but an emotional recognition of the gaps in the real, the contradictions of capitalist ideology, that are provided through the artistic object.

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<sup>16</sup> Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, 'emotion', in: *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199587261.001.0001/acref-9780199587261-e-0233>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>17</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Problems of Film Direction* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2004) p.6–7.

<sup>18</sup> Ian Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2001) p.40–41.

<sup>19</sup> Eisenstein, 2004, p.6–7.

Around the same time in Germany, Béla Balázs wrote, in his essay *The Visible Man* that film enables the viewer to feel himself into the object in a new way – by joining the moving image. ‘Movement in reality is seen only as a moment, a cross-section of motion. In film, however, we accompany a runner and drive alongside the fastest car.’<sup>20</sup> For Balázs this experience of movement ‘can be the highest expression of an emotional or vital rhythm.’<sup>21</sup> This statement is, according to Adriano D’Aloia, the first description of empathy in regard to film.<sup>22</sup> Balázs describes an *Einfühlen* by the spectator into the events on screen, which to describe as phenomenological would not be precise enough, as Balázs understands the purpose of film as something that transcends the subjective experience of empathy with an object, be it physical or emotional.

In both descriptions – Eisenstein and Balázs’ – empathy has to be seen in the context of the possibility of the subject becoming richer and fuller through identification with something greater, outside itself. For both, film provides for the spectator an emotional understanding of human possibility. Emotional identification becomes one of several artistic means intended not for mere emotional manipulation of the spectator for its own sake, the impulse for a personal catharsis. Eisenstein and Balázs understand the purpose of film as for the viewer to become a new kind of subject: for Eisenstein it is the creation of a revolutionary subject, and for Balázs cinema is an instrument to put human beings centre stage. The empathy evoked by film in the descriptions of Eisenstein and Balázs serves as a means to achieve a synthesis towards a greater truth about the condition of humanity.

However, the idea of *Einfühlung* and emotional identification with what is experienced on screen has changed dramatically since Eisenstein and

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<sup>20</sup> Béla Balázs and Rodney Livingstone, *Béla Balázs’s Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010) p.64.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Adriano D’Aloia, ‘Cinematic Empathy: Spectator Involvement in the Film Experience’, in: Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason, *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2011). pp.91–109, p.96



Balázs, as their ideal of a universally shared vision of humanity has today become a foreclosed possibility.

Contemporary theories on empathy and film are more or less arguments between cognitivists (empathy as active brain work), neurobiologists (empathy as a biological function) and phenomenologists (film as an aesthetic experience of otherness through empathy).<sup>23</sup> In these understandings empathy is seen as an intrinsic human trait that can be studied scientifically.

Recent film theory is also heavily invested in the notion of empathy. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener suggest that empathy theory could be ‘picking up where apparatus theory left off.’<sup>24</sup> They emphasise especially discoveries that have been made within the field of neurobiology, where so called ‘mirror neurons’ are activated in the brain and compel humans to mimic the actions they observe.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the work of Margrethe Bruun Vaage<sup>26</sup> uses the recent work of neurobiology to argue that people are hard-wired to empathise as a way of mirroring other people. However, the idea of empathy as a result of biological processes is questionable on at least two levels. Firstly, in terms of biology: In the field of neurobiology mirror neurons have been discovered only in a certain type of monkey and there are reasonable doubts both about their function (if the neuron cluster identified has the purpose of ‘mirroring’) and, moreover, their actual existence in human beings.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, in the field of philosophy: The idea of ‘mirror neurons’ is in itself a human concept, conditioned through a particular understanding of the world. Patricia

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23 For an in-depth discussion of these ideas I suggest: Neill, Alex, ‘Empathy and (film) fiction’, David Bordwell, and Carroll, Noël (eds.) *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. Madison, USA, University of Wisconsin Press, (1996) p.175–194.

24 Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (London: Routledge, 2010) p.79.

25 Elsaesser and Hagener refer to the work done by Keysers and Gazzola. in: Keysers, Christian and Gazzola, Valeria, ‘Towards a unifying neural theory of social cognition’, *Prog. Brain Res.* 156, pp.379–401. (doi: 10.1016/S0079-6123(06)56021-2) C. & V. 2007 *Integrating simulation* (2006)

26 Margrethe Bruun Vaage, ‘Fiction film and the varieties of empathic engagement’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 34.1 (2010) pp.158–179.

Churchland describes how neurons are in themselves not intelligent and therefore cannot be driven by a mindful purpose, let alone a complex one such as ‘mirroring’ another.<sup>28</sup>

Other academics interested in notions of empathy are cognitive theorists such as Noël Carroll,<sup>29</sup> Susan Feagin<sup>30</sup> and Murray Smith,<sup>31</sup> who describe how mental schemata, especially those of empathy, determine people’s way of understanding and reading film. Empathy here is an internal understanding of the other’s emotional make up. The work of Berys Gaut also sees empathy as a cognitive process, which he describes as ‘imaginative identification.’<sup>32</sup> These cognitive approaches to empathy are often helpful in describing the way empathy is artistically evoked on screen, by providing a descriptive tool to analyse film. For example, by adopting Edward Branigan’s theory of ‘subjective narration’,<sup>33</sup> cognitive theorists (e.g. Carroll, Smith) put forward, that by adopting a character’s narrational point-of-view, we are likely to emulate the character’s affective state, where the point-of-view (p.o.v.) shot becomes one of the artistic tools to achieve this aim. Where cognitive theories are less fruitful is in their understanding of human action as based on the idea schemata, or the inner logic of common sense. This understanding of human behaviour neglects to investigate certain forms of empathy on screen because these theories are not interested in exploring the reasons for empathy as a part

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27 Angelika Lingnau, Benno Gesierich, and Alfonso Caramazza, ‘Asymmetric Fmri Adaptation Reveals No Evidence for Mirror Neurons in Humans’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106.24 (2009) pp.9925–30.

28 Patricia S. Churchland, *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Morality* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012) p.142.

29 Noël Carroll and George Wilson, *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003)

30 Susan L. Feagin, ‘Imagining emotions and appreciating fiction’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 18.3 (1988) pp.485–500.

31 Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995)

32 Berys Gaut, ‘Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film’, Carl R. Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, (ed.) *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) pp.200–216.

33 Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992) p.162.

of a greater social construct that has to be understood in its own terms. For example, Smith's model of empathy is based on the concept of 'allegiance' in terms of a moral identification. He says that, 'to become allied with a character, the spectator must evaluate the character as representing a morally desirable (or at least preferable) set of traits, in relation to other characters within the fiction. On the basis of this evaluation, the spectator adopts an attitude of sympathy... toward the character.'<sup>34</sup>

This approach however fails to explain, on the one hand, how films still manage to evoke empathy with morally repugnant people e.g. Hitler and his henchmen in *Downfall* (2004). On the other hand, because this approach understands cinema as 'purely objective', as Flisfeder points out, the cognitivist's emphasis on empathy fails to conceptualise how empathy is historically conditioned.<sup>35</sup> A failure to understand empathy as a product of its time has a similarly detrimental effect on the reliability of phenomenological approaches to film to engage with discussions around the meaning of the empathic effect in its own terms.

### **Intersubjectivity**

Phenomenological approaches are another field in film studies that are highly dependent on the concept of empathy. The phenomenological experience, as described by the one of the first thinkers of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, relies on empathy as the method of intersubjectivity – an appreciation of the other through one's own 'lived body.'<sup>36</sup> Intersubjectivity describes the relationship between the subject and the other. This other is seen as relatable to in the way its otherness is present within the subject's own ego and it can be accessed through an identification with the other on a physical level, by putting oneself metaphorically 'in the shoes of the other'. The subject's body

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<sup>34</sup> Murray Smith, 1995, p.188.

<sup>35</sup> Flisfeder, 2012, p.36.

<sup>36</sup> Barry Smith, David Woodruff Smith and David Woodruff-Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p.71.

becomes the place where one encounters the other, or the object, by translating the feeling of the object directly into the subject's own body, rather than through a conceptualisation of the other/object mediated through an abstract universal idea of being. As the name suggests, intersubjectivity implies an in-between state in the process of becoming a self-conscious subject. The process of becoming a self-conscious subject is most famously described by Hegel's dialectical allegory of master and servant. The intersubjective state is the moment of recognition between the two subjects, where both parties become one subject-object. Becoming a self-conscious subject is seen as a process of individual becoming, so recognition happens when the individual subject encounters another thing. Robert Williams describes how in the intersubjective state, the old 'subjectivity is transformed (*aufgehoben*), expanded, and elevated into intersubjectivity.'<sup>37</sup>

How the contemporary phenomenological understanding of intersubjectivity differs from the dialectical process in Hegel's phenomenology, underlines the evolvement of the contemporary understanding of empathy as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. In Hegel's philosophy the process of recognition is based on the subject exerting the metaphysical concept of what he called 'spirit of the world'<sup>38</sup> (*Weltgeist*), the collective reason of humanity (not people's individual reason) which forms itself through the process of history. The *Weltgeist* is then a distinct moment in time in which the collective truth is reality.

In Hegel's process of subjectivisation, the other is first recognised through this universal system of meaning, and the subject then continues through the intersubjective state to become a self-conscious subject. In the end, one of the subjectivities is always incorporated into the other to form a single project or

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<sup>37</sup> Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 1998) p.2.

<sup>38</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. (the Project Gutenberg eBook, Posting Date: November 9, 2012) p.43.

system (of 'needs and labour') – in short, one subjectivity is subordinated into the venture of the other, more powerful, subjectivity.<sup>39</sup>

Today, the implication of Hegel's dialectic towards becoming a self-conscious subject is problematised as it relies on contested ideas which are: 1. A universal meta-narrative as assumed by the subject, and 2. That this meta narrative overrides the other's subjectivity, i.e. it concludes with one subjectivity dominating the other.

With the general rejection of meta-narratives in the postmodern, it is more common to understand the state of intersubjectivity as both the start and end point of interaction with the other. This state allows for both subjects (or subject and other/thing) to exist on the same level of recognition without having to succumb to, or be mediated into, a greater/outside body of meaning. Today Hegel's idealistic intersubjectivity, in which the subject emerges from the dialectical encounter with another, is replaced by the idea of empathy as a safe method, or as a tool, of recognising the other, without imposing on the other one's own subjectivity, by promoting the state of intersubjectivity as the place of recognition as a state of compromise between the self and the other.

Translated to film studies, today's understanding of phenomenology identifies people's experience of what they see on screen as an almost entirely empathetic process. Often, phenomenological theories describe the empathic relationship with the body on screen, most fully in the work of Vivian Sobchack.<sup>40</sup> Also Jennifer Barker describes how experiencing film is a literal *Einfühlen*, in which one's own body recognises what the body on screen experiences: 'Our emotional sympathy for [film characters] derives from our muscular empathy with them.'<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Julian Hanich swoons over his

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39 *ibid.*

40 One of her works to mention here is *Carnal Thoughts* in which she describes how one can experience 'bodily empathy' with the characters on screen. Sobchack, Vivian, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2004) p.283.

41 Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) p.92.

ability to *Einfühl* himself into the on-screen muscular strength of Arnold Schwarzenegger through ‘pleasurable somatic empathy.’<sup>42</sup>

Žižek describes intersubjectivity, as promoted by phenomenological discourses, as the contemporary ideal of a moral being, the ‘fragile symbolic status of a human subject, caught in the abyss of decentered symbolic representation, and whose very identity hinges on an external, inconsistent network’.<sup>43</sup> This state of ‘precarious (inter)subjectivity’, he continues, creates today’s ‘ethical subject’. It is an ethics of little value, he says as the in-between state of a ‘meeting of minds’, that is assumed in the concept of intersubjectivity, forecloses what Žižek calls the ‘immortal Truth’ of man.<sup>44</sup> What Žižek is describing is the universal principle, as posited by Hegel – that which the individual assumes for all mankind. The universal principle is the necessary element in Hegel’s idea of the transitional process from subject to self-conscious subject (or to translate it to the meeting of subjects: the transformation from other to fellow human being). Hegel describes the universal (*das Allgemeine*) as spirit (*Weltgeist*) which is brought into being by thought; ‘Spirit as simply the ‘nature of human beings en masse,’ a product of history rather than its presupposition’.<sup>45</sup> For Marx (following Hegel) the universal was the prerequisite for history itself – human beings are the producers, and at the same time products, of the historical progress of human culture (now referred to as historical materialism). Žižek’s main concern is that, the necessity for a universal absolute, that speaks all individual narratives, is called for in order to evoke progress and with it – change.

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42 Hanich, Julian, ‘Mr. Schnitzelicious, the Muscle Man. Somatic Empathy and Imaginary Self-Extension in Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Hard-Body Movies.’ In Michael Butter, Patrick Keller & Simon Windt (Eds.), *Arnold Schwarzenegger: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Body and Image* (American Studies – A Monograph Series, Band 198) (2011) pp.103–127, p.105.

43 He refers to Judith Butler’s writing as influenced by Levinas. Žižek, 2013a, p.827.

44 Žižek is here borrowing Badiou’s Christ allegory, in which a truth event (Christ’s resurrection) reveals that humans are part of a greater, metaphysical world that is outside their lived experience. Žižek, 2013a, p.827, emphasis in original.

45 Andy Blunden, ‘Hegel, Recognition and Intersubjectivity’, *Marxists Internet Archive* (2007) <<http://home.mira.net/~andy/works/williams.htm>> [last access 4 September 2014]

In rejecting a universal truth for the other, out of the absolute dismissal of the idea of one subjectivity dominating over the other the possibility of possessing and transcending current realities is foreclosed. The post-political is the rejection of political change in favour of a simple 'recognition' of the other. Žižek asks: 'is it then the case that the Neighbour is the ultimate horizon of our ethico-political activity? Is the highest norm the injunction to respect the neighbour's Otherness?'<sup>46</sup>

Empathy as way of experiencing film is, for many theorists, a central idea of film studies. Often, these theories are concerned with how the spectator relates to the character on screen by feeling a character's physicality, including their emotions be it through the mechanisms of cognitive identification with the characters or the phenomenological *Erfahren* (experiencing) of the other through the state of intersubjectivity; the fundamental tenet being is that there is an alignment (a word also used by Murray Smith in his theory of emphatic identification)<sup>47</sup> by the spectator with the character through an empathic evaluation. Where differences between theoretical takes on cinematic empathy occur, they are in a matter of degree. Accounts range from an abstracted empathy that requires awareness of the fiction of the film (e.g. Eisenstein, Carroll), over being able to position oneself in the character's situation (e.g. Smith, Gaut) to a copying of the physical experience of what the character experiences (e.g. Balázs, Barker).

For the earlier modernists such as Eisenstein and Balázs, empathy is only one step in the dialectics of creating meaning. For them, film had a universalising potential, in which empathy was only a means to an end in producing a subject that was part of a greater human project. Without a common ideal, the human connection that empathy creates with the work of art is not the shared social experience they envisioned. Empathy on its own allows for only an interpretation of the other's desire on a personal level as it does not access a greater social narrative. It is telling that the discourse on

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<sup>46</sup> Žižek, 2013a, p.827.

<sup>47</sup> Murray Smith, 1995, p.83.

empathy within film studies is between areas that tend to neglect or ignore the social that exists outside individual experience.

### **Empathy as a master signifier of the postmodern and moral guideline of the post-political**

It could be said that contemporary theories on the relationship between film and empathy often do not take into consideration that empathy itself, and its acclaimed properties to provide insight into the other, are an expression of a preference for individual experiences over universal/social ones. The concept of empathy describes a distinct form of human interaction that (by insisting on a state of intersubjectivity) seems to resolve the gap between individual and universal experience. This is why Žižek's emphasis on ideology critique is important, as it makes it possible to grasp the current emphasis on empathy in the context of its own construction. It becomes necessary to define the conditions that produce, and rely on, the empathic affect, and the reasons for why empathy, the intersubjective state, and the construction of victimhood are the interconnected signifiers of the post-political age. The following section investigates the conditions that created the new emphasis on empathy and victimhood in the post-political.

The post-political is an age that makes a virtue out of the ability to empathise. What has changed is that empathy has become a self-serving moral imperative; it is not a transgressive state towards becoming a self-conscious subject, but empathy is regarded as the be all and end all of human understanding of another. At the same time the role of victim as a conduit for empathy has changed in that the position of victim is no longer a lamentable one. Instead there is a case to say that victimhood has become a defining feature of social identity.

The understanding of political change as a cultural matter results in emancipatory politics turning into a cultural exercise in finding and/or identifying with that which is other. This is where the new emphasis on empathy can be usefully positioned: as the other is seen as the negation of



dominant culture, the other is automatically considered 'oppressed' and in need of recognition. Through empathy, people can achieve a recognition of the other that does not impose on another's subjectivity, and the self, shaped by identity, is the acceptable platform for political ideas. The self is considered safe enough as a space for change that does not impede the Other's/others' identity narratives, and (for the greater good) it is only individual human behaviour that is changeable. Žižek describes how ethical behaviour today revolves around the performance of intersubjectivity as the guarantor for non-oppression. 'The ultimate goal of ethics (today) is to guarantee the neutral space in which this multitude of narratives can peacefully coexist.'<sup>48</sup>

(And, it could be added, the ultimate goal of post-political practice is a static pluralism with regard to 'the intersectionality of oppressions'<sup>49</sup> – a personal politics of liberation of identities instead of liberating people from identity itself. The political act is reduced to gaining a status of being an 'other'.<sup>50</sup> And the other is the oppressed, the victim, the one who suffers. This works vice versa and therefore those who are suffering, the victims, are the other – the ideological proof of their oppressed status.)

Žižek sees the philosophical ideas on ethical behaviour by Richard Rorty and Peter Singer, which centre around empathy and suffering, as the logical realisation of post-political activism. In their philosophy, which is based on any creature's ability to suffer, they demonstrate that the cultural logic of post-modern thinking is that animals should have rights simply because they experience suffering. Žižek concludes, 'This, then, is the ultimate truth of

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48 Slavoj Žižek, 'Afterword: Lenin's choice', *Revolution at the Gates: Žižek on Lenin: The 1917 Writings* (London: Verso Books, 2011b) pp.165–336, p.190.

49 As coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. in: Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' (University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989) pp.139–67. <<http://philpapers.org/archive/CREDTI.pdf>> [last access 4 September 2014]

50 Patricia Hill Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider With, The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought', *Social Problems* 33.6 (1986) pp.14–32, p.18.

Singer: our universe of human right is the universe of animal rights.<sup>51</sup> In a society where all narratives are valid, the lowest common denominator of suffering is equally valid. The logical conclusion of identity politics for Žižek is demonstrated by Singer's anti-humanism, where the oppressed are defined by their ability to suffer.<sup>52</sup>

Today, empathy as a basis for human interaction rests on the idea that a mutual recognition of pain would resolve conflict. Right and wrong would cease to exist or only exist in a new moral absolute; the person who has not empathised must be wrong. It could be argued that empathy has become what Žižek would call a master-signifier, a denotation of its own system of meaning that stands for itself, 'a signifier which structures an entire field of meaning'.<sup>53</sup> (The master-signifier is also often called by its French name, *point de capiton*) His use of Lacan's idea of master-signifier is more political than Lacan originally intended; as for Žižek it is the ability of the master signifier to obfuscate the real relations of things behind an unquestionable truth that stands for itself. This is what makes the master-signifier an ideal device for ideology critique. Rex Butler gives a useful interpretation of Žižek's use of master-signifier as that which is 'always a tautological, performative, and self-referential element in ideology, and that the identification of such a master-signifier is 'crucial in any analysis of ideology'.<sup>54</sup> Empathy, then, has become a self-evident truth in the post-political: something that can be measured, articulated and scientifically proven.

It has to be noted that this is not a critique of the non-existence of the notion of empathy. It obviously does exist, as the ability of people to imagine and understand the feelings, perspectives, and ideas of fellow human beings.

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51 Slavoj Žižek, 'Repeating Lenin' (2001d) reproduced *Marxists.org* <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ot/Žižek1.htm>> [accessed 11 August 2014]

52 Žižek, 2001d.

53 Slavoj Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transit* (London: Penguin Books, 2014) p.6.

54 Rex Butler, 'What Is a Master Signifier?', Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, (ed.), *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2005b) pp.31–65, p.34.

And it is a concept that everyone can identify with as part of what makes us a functioning human being (this is evident in that today ‘lack of empathy’ is a symptom of pathological behaviour such as Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD).)<sup>55</sup>

The surge in the popularity in the idea of empathy today, also has to be regarded as an indicator of how in the post-political people are expected to engage with one another – that is, people are expected to understand the other in terms of intersubjectivity.

The rise in the appeal of empathy today is best understood in its ideological function as a ‘safe’ way to understand others (without risking to impose another subjectivity onto them), where the self is the risk-free space of intersubjectivity. And it is here where Spielberg’s moral values sync with the post-political; Spielberg sees empathy as the only morally acceptable way of encountering the other, and it could be argued that Spielberg’s own Jewish identity served as a template for the development of his moral code.

### **Spielberg and empathy**

This part looks at how empathy plays a role in *Munich* as a concept that is shaped by post-politics, in particular in how Spielberg’s understanding of empathy as his guiding the moral principle was shaped by his Jewish identity.

Spielberg’s movies are noted for their classical narrative structure and the recurring themes of childhood and absent fathers,<sup>56</sup> childlike wonder<sup>57</sup> and male angst,<sup>58</sup> but they also deal with deeper ethical questions around the

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55 Andrew M. Colman, ‘narcissistic personality disorder’, in: *Oxford Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199534067.001.0001/acref-9780199534067-e-5349>> [last access 4 September 2014]

56 Dean A. Kowalski, *Steven Spielberg and Philosophy: We’re Gonna Need a Bigger Book* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011)

57 Geoffrey H. Hartman, ‘The Cinema Animal’, Loshitzky, Yosefa (ed.) *Spielberg’s Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on ‘Schindler’s List’* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997) pp.61–77, p.72.

58 Lester D. Friedman, *Citizen Spielberg* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006) p.7.

consequences of human behaviour. More often than not Spielberg addresses the present, and contemporary politics, through analogies created in historical films and science fiction blockbusters; subjects centre around history, identity and collective memory e.g., *Lincoln* (2012) *Amistad* (1997), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *The Color Purple* (1985), *Schindler's List* (1993) *War Horse* (2011), as well as uncanny encounters with the other e.g. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Jaws* (1975), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Minority Report* (2002), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Buckland observes that, as diverse as Spielberg's films are in subject matter, they all carry the hallmark of his artistic, and production, principles. In the words of Jon Lewis, a Spielberg film is a 'signature product', and Spielberg can be titled as *auteur*, as author of his films.<sup>59</sup>

The events of 9/11 had an obvious impact on Spielberg's cinematic work. In 2005 he released two films; a highly successful adaptation of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, and *Munich*, also based on a preexisting book. These two films could not have been more different in subject matter; the first is science fiction, the second is a story 'inspired by real events', as stated in the opening titles. Nonetheless, both films fit comfortably within the Spielberg canon of movies: both deal with common Spielbergian tropes such as the absent father, the upheaval of the family and encounters with the other.

Moreover, both films can be seen as Spielberg's engagement with the events of 9/11, their impact on the American psyche, and the consequent self-analysis by America of its role in the world. Both films deal with a violent alien invasion by those whose motives are outside understanding, and how this invasion creates a state of uncertainty and ambivalence in society. In both films the superstructure of society fails to provide a sufficient fabric of

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59 Analyses of Spielberg's status as auteur a manifold and can be found amongst others: Jon Lewis, 'The Perfect Money Machine(s): George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Auteurism in the New Hollywood', *Film International* 01 (2003) 1(1) pp.12–26, p.68. Timothy Corrigan, 'Auteurs and the New Hollywood', *The New American Cinema* (1998) pp.38–63; Warren Buckland, 'The role of the auteur in the age of the blockbuster: Steven Spielberg and DreamWorks', *Movie Blockbusters* (2003) pp.84–98; Warren Buckland, *Directed by Stephen Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster* (London: Continuum International PublishingGroup, 2006)

meaning for these encounters with the real, the Lacanian dimension of that which cannot be imagined, and thus a general sense of being 'unsafe'. In the epilogue of Wells' novel it says that, 'We have learned now that we cannot regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding place for Man; we can never anticipate the unseen good or evil that may come upon us suddenly out of space'.<sup>60</sup> This statement coincides with the American experience of 9/11. Spielberg, when asked if he would have made his adaptation of *War of the Worlds* if 9/11 hadn't happened answered, 'Probably not, our adaptation is again at a time when Americans feel extremely vulnerable.'<sup>61</sup> These two films tackle the effects of 9/11 in different ways; where *War of the Worlds* reimagines the shock of the impact of the attack by the invasive element, *Munich* conceives the reaction to such an event.

According to Daniel Levine, Spielberg, in his method of 'dramatic exposition' ... 'through fictionalised retellings of real-world events ... stands at the head of a remarkable series of initiatives intended to develop and disseminate moral, ethical and political consensus around some of the most important issues of our times'.<sup>62</sup> Key to Spielberg's success, both commercially and artistically, is his ability to fictionalise the political consensus of contemporary American liberalism, that can be found through what Buckland refers to as an 'organic unity'<sup>63</sup> of three elements of film directing that are: cinematic visualisation, blocking and filming. For Buckland, Spielberg's cinematic work, by being well crafted, 'magically' evokes something elusive, akin to a stage magician who 'constitutes a fictional domain where what is seen is not what is there'.<sup>64</sup> Buckland not only talks about Spielberg as a

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60 Herbert George Wells, *The War of the Worlds*. (Public Domain Book. kindle edition, July 1992)

61 Lars-Olavv Beier und Evers, Marco 'Jeder hat seine Mission' *Spiegel* 17 (2005) p.143.

62 Levine J. Daniel, 'Munich: Warp-Speed Storytelling and the 'war on terror'', *Theory & Event* 9.3 (2006). *Project MUSE* <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>> [last access 4 September 2014] p.2.

63 Buckland, 2006, p.31.

64 Buckland quoting During. Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004) p.286.

magician but also describes the accomplishment of Spielberg's craft (brought about by Spielberg's 'competence, sensibility or intuition')<sup>65</sup> as 'poetics'.<sup>66</sup>

Other Spielberg scholars are more specific when it comes to Spielbergian 'magic'. In Nigel Morris' intertextual analysis of Spielberg's work, what links Spielberg's films is his ability to create emotional empathy within the spectators.<sup>67</sup> Others have also pointed out that Spielberg's dramatic and cinematic formula is designed to create empathy as method of evoking a reaction from the audience.<sup>68</sup> Bringing these approaches together, it seems that what Buckland calls Spielberg's 'poetics' is what creates the empathy that other critics consider the cardinal point of Spielbergian meaning making – or, to put it another way, it is Spielberg's skill as a director, working in combination with his personal philosophy of empathy, that brings about a Spielberg film.

These analyses of Spielberg's methodology are in accordance with Spielberg's own conception of his filmmaking. Referring to his film *Munich*, and the difficulty of filmically approaching ideologically motivated characters, he claims that the only way 'to understand this as filmmakers is through empathy because that's what you do – you extend empathy in every single direction because you can't understand the human motivation without empathy.'<sup>69</sup> For Spielberg, empathy is the primary means of understanding people. When others do not feel as he does, this is due to their lack of

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65 Buckland, 2006, p.30.

66 Buckland draws from the work of on classical Hollywood filmmaking by David Bordwell and Janet Staiger, amongst others, to establish his method of analysis of Spielberg.

67 Nigel Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007) p.38.

68 Especially John W. Wright, 'Levinasian Ethics of Alterity: The Face of the Other in Spielberg's Cinematic Language.' Dean A. Kowalsk, (ed.), *Steven Spielberg and Philosophy: We're Gonna Need a Bigger Book* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011) pp.50–69.

69 Steven Spielberg, interview *Munich* (2005) DVD

empathy: 'Sometimes it seems as if there are still people immune to the notion of empathy, of compassion,'<sup>70</sup> Spielberg said at a news conference in Pasadena.

Spielberg's enthusiasm for empathy can be seen in parallel with Roger Ebert's exclamation that 'Movies are the most powerful empathy machine in all the arts.'<sup>71</sup> Ebert describes that movies are what enable him to 'live somebody else's life for a while.'<sup>72</sup> He continues that, feeling what 'it feels like to be a member of a different gender, a different race, a different economic class, to live in a different time, to have a different belief' has a liberalising influence on him.<sup>73</sup>

For Spielberg and Ebert empathy, as generated by the cinematic experience, allows for an understanding of the other that is experienced as somewhat authentic. This feeling of authentic experience of another is for them not one of total subjectivisation. Their understanding of the purpose of empathy is congruent with the postmodern understanding of the subject that can never be/assume another, but can experience the other in a phenomenological way, in the state of intersubjectivity. In Spielberg's opinion this tactic is also a way of tackling greater political issues.

Spielberg applies the method of empathy to highlight the complex political decisions of America's defence policies in order to understand them; he describes his motivation for *Munich* as 'an attempt to look at policies Israel shares with the rest of the world and to understand why a country feels its best defence against certain kinds of violence is counter violence.'<sup>74</sup> Spielberg's seeming intention is to draw parallels between the American policies after 9/11 through Israel's experience of Munich, and by showing the consequences of

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70 Erik Hayden, 'Steven Spielberg Reflects on 20th Anniversary of 'Schindler's List' (2013) <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/steven-spielberg-reflects-20th-anniversary-424919>> [last access 4 September 2014]

71 Ebert, Roger, 'Walk of Fame remarks', *Roger Ebert's Journal* (June 24, 2005) <<http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/eberts-walk-of-fame-remarks>> [last access 4 September 2014]

72 *ibid.*

73 *ibid.*

74 Introduction by Steven Spielberg, *Munich* (2005), DVD

Israel's policy of vengeance on the moral wellbeing of its protagonist, in order to question the moral outcomes of the 'war on terror'. The idea of empathy is not just a cinematic tool for Spielberg, but also as the moral guideline for understanding people as a whole. *Munich* in particular demonstrates how Spielberg evokes empathy cinematically (in order to elicit understanding for his characters).

It can be argued that his personal moral code around empathy was shaped in a great part by his greater identification with his Jewish identity. The Jewish experience of the Holocaust created debates around a new moral imperative to empathise, which could be seen as a highlighted version of the general postmodern turn towards empathy. It is worth investigating how Spielberg evokes in *Munich* this particular combination of empathy; empathy as the logical moral exigent of not only of the post-political but also the Holocaust.

### **Jewish identity in the context of *Einführung***

Spielberg often refers to his own Jewish identity as a basis for his interest in history, morality and humanity. He describes how his Jewish background has informed his world view:

From the day I started thinking politically and developed my moral system, so from my earliest youth onward, I have been a vehement defender of Israel. As a Jew, I know that the existence of Israel is important for the survival of all of us. And because I am proud to be Jewish, I am very worried about the rise of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the world.<sup>75</sup>

Spielberg said himself that he rediscovered his Jewish roots when studying the Holocaust in close detail for his film *Schindler's List*.<sup>76</sup>

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75 Steven Spielberg interview, 'Ich würde sterben für Israel', *Der Spiegel* (April 2006)

<<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-45506363.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

76 Spielberg gives a comprehensive account of how his research has informed his understanding of the Holocaust look at: 'Remarks by Mr. Steven Spielberg', United Nations Holocaust Memorial Ceremony (27 January 2014) <<https://www.un.org/en/holocaustremembrance/2014/pdf/Steven%20Spielberg%20Remarks.pdf>>



To some extent *Munich* demonstrates how the legacy of the Holocaust has created a problematic situation for Jewish post-war identity, as one caught in its own tautology.

The defining feature of the Holocaust was the victimisation of a single people. Any event in which Jews are victimised has the capacity to evoke the horrors of the Holocaust. In his critical essay on *Munich* and victim identity, titled *Identification with Victimhood in Recent Cinema*, Roy Brand describes how the actual Munich attack triggered what he describes as ‘the old victim complex.’<sup>77</sup> He mentions how, in the film, Spielberg lets the charismatic character of Golda Meir, express how the ‘old victim complex’ affects her reaction to the Munich attacks on the Olympic village. At the beginning of *Munich*, Meir evinces her anguish and the horror over the fate that has befallen Jews thirty years after the Holocaust, she says:

Ambushed and slaughtered again ...  
 while the rest of the world is playing games,  
 Olympic torches ...  
 And brass bands and dead Jews in Germany.  
 And the world couldn't care less.

Brand explains that the Munich attack had such a great impact on Jewish sensibilities because of the unique relationship between Jewish identity and victimhood. He starts by illustrating how the clear and unquestionable distinction between the victims and the perpetrators of the Holocaust – the unambiguous distinction of good and evil – was also problematic for Jewish identity, in that the moral absolute of the Holocaust helped to essentialise the equation of Jewish = victim in the context of the twentieth century.

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[last access 4 September 2014]. For more descriptions of how the Holocaust influenced Spielberg see: Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2001) p.156.

<sup>77</sup> Roy Brand, ‘Identification with victimhood in recent cinema’, *Culture, Theory & Critique* 49.2 (2008) pp.165–181, p.170.

The anti-semitism of the Nazis was not simply a chance manifestation of fascism but was the core of fascist ideology and the planning of the final solution (the total extermination of the Jewish population in Europe) at the Wannsee conference in 1942. Its execution in extermination camps, was its logical and horrific conclusion. The fascistic racist understanding of the Jew was that of an 'incurable mistake'; their Jewishness was essential to them, they cannot be re-educated, baptised or cured (in the sense of: the Jew is a mistake because he is a Jew). This fascist tautology of the Jew is described by Žižek (who often refers to the 'Jew' as an example for the idea of a master-signifier of fascist ideology),<sup>78</sup> 'for the Nazis, the guilt of the Jews is a direct fact of their very biological constitution; one does not have to prove that they are guilty, they are guilty solely by being Jews.'<sup>79</sup> The essentialist concept of the Jew was in fact the essence of fascist ideology itself.

The Holocaust, Brand says, turned victim and perpetrator 'gradually into all inclusive (and not always exclusive) categories resulting in the claim that every Jew is a survivor by dint of having been a potential victim, and every non-Jew is a perpetrator by virtue of not being a victim, or not as much a victim as the Jews.'<sup>80</sup> In short, the inconceivable scale of the Holocaust produced a unique tautology of victimhood for the Jewish people: The reasoning of this understanding is that, because the victims of the Holocaust were all Jews (the aim of the Nazis was to exterminate the whole Jewish people), all Jews are victims.

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78 Žižek describes how the Jew was the master-signifier that structured Nazi ideology as such.

The construction of the Jew as master-signifier was, according to Žižek down to the historically conditioned emergence of the 'Absolute Jew', 'and this transformation conditioned the shift of anti-Semitism from theology to race: their damnation was their race, they were not guilty for what they did (exploit the Christians, murder their children, rape their women, or, ultimately, betray and murder Christ), but for what they WERE.'

Slavoj Žižek, 'Leninism Today: Zionism and the Jewish Question' (1 January 2008e) *Lacan.com*. <<http://www.lacan.com/zizbarabajal.html>> [last access 4 September 2014] emphasis in original.

79 Žižek, 2008e, 'Leninism Today'

80 Brand, (2008) p.167–168.

The main feature of post-war Jewish identity, as victim by default, contained contradictions. On the one hand, there was a political expediency in adopting this identity in order to claim the state of Israel. On the other hand, the question was, if Jews integrated this truism into their identity, is this adopting the same essentialist principles as fascism? This state of affairs was best exemplified by Hannah Arendt's assessment of Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem in 1961.

Arendt describes how the hearing was used as a show trial designed not to investigate Eichmann's individual guilt, but to showcase what the Jews had suffered through the Holocaust. She maintained that this was done in order to further the political cause of then prime minister David Ben-Gurion by teaching a 'lesson to Jews and Gentiles, Israelis and Arabs, in short, the whole world.'<sup>81</sup> That lesson was that the Jewish State was the only solution to the anti-Semitism in the world and the moral wrongness of the Holocaust (as represented by Eichmann) legitimised the then very young and uncertain Jewish State as morally right – it was a political move to demonstrate to the world that Israel must exist so that Jews could exist.

Arendt described how 'the most potent ideological factor in the Zionist movement since the Dreyfus Affair' (the Holocaust) was 'their (the Zionists) conviction of the eternal and ubiquitous nature of anti-Semitism.'<sup>82</sup> For many political thinkers, such as Arendt, the idea of Zionism, as the only rational response to anti-semitism was as anti-semitic as anti-Semitism itself, they were seen as two sides of the same coin. What Arendt criticised was how the Holocaust was misused by Israel as a moral absolute in order to legitimise its existence. For Arendt, a morality that is based on an inherent victimhood of the Jewish people 'was ill advised.'<sup>83</sup> She saw the weakness in such a legitimisation of Israel as a reminder of fascist ideology itself,<sup>84</sup> in so far as the

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<sup>81</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006) p.9.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.* p.10.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.* p.11.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

tautology that emerged out of the horrors of the Holocaust, 'the Jew' is a victim because he is a Jew,' finds its counterpart in the fascists' racist understanding of 'the Jew' as an incorrigible mistake. The criticism Arendt makes is that both understandings of Jewish people essentialise their identity, either biologically or culturally, and by doing so ahistorical, general statements such as 'the Jew' can be made. The reduction of the Jewish people to their cultural identity enables the fascist ideology and inhibits Jewish people to transcend the Jewish experience.

Arendt's account of Eichmann, *The Banality of Evil*, concluded that he was not an evil monster who hated Jews, but a pathetic creature who lacked the ability to think.<sup>85</sup> Her description was, "The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else."<sup>86</sup> Arendt concluded that the monstrosity Eichmann committed, he could only have done because he was intellectually incapable of moral reflection; a condition for which she blames the efficiency of the totalitarian Nazi State apparatus that, for her, relieved people of their duty to think. This conclusion is premised on Arendt's own phenomenological philosophy. She sees the failure of Eichmann in his incapacity of *Einfühlung*, to feel himself into the other. Ultimately, Arendt's assessment was problematic, as it diminished the reality that Eichmann was a rational being, a self-conscious subject, fully responsible for his deeds.<sup>87</sup>

However, Arendt's conclusion can be understood in the context as part of the greater rejection of Hegelian self-awareness in the postmodern. Arendt's criticism of Eichmann as a failure of *Einfühlung* is consistent with her own philosophy in which she aims to understand the nature of politics through

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85 *ibid.* p.49.

86 *ibid.*

87 Making the fascist ideological apparatus responsible for the actions of war criminals' decisions, blaming people's culture for their behaviour, releases them from taking full accountability for their actions. Eichmann's crimes are exemplary for the workability of Kantian ethics, that people have to be self-conscious subjects in order to be moral agents, ultimately always responsible for their actions.

phenomenological approaches that are about abstract contemplation instead of worldly engagements with political reality.

In spite of her critical stance towards its policies, Arendt was a defender of Israel, especially at the time of the 1967 war. However, she was always aware of the role the Holocaust played in the political self-image of Israel. Amos Elon writes in the preface to the 2006 edition of Arendt's book, that 'it would have been interesting to hear what she might have said later when, under the governments of Golda Meir and Menachem Begin (the time of the Munich attacks), the Holocaust was *mystified* into the heart of a new civil religion and at the same time exploited to justify Israel's refusal to withdraw from occupied territory.'<sup>88</sup> What Elon describes is that Arendt's original criticism, the mystification of the Holocaust, continued establishing itself into the national identity of Israel – a theme that becomes a point of identification in *Munich*.

### **Jewish identity, morals and *Munich***

*Munich* is a fictionalised account of a real counter terrorist operation, 'Wrath of God'. This was Israel's retaliation to the attack by the Palestinian terrorist organisation Black September on the Olympic games in Munich in 1972, in which the terrorists killed eleven Israeli athletes and one German police officer.

*Munich* tells the story of Avner (Eric Bana), an Israeli born Mossad agent, who is recruited by Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir (Lynn Cohen) personally to lead a unit of five volunteers on a mission to assassinate several Palestinian officials. Over the course of the film the assassinations become increasingly difficult. Not only do the hits become less well executed but the assassins are forced to face the realities and consequences of their mission. They discover that attrition does not work, merely producing new targets once the old ones are eliminated. The functionaries they kill, who had a more or less

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<sup>88</sup> Arendt, 2006, p.xviii.

direct relation to the attack in Munich, are replaced by other members of the PLO who are further and further removed from the actual event. The realities of politics come in to conflict with their idea of punishing the instigators of the terrorist attack, and the assassins are confronted with the possibility of losing faith through their actions of vengeance.

*Munich* is most often scrutinised for its ethics:<sup>89</sup> from Spielberg's treatment of revenge,<sup>90</sup> to positive readings of the film as redemptive, letting 'the assassins (...) question their mission',<sup>91</sup> to descriptions of *Munich* leaving 'essentialist view(s) of Israeli Jewish ethics unchallenged.'<sup>92</sup> The focus on ethics is unsurprising, as it is the ethics of vengeance and the loss of moral framework that inform the narrative of the film. *Munich* couples ideas of victimhood, empathy and the post political, showing how empathy – understood as 'the ability to understand and share the feelings of another',<sup>93</sup> – is the preferred method of social connection. The film thematises, through empathy, the contradictions in post-war Jewish identity, and applies them to the moral dilemma of America's decision to embark on the 'war on terror'.

*Munich* is about understanding a contemporary conflict through the experience of another, one that happened thirty years earlier. For Spielberg empathy is the key to unlock the film's cinematic allegory. Empathy in *Munich* works on two levels: firstly within the narrative itself, where the characters' moral imperative to empathise is compromised. Secondly, the audience is connected to the emotional turmoil of the characters through what

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89 Kenneth Waltzer, 'Spielberg's Munich, Ethics and Israel', *Israel Studies* 11.2 (2006) pp.168–171.

90 Raja Halwani, 'Ethicism, Interpretation, and *Munich*', *Journal of applied philosophy* 26.1 (2009) pp.71–87.

91 David H. Richter, 'Keeping company in Hollywood: Ethical issues in nonfiction film.' *Narrative* 15.2 (2007) pp.140–166.

92 Yosefa Loshitzky, 'The Post-Holocaust Jew in the Age of the 'War on Terror': Steven Spielberg's *Munich*', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. XL, No. 2 (Winter 2011), pp.77–87, p.85.

93 'empathy', *Oxford Dictionary of English*. (ed.) Stevenson, Angus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) <[http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m\\_en\\_gb0263320](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0263320)> [last access 4 September 2014]

Spielberg calls an 'empathic pathway' where the viewer becomes emotionally attached to the character.<sup>94</sup>

This first section examines how in *Munich* this particular moral code of Jewish identity is utilised in order to posit a greater question on the politics of vengeance in the context of 9/11. Spielberg translates the moral choices the characters have to make as Jews to those America has to make as a nation. *Munich* shows the morally complex dilemma of the question of how a nation should behave when it is attacked by terrorists, how should it defend itself, by imagining the moral dilemmas of the Jewish characters and the consequences of their behaviour.

The characters in *Munich* are shaped by the opposing notions of post-war Jewish identity: On the one hand, that of an identity based on an essential Jewish victimhood that demands the safety of a nation state, represented by the characters Hans and Steve. Steve says, 'the only blood that matters to me is Jewish blood.' This exclamation by Steve is shocking as it reveals that his racist essentialism (notably he is from South Africa) is evocative of a fascist ideology that describes the other as a target because he is not us (and ultimately a lack of empathy with the other). On the other hand, the notion of identity with a duty to moral righteousness as the essential marker of Jewishness (which demands that Jews in particular have the moral obligation to 'not be evil' in terms of Arendt), as represented by the characters Carl and Robert. Robert realises that, 'All this blood will come back to us' when he tells Avner that he will leave the group. He continues, 'We're Jews, Avner. Jews don't do wrong because our enemies do wrong.' ... 'I don't know if we ever were that decent. Suffering thousands of years of hatred doesn't make you decent. But we're supposed to be righteous. That's a beautiful thing. That's

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94 In this interview Steven Spielberg And George Lucas talk about the how video games fail to create this empathic link with the characters that only film can do. 'Spielberg And George Lucas On Hollywood's Future', *Empire* <<http://www.empireonline.com/interviews/interview.asp?IID=1714>> [last access 4 September 2014]

Jewish. That's what I knew, that's what I was taught and I'm losing it. I lose that and that's everything. That's my soul.'

Confronted with the real of their mission (the discrepancy between a moral worldview as espoused by Robert, and the *realpolitik* of the violence of war) Avner has no choice but to cling to and assert the moral code practiced by Hans and Steve – otherwise he would have to question the whole purpose of the mission and his identification with Israel.

The consequence of this is that they become ever more inhumane and cruel, culminating in their macabre execution and humiliation of a freelance female assassin. In the end the agents in turn have become targets themselves, embroiled in the tit for tat of international politics. Carl and Hans are assassinated and Robert is killed while making a bomb. The film ends with Avner quitting Mossad and exiling himself to Brooklyn, by then he is in a poor mental state, suffering from persecution complex and psychological traumas.

Reading the film in terms of the post-political, Spielberg establishes a relationship between Jewish identity and post 9/11 American identity through the prism of a loss of innocence. For Spielberg the terror attack on Munich can be used as an allegory of the events of 9/11, and the mission 'Wrath of God' as an allegory on the 'war on terror'. The allegory is complete when the final shot of the film connects these two events visually and thematically. Avner walks alone, in the distance the Twin Towers loom over the directionless, homeless Jew.

The ethical message of *Munich*, that the 'war on terror' was a questionable reaction to 9/11, is delivered by showing the collapse of the moral guidelines of empathy. And the ensuing metaphorical homelessness is particularly striking as it is the Jew, Avner, who becomes homeless once again.

Spielberg's insistence on the value of a moral code of empathy can be seen as an answer to the understanding of evil as described by Arendt: If the evil of the Holocaust was possible because people like Eichmann failed 'to



think from the standpoint of somebody else,<sup>95</sup> a moral code based on guaranteeing this phenomenon, empathy, is a suitable rejoinder.

### **Empathic pathways in *Munich***

The following examples show how empathy, as enjoyment, is organised in *Munich* is through points of identification.

Todd McGowan describes how for Žižek, ideology is captured by the cinema in the way that, ‘film organises the spectator’s enjoyment.’<sup>96</sup> What McGowan refers to, is the particular kind of enjoyment that in psychoanalysis understands how people are experiencing the other. Enjoyment here means that, if so inclined, one can enjoy a film in an atypical way, by not liking it, but by still being engaged in the narrative and the characters. When watching a film, enjoyment or *jouissance*, is generated through watching the on-screen, ritualised performance of ideology, ‘that this ideology justifies.’<sup>97</sup> In the case of the post-political, the emphasis on empathy can be read as an example of this kind of ritual. The enjoyment that is experienced by the viewer is achieved by ‘witnessing the characters’ relationship to their own enjoyment.’<sup>98</sup> What this means is that the characters, in what Žižek calls interpassivity, take on the task of experiencing the spectator’s *jouissance*, ‘so that it is the object itself which "enjoys the show" instead of me, relieving me of the superego duty to enjoy myself.’<sup>99</sup> By encountering one’s *jouissance* through the characters in the film, the spectator identifies with the character and, in turn, the relationship the spectator has with the film depends on how the character experiences this *jouissance*. By looking at how *Munich* organises the master-signifier empathy, which can be understood as a master-signifier of the post-

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95 Arendt, 2006, p.49.

96 Todd McGowan, ‘Introduction: Enjoying the Cinema’, *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1.3 (2007) pp.1–13 <<http://Žižekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/viewFile/57/119>> [last access 4 September 2014] p.5.

97 Sharpe and Boucher, 2010, p.11.

98 McGowan, 2007, p.8.

99 Slavoj Žižek, ‘The interpassive subject’ (1998) <[www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-Žižek/articles/the-interpassive-subject](http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-Žižek/articles/the-interpassive-subject)> [last access 4 September 2014]

political, we can see how post-political ideology organises people's enjoyment through film.

It is useful to turn to Nigel Morris' description of how this process of identification works in the canon of Spielberg's films and how Spielberg, through this, creates empathy. Morris understands empathy as a primordial reaction which Spielberg is able to create through his films, by facilitating identification through a favouring of subjective shots and thus, 'aligning spectatorial vision with protagonists,' which, he says, 'may be an important factor in the films' emotional power.'<sup>100</sup> This technique that evokes emotional identification, he says, triggers a process of analysis and reflection, in which a 'postural echo', a similarity or mirroring of body positions', is performed by the spectator.<sup>101</sup> Here he combines psychology with psychoanalysis, by linking this postural echo with the spectator's transferring of his/her own enjoyment onto the characters in the act of interpassivity. Morris refers to Spielberg's film *E.T.* saying, 'Elliott's mutual empathy with the alien ('He feels his feelings') echoes the spectator's empathy with the screen image.'<sup>102</sup> The first example of how empathy is generated in *Munich*, is an analysis of how the film creates an emotional identification with the experience of a terrorist attack as a mediated event.

Morris describes how Spielberg generated empathy in *E.T.* through evoking an echoing within the spectator of the mutual empathy between Elliott and the alien. This effect is created in *Munich* in the way the spectator is invited to identify with the protagonist as the spectator of the terrorist attack as a mediated event. The spectatorial enjoyment is organised in the form of a change of the gaze, from an objective 'witnessing' of the event as mediated spectacle to a cinematic identification with the protagonist.

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<sup>100</sup> Morris, 2007, p.379.

<sup>101</sup> Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, 'postural echo', *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199568758.001.0001/acref-9780199568758-e-2101>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>102</sup> Morris, 2007, p.380.

The empathic engagement with the film starts directly at the beginning of the story. Spielberg establishes an emotional connection between the events of the film and the real experience of 9/11 by showing the Munich attack as a mediated event, in which the audience can partake through empathy. Before the documentary recording of the Al Qaida attacks on New York, the hostage situation carried out by the Palestinian terrorists was the most spectacular terrorist media event to date,<sup>103</sup> and Spielberg utilises this historical parallel.

The film starts by showing a group of men entering the Olympic village in Munich. They take guns out of their carrier bags and storm the quarters of the Israeli athletes. This first part is designed in the way one expects from a Hollywood film; editing and camera angles, music and lighting is arranged in this dramatic sequence are arranged to evoke, what Bordwell calls, a 'classical omnipresence' where the camera becomes an invisible observer, not restricted by the contingencies of space and time.<sup>104</sup> Here the spectator is not directly invited to invest in the characters' enjoyment, but neither is it made impossible. This objective narration though, changes subtly and slowly over the next sequence in which several spectatorial alignments take place.

At the height of the action during the hostage scene, the film cuts to the televised news, the camera shows the seventies style tv screen, the announcer talking about the breaking news of the attack on the Olympic village in Munich. Through this cut the audience's perspective is switched from objective to subjective; they are being addressed directly, also they are addressed as tv watchers in the seventies. What follows are several scenes of groups of people watching the live news coverage of the dramatic unfolding of the hostage scenario. The footage on the screens is the original news coverage from 1972. The first group watching the footage are people in a Palestinian cafe, where several of them shout rallying cries when hearing the news of the

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<sup>103</sup> According to Simon Reeve, 'new satellite technology made it (Munich) the mass-media event of the century.' in: Reeve, Simon, *One Day in September: The Full Story of the 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre and the Israeli Revenge Operation 'Wrath of God'*, 1st edn (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2006) p.x.

<sup>104</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 2013) p.178.

siege. Then Golda Meir, is shown in silhouette, watching the television screen. The next shot is of the media centre in Munich from where the live coverage takes place. The impression is that this is a global, highly mediated event. We also see the terrorists watching the live coverage of their leader negotiating with the police. In these scenes the camera cuts between showing the group of people, or the person, watching the news and their respective tv screen, creating a link between spectator and characters through a switching between objective and subjective spectatorship, that is joined by the mutual witnessing of the event. The camera shows families together in their living rooms watching the news as the hostage situation deteriorates. Palestinian as well as Israeli families watch with incredulity, wide eyed, crying. Through the whole sequence an 'echoing', in the way Morris describes, seems to take place.

The spectator watches the screen, watching the characters doing the same thing – every one involved watches the same footage, creating the effect of the spectator being connected with the witnesses of the terror attack.

This is followed by a sequence that picks up the emotional investment by the spectator from the previous one and creates an even more concrete empathic effect. Like the previous characters, the film's protagonist Avner watches the coverage of the dead athletes being transported back to Israel. Although several days must have passed (from the end of the attack to the bodies being flown back) the cut suggests that it is a continuous event. This sequence creates the emergence of a deeper emotional connection and eventually a sense of empathy in two ways. The first is that, at this moment, fragmented news of the Munich attack – shown in the film on tv screens – merge into a complete narrative of the event itself – the story of the Munich attacks, as told by media reports. The impression is that the connected images tell the story of the event, in the same way the coverage of 9/11 and the days that followed created a constant loop of news and images that became their own interpretation of the events. Patricia Mellencamp wrote of televised media events, 'Via repetition, information, and constant coverage, TV is both

source and solution.<sup>105</sup> The coverage of 9/11 failed to offer such a solution. The immediate question after 9/11 was the now famous phrase ‘Why do they hate us?’<sup>106</sup> This confusion about an unknown enemy is expressed in *Munich* by Golda Meir’s address to the secret service early on in the film. She describes how these new terrorists make no sense to her:

But I don’t know who these maniacs are ...  
 And where they come from.  
 Palestinians?  
 They’re not recognisable.  
 You tell me what law protects people like these.

Spielberg manages to establish his allegory of Munich to 9/11 at the beginning of the film, by re-creating the empathic engagement with 9/11 as a mediated event. The film also recreates the feeling of the failure of the repeated images to understand what motivated the attacks. The witnessing of the televised attack of 9/11 is ‘echoed’ by the film, not only linking the film historically to today, but also creating an emotional link between the experiences of Munich and 9/11.

The second way this sequence furthers empathic identification is again through spectatorial identification, but in a more subtle way. This empathetic investment begins with the first encounter with Avner. He is introduced watching the television screen, the low angle camera framing his shoulder and the back of his head in the foreground on the right hand side of the frame. His gaze is directed towards the television in the living room which is in the back, on the left side of the frame. It is the tv that is in focus, not Avner. This atmospheric over-the-shoulder shot establishes a spectatorial alignment with Avner experiencing the mediated event by drawing on the audiences’ own learned narrative of experiencing 9/11 as a mediated event. Note, it is not a

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<sup>105</sup> Patricia Mellencamp, ‘TV Time and Catastrophe, or Beyond the Pleasure Principle of Television’, Patricia Mellencamp (ed.) *Logics of Television. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Bloomington, Indiana/London: Indiana University Press, 1990) pp.240–266, p.246.

<sup>106</sup> Most famously expressed by President Bush’s address to a joint session of Congress on Thursday night, September 20, 2001.

p.o.v. shot that would invite the spectator to take on the role Avner (as would a cut showing his p.o.v.). Instead it establishes more of an alignment with a character by the audience, which could be called a being-with-Avner, rather than a becoming the character. Derek Bousfield and Dan McIntyre describe that the importance of the over-the-shoulder shot 'to the creation of empathic emotion in the viewing audience lies in the fact that they generate a sense of being involved in the fictional world.'<sup>107</sup> They cite Peter Stockwell's text based analyses of how a reader becomes empathetically engaged in the fictional world through the text forging a close identification between the fictional world and a real life counterpart.<sup>108</sup> As mentioned earlier, Morris describes that Spielberg's favouring of subjective shots, and consequential spectatorial alignment, 'may be an important factor in the films' emotional power.'<sup>109</sup> The identification with the real life counterpart is what Žižek encapsulates with the idea of enjoyment through the other via interpassivity. This seems to be the case when the shot connects the viewers' real life experience with the mediated event of 9/11 to a being-with-Avner watching the tv footage of Munich.

By this point it is not clear within the narrative what the viewers' relationship with the character is supposed to be. This could be another in the sequence of scenes showing people watch the events in Munich. But then the camera moves around Avner, along the side of his face, ending with a close up of him staring at the screen. Buckland states that this cinematic introduction to the main character (he talks about the same camera movement in *Minority Report*) is a way to create 'sympathy for the character,' calling on Steven D.

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<sup>107</sup> Derek Bousfield and Dan McIntyre, 'Emotion and empathy in Martin Scorsese's Goodfellas, A case study of the 'funny guy' scene', Piazza, Roberta, Monika Bednarek and Fabio Rossi (eds.) *Telecinematic Discourse: Approaches to the language of films and television series*. (2011) pp.105–123, p.120.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Talking about the body of Spielberg's films. Morris, 2007, p.379.

Katz's description of the 'sympathetic motion' of the camera, and this camera move repeated several times in the film.<sup>110</sup>

In this short sequence, the spectatorial alignment changes from sharing the gaze with Avner to a gradual stepping out of this position into turning Avner into the object of the gaze. This is not done abruptly, by means of a cut to a reaction shot that looks at the object of the audience's gaze. Rather the spectator is gradually, in one coherent move, put in the position of being both; their alignment is at the same time a subjective being-with-Avner whilst also being allowed to gaze upon the character as an object. This complex spectatorial alignment evokes the notion of intersubjectivity, the phenomenological condition for empathy; the object of the gaze, Avner, is not totally subjectivised, as would have been more the case in a direct p.o.v., instead of the over shoulder shot, and a cut between over the shoulder and the close up of his face, where the spectator would totally emerge in his subjectivity. Instead the film invites the spectator to first identify with the environment and the emotional state Avner is in. After the audience got to know him on a subjective level the film can start to tell the story of Avner from a position that is based in empathy. Spielberg's cinematic vocabulary establishes that Avner is the focus of empathic investment for the film, that the audience should empathise with his experience of the mediated event.

It is worth noting that Avner's aloof informant Louis (Mathieu Amalric) is introduced in the opposite way. The camera movement starts with Louis in close up, the Eiffel Tower half seen in the background. Then the camera moves back quickly revealing Louies' upper body. Here the camera creates the reverse effect of emotional alignment. The camera perspective is purely objective, a spectatorial investigation of the object. But, instead of the camera taking the spectator to Louis, it withdraws from him, as if having looked too close and then being repulsed by the object.

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<sup>110</sup> Buckland, 2006, p.203.

Another way Spielberg creates empathy in *Munich* is through points of identification that can be understood as a spectatorial echoing of how the characters' relate to their shared experiences of home.

At the centre of *Munich* is the motif of home, and its loss. The film's theme is Avner's relationship with his motherland Israel as the provider of home, how a nation can be simultaneously a family and provider in as much as real family can, and what happens if this family does not provide the fundamental needs of home anymore. Home in this instance is something greater than a living place or homeland, it is the particular place that gives context and purpose to life. The stress of its meaning lies in its use as a counterpoint to social alienation.<sup>111</sup> In Spielberg's films, home is fundamental to the character's experience of reality, it provides and protects meaning and moral purpose – it is the seat of identity. Spielberg uses home, a fundamental component of human life, as the main source of empathy in *Munich*. This conception of home is spelled out thematically by the character of the PLO agent Ali, who tells Avner that their dispute with Israel over land is because '*Home is everything,*' (insinuating that this life purpose of home and its pursuit is fundamentally true for all people). The characters in *Munich* encounter one another via the notion of home and find their commonality through these encounters. The spectator is invited, through their fundamental alignment with Avner, to echo Avner's empathy that he develops through sharing the commonalities of domesticity. And when the characters become alienated from home through their actions of vengeance, the audience is able to emotionally access this feeling of loss. In making the concept of home, and the related aspects of food, sex, family, and encountering the other (that which is not home), central to his characters' identities, Spielberg understands the characters' experiences as relatable through an empathic engagement with

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<sup>111</sup> Home is a fundamental element in many of Spielberg's films. One need only think of *E.T.* (1982), who wants to 'go home' and his desperate request to Elliot to 'Phone home!', or the scene in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) when Captain Miller tells Ryan that he is going home, as if 'going home' was the goal for fighting a war. In: Frederick Wasser, *Steven Spielberg's America* (London: Polity Press, 2009) p.181.



their humanity. By inverting the wholesomeness of the home, Spielberg makes his moral point – the character’s lack of empathy leads to the destruction of home, in the literal as well as metaphorical sense. By echoing the experience of the loss of empathy the spectator is invited to share through their own empathy the greater loss of humanity, through the loss of home, that the characters feel.

For example, Spielberg utilises the motif of food as a shared experience of home and one another, when he shows it being used in horrendous ways in *Munich*. Avner is a good cook, who brings his team members together by cooking big meals for them. However, the further along their ill-fated mission, the more they lose their appetite literally and metaphorically, and the many dishes on the meal table, that looked so inviting at the beginning, begin to look monstrous and indigestible. Another moment when food turns awry is every time Avner meets his case manager Ephraim (Geoffrey Rush), who briefs Avner and at the same time tries to give him some sweet baklava (*‘from the Arabs in Jaffa’*), literally sweetening the deal. The most grotesque devaluation of food happens when Avner settles the problem over who is going to have to carry out the first assassination. His method is breaking breadsticks into different lengths and making the team draw lots. It is Robert who draws the short end of the (bread)stick – Bread is used symbolically (to the point of cliché) as the symbol of life which becomes the harbinger of death and murder. The killing of Wael Zwaiter (Makram J. Khoury), in the hallway of his house is also shown as a perversion of food. Zwaiter is shot whilst carrying his grocery shopping in which there is milk and marinara sauce. Avner and Robert shoot him through the brown paper bag with the food which Zwaiter carries in his arms. He dies in a pool of a hideous mixture of blood and milk, the wholesome puddle of milk being symbolically encroached on by slowly seeping blood.

Through the characters’ relating to one another by means of food, the spectator – through interpassivity – experiences the on-screen empathy, as

well as the trauma the characters experience through the slowly emerging lack of empathy that they develop.

In the film, the commonly shared notions of food, family and sex also become the point of empathic identification with the group's first three victims. After Zwaiter is shot through his grocery bag, Robert gains access to the house of the second target, the Parisian PLO representative Mahmoud Hamshari (Igal Naor) in preparation for a bomb attack. In the flat he meets his wife and daughter – the marked victim is not a single entity but part of greater family that will be affected by the violence. Avner meets the third target, Hussein Abad al-Chir (Mostefa Djadjam) on the balcony of their adjoining rooms in a hotel in Cyprus. They start talking to one another and find a connection when watching a young couple fooling around on another balcony further down. They both look at each other knowingly, prompting Abad al-Chir to say, *'Don't plan to sleep. They keep at it all night. There, for hours.'* Avner's and Hussein's shared moment over their common benevolent understanding about what goes on in the bedroom next door, also lets the audience into their shared moment of mutual understanding. *Munich* presents the targets to Avner and his group through the shared experience of home. The spectator discovers the other through empathising with Avner's and Robert's own empathy for the other – an enjoyment of the other through interpassivity.

### **'The lie of Spielberg' – Žižek**

In *Munich*, Spielberg approaches all characters, not just the other (in the form of the PLO), through empathy. This results in the characters only being understood in the state of recognition of commonalities, of intersubjectivity – *Munich* plays on the lowest common denominators of human interaction, readily accessible images of domesticity. This emotional engagement however, leaves no space for an objective evaluation of conflict outside of the personal. To approach a complex political subject such as 'the war on terror' through empathy poses a dilemma for Žižek.

Žižek emphasises how the humanisation of characters in contemporary war films through empathy does not encourage an impersonal evaluation of the politics of the film. Žižek describes the portrayal of soldiers as people like 'you and me' in the films *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Waltz With Bashir* (2008) and *Lebanon* (2009) and how, 'such a 'humanisation' thus serves to obfuscate the key point: the need for a ruthless analysis of what we are doing in our political-military activity and what is at stake. ... It is easy to discern the falsity of such a gesture of empathy: The notion that, in spite of political differences, we are all human beings with the same loves and worries, neutralises the impact of what the soldier is effectively doing at that moment.'<sup>112</sup>

Žižek points out that by relying on empathy as a method of an analysis of war, there is danger of losing sight of the actual political dynamics of the conflict. Moreover, according to Žižek, the moral ambivalence of victimhood more often than not fails to expose the political motives that created the violence in the first place. Žižek accuses Spielberg of this in this passage;

Therein resides the lie of Spielberg's *'Munich'*: it wants to be 'objective,' presenting moral complexity and ambiguity, psychological doubts, the problematic nature of revenge, of the Israeli perspective, but what its 'realism' (the aim of an empathetic approach to the character's motives) does is redeem the Mossad agents still further: 'look, they are not just cold killers, but human beings with their doubts-they have doubts, whereas the Palestinian terrorists ...'. One cannot but sympathise with the hostility with which the surviving Mossad agents who really carried out the revenge killings reacted to the film ('there were no psychological doubts, we just did what we had to do') for there is much more honesty in their stance.<sup>113</sup>

By assuming an ahistorical, post-political morality for the agents, the film belies the questionable yet political nature of the historic events.

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<sup>112</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'A Soft Focus on War: How Hollywood Hides the Horrors of War', *In These Times*, (April 21, 2010a) <[http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/5864/a\\_soft\\_focus\\_on\\_war/](http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/5864/a_soft_focus_on_war/)> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>113</sup> Žižek, 2008b, p.11.

By presenting the Mossad agents experiencing not only doubt in their mission and a questioning of their belief system, but also the emotional turmoil through which the audience is made to empathise with the protagonist, Žižek argues, the film falsifies the political certainties with which the conflict was fought. This sentiment is shared by the author of the book *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team*, published in 1984 by the Canadian Journalist George Jonas, on which the film is based. Jonas writes about Spielberg's adaptation of his book that, 'My 'Avner' may have questioned the utility of his mission toward the end ... but he never questioned the morality of what his country had asked him to do. He had no pangs of guilt.'<sup>114</sup> At the time, the Mossad agents of 'Wrath of God' had no doubt in the rightfulness of their work. By representing Mossad as reflective moral agents, as Žižek points out, *Munich* historicises the Israeli Palestine conflict through modern sensitivities in which both sides are equally tragic victims of history. For Žižek, the film ignores the complicated colonial history of Palestine in which narratives of identity and homeland have obfuscated the political power struggles within Israel itself, the repressive actions against Palestinians and, most of all, the West's own politics of interventionism.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, *Munich* embodies the idea that everyone is a victim of a greater failure, a lack of empathy. The emphasis on empathy expressed by Spielberg, which translates into his film, describes (as was pointed out by Levine earlier) 'a moral, ethical and political consensus ... of our times', in short – an imperative to *feel* – to understand the other through our own emotions rather than our reason. It could be said that Spielberg's films deliberately enable the audience to enter the state of intersubjectivity – and the deadlock of possibility of action and analysis that comes with this. *Munich* shows clearly the ways in which empathy has become a moral scaffold integral to the post-

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<sup>114</sup> George Jonas, 'The Spielberg Massacre', *Macleans* 119.2 (2006) <[http://www.georgejonas.ca/recent\\_writing.aspx?id=382](http://www.georgejonas.ca/recent_writing.aspx?id=382)> [last access 4 September 2014] p.44.

political, not only in facing terrorism but also one another. The highest proof of principle for societal and political endeavours has, it would seem, become 'I have empathised,' shifting the burden from reason to emotion. In the post-political, the most valid form of self is that which is placed in an emotional intersubjective position produced by empathy. Spielberg's work reflects the way in which empathy has become a largely uncontested and culturally fixed policy at formal and informal levels.

## Chapter 1.2

### *Zero Dark Thirty* – the ‘war on terror’ and the camp absurdity of the post-political

#### Introduction

This chapter has two aims. First, to describe how the film *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) helped frame ideological discussion at the same time as exemplifying ideology at first hand. Second, to explore how the characteristics of camp, as described by Susan Sontag, can be read as a symptom of the post-political, and how this is evident in *Zero Dark Thirty*.

*Zero Dark Thirty* was a rush job. In April 2011, journalist Mark Boal and director Kathryn Bigelow were already working on a screenplay about the hunt for Osama bin Laden, set around the Battle of Tora Bora.<sup>1</sup> Boal and Bigelow had been working together for several years, with Boal having written the screenplay for *The Hurt Locker* (2008), which was also directed and produced by Bigelow. On 2 May 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed by the US military in Abbottabad in north-eastern Pakistan. This quickly became public knowledge and the pair started rewriting their screenplay. Eighteen months later, on 19 December 2012, *Zero Dark Thirty* was released in the USA.

The plot is unconventional for a Hollywood film; it does not follow a classical three act structure but is instead a series of instances or episodes assembled in chronological order. Running for two hours and thirty-seven minutes, it tells the story of CIA agent Maya (Jessica Chastain) and her role in the gathering of the intelligence that leads to the killing of bin Laden.

The film was nominated for an Oscar for best picture but lost to *Argo* (2012), a film that also dealt with real events in America’s geopolitical history.

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<sup>1</sup> The US government originally suspected the mountains of Tora Bora to be the hideout of Osama bin Laden. For a detailed account on Boal’s and Bigelow’s working process see: Mark Harris, ‘Inside Mark Boal’s and Kathryn Bigelow’s Mad Dash to Make Zero Dark Thirty’, *New York Magazine* (17 December 2012). <<http://www.vulture.com/2012/12/mark-boal-kathryn-bigelow-on-zero-dark-thirty.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

At the time, journalistic opinion was that *Zero Dark Thirty* was snubbed because of the controversial public debates it caused.<sup>2</sup> Press agency Reuters wrote ‘*Zero Dark Thirty* fails at Oscars amid political fallout.’<sup>3</sup> The film addressed a sensitive subject soon after the event and, even before the film was released, gave rise to a debate in the media amongst critics and politicians concerning the authenticity of the film and the film’s relationship to reality, especially around the subject of torture. The film’s opening on-screen disclaimer ‘based on first-hand accounts of actual events’ followed by fragments of sound taken from the despairing phone calls made by people trapped in the World Trade Center on 9/11 ensured that criticism of the film’s facticity was limited.

By presenting the hunt for bin Laden as an artistic Hollywood film, *Zero Dark Thirty* was considered to sum up, contextualise and give meaning to recent American history, in particular the ‘war on terror’. It was labelled ‘A Film To Define A Decade’ by Mark Hughes in *Forbes Magazine*, ‘It resonates with us because it represents that narrative [the hunt for bin Laden] of the last decade’.<sup>4</sup> Hughes suggested that Americans expected closure with the capture of bin Laden, and that his death would be the end of a particular chapter of history. ‘All of that tension and aggression,’ he wrote, ‘all of that killing and warfare, all of those revelations about the United States engaging in torture and secret prisons and rejection of international law and Geneva Conventions, it was all supposed to be building to this moment. Bin Laden’s death was supposed to be worth all of it, the justification for what had come before, and in his death the nation had expected some resolution and fulfilment.’<sup>5</sup>

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2 Michael White, ‘Hollywood Snubs Best Film as ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ Odds Fade’ *Bloomberg* (17 February 2013) <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-02-16/hollywood-snubs-best-film-as-zero-dark-thirty-odds-fade.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

3 Reid, Tim and Serjeant, Jill, ‘Zero Dark Thirty fails at Oscars amid political fallout’, *Reuters* (February 25, 2013) <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/25/entertainment-us-oscars-zero-idUSBRE91O07S20130225>> [last access 4 September 2014]

4 Hughes, Mark, ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ Review: A Film To Define A Decade’, *Forbes* (18 December 2012) <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/markhughes/2012/12/18/zero-dark-thirty/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

5 *ibid.*

The first part of this chapter examines debates around the film's relationship to reality. Following Furedi, Hammond et al, the second part proposes that *Zero Dark Thirty* reflects a more general failure of creating meaning in the post-political, and that this void of meaning is filled by tropes and narratives that are found in Hollywood cinema. The third part introduces the post-political readings of the film by Shaviro and Žižek. The final part consists of an analysis of the aesthetics of the film, looking for elements of camp within the film's audio/visual aesthetics, its characters, and its dramaturgy.

### **'Reality effects' in *Zero Dark Thirty***

In order to look at the film's claims to show actual events, it is useful to contextualise these ideas in relation to Kathryn Bigelow as a filmmaker, her films, and the roles atmosphere and aesthetics play in her work.

Bigelow graduated from the film program at Columbia University in 1979, where one of her professors was Susan Sontag. Her reputation as an auteur who is proficient in the action genre stems from making atmospheric and action-packed films, notably *Near Dark* (1987), *Blue Steel* (1989), *Point Break* (1991), *K-11: The Widowmaker* (2002) and *The Hurt Locker*. Bigelow is part of a generation of filmmakers, including her ex-husband James Cameron, that established a new genre of action films in the 1980s. These films signalled a shift in emphasis toward action as 'spectacular movement'; a tendency for action sequences to become an end in themselves, rather than a means to a narrative end.<sup>6</sup> Bigelow became known for her skill as an action film director, a genre associated with male bodies and machismo (however these roles were and still are filled by women as well as men).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> see 'action film' as defined by, Annette Kuhn, and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies*, 1st edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) p.4.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*



Because of her affiliation with a genre that often seems to be defined by maleness,<sup>8</sup> Bigelow invites scrutiny in terms of gender. For example, she is repeatedly described as a female action director.<sup>9</sup> Ann Kaplan says that, 'Bigelow's films, ..., do not show easy evidence of her presence or even a clear feminist voice.'<sup>10</sup> According to Kaplan, Bigelow lacks a feminist voice because she is part of the Hollywood mainstream.<sup>11</sup> Christina Lane cites Acker and Denby's critique of Bigelow as lacking 'any new insights into gender politics', for being part of the same old patriarchal filmmaking of Hollywood action films.<sup>12</sup> Lane's own opinion is that Bigelow takes on 'male genres' such as film noir and action films are subverted by her reframing of those genres in terms of traditional gender roles. Lane proposes that Bigelow performs the role as 'good director-for-hire' for the Hollywood film industry 'being someone who 'knows' genre and produces marketable product, but she also engages in a heavy narrational style (...) as she capitalises on genre tensions by revealing the ideological excesses.'<sup>13</sup> While readings of Bigelow's work informed by gender are common, alternative readings are less frequent and this lack invites investigation.

Her films have a particular atmosphere, integral to the action, that verges on the scopophilic, the intense love of looking or observing. A good example can be found in the opening sequence of *Blue Steel*, a thriller in which a rookie cop (Jamie Lee Curtis) loses her gun, which then becomes the murder weapon of a sociopath. The sequence begins with the camera moving around a gun in

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8 *ibid.*

9 For example by Yvonne Tasker in, Yvonne Tasker, 'The Cinema as Experience: Kathryn Bigelow and the Cinema of Spectacle.' *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema.* (ed.) Yvonne Tasker. (London: Routledge. 1993.) pp.153–166, p.13.

10 E. Ann Kaplan, 'Women, Film and Resistance: Changing Paradigms,' In Valerie Raoul, (ed.) *Women and Film: Refocussing* (Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Press, 2003) pp.15–28, p.34.

11 Kaplan, 2003, p.35.

12 Christina Lane, *Feminist Hollywood: From Born in Flames to Point Break* (Wayne State University Press, 2000) p.99.

13 Lane, 2000, p.100.

extreme close up. The shallow depth of field, requiring delicate focus pulling, produces the effect of the camera lovingly caressing the gun.

Another example of the way in which Bigelow emphasises atmosphere over narrative can be found in the film *Near Dark*, a vampire film set in cowboy country. In the film, the score by Tangerine Dream supplements the images. The distinctive Krautrock sound is a mix of psychedelic noise and progrock; the clash of genre expectations between American and European sensibilities destabilises the film's images and engenders an uncanny atmosphere.

Bigelow's commitment to working on her own projects, establishing new styles and working methods, together with her relatively unusual position as a successful female director of action films, have earned her the reputation of a serious art house filmmaker.<sup>14</sup>

Bigelow's prime directorial principle for *Zero Dark Thirty* was to keep the film's aesthetic 'rigorous in terms of the journalistic imperative.' In an interview with *American Cinematographer* she says, 'I'm drawn to material that tends to be journalistic, (...) but in this instance, we also had the weight of reality imposed upon us. So, (cinematographer) Greig (Fraser) and I and (production designer) Jeremy Hindle worked closely to find or create environments that were correct and respectful to story, reality and authenticity. To service the story and still maintain a kind of aesthetic coherence was a pretty tall order.'<sup>15</sup>

The way in which the film was shot was also dictated by Bigelow's 'mandate of verisimilitude.'<sup>16</sup> The film was shot on digital cameras, which were able to accommodate the physical restrictions of often inflexible, real-world

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<sup>14</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Fifty Contemporary Film Directors*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2010) p.59.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Goldman, 'Zero Dark Thirty, directed by Kathryn Bigelow and shot by Greig Fraser, ACS, dramatises the hunt for Osama bin Laden with a run-and-gun style', *American Cinematographer*, February (2013), online archive <[http://www.theasc.com/ac\\_magazine/February2013/ZeroDarkThirty/page1.php](http://www.theasc.com/ac_magazine/February2013/ZeroDarkThirty/page1.php)> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>16</sup> Michael Ordoña, 'Painstaking Detail in Zero Dark Thirty', *SF GATE* (January 2013), <<http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Painstaking-detail-in-Zero-Dark-Thirty-4184632.php>>

locations and natural, low light. Bigelow ‘wanted a handheld, guerrilla-filmmaking feel to the production’, says Greig Fraser.<sup>17</sup> These handheld cameras were often used up to six at once, to produce more coverage and allow for a greater scope during the editing process. This process, according to Fraser, gave a ‘guerrilla-filmmaking style’ to the production, often utilising a ‘run-and-gun method’<sup>18</sup> (moving while shooting, with an implied sense of urgency).

The filmmaker’s claims of authenticity were also grounded in its source material of first hand accounts and CIA information. Records made available through the FOIA (Freedom of Information Act), Birkhold writes, detail the CIA’s considerable cooperation with the filmmakers of *Zero Dark Thirty*. ‘The records indicate that Boal obtained permission to visit the CIA at least six times over the course of two months in the summer of 2011 and that Bigelow visited Langley at least once.’<sup>19</sup> The information given by the CIA was tailored to the need of the filmmakers in order to provide not only accurate records of the mission but also a believable degree of accuracy which derives from ‘the trustworthiness of a record as a record.’<sup>20</sup> The film thus looks truthful in the sense that the correct helicopters are used in the raid of the compound, people wear the right outfits, and even the banter used by the agents and the soldiers sounds correct. The truth claims of the film, then, are derived largely from extra-textual discourse that viewers bring to the film.

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<sup>17</sup> Goldman, 2013

<sup>18</sup> Goldman, 2013

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Birkhold, ‘Unclassified Fictions: The CIA, Secrecy Law, and the Dangerous Rhetoric of Authenticity’, *Berkeley Journal of Entertainment and Sports Law* 3.1 (2014): 2. pp.17–71.

It is worth noting that Bigelow and Boal were given so much detailed information that it became part of a motion to compel for the defence counsel for one of the 9/11 co-conspirators. The motion says that ‘The USA has provided more information to the filmmakers of *Zero Dark Thirty* about Mr Baluchi’s (Ammar al-Baluchi, who is portrayed in he film) treatment in CIA custody than it has to his defence council.’ See 2013-07-31 AE195(AAA) Notice of Defense Motion to Compel Production Public).pdf. <[https://docs.google.com/file/d/oBz5OZNOjYA1\\_OEYtalB1cnBSRUU/edit](https://docs.google.com/file/d/oBz5OZNOjYA1_OEYtalB1cnBSRUU/edit)> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>20</sup> Birkhold, 2014, p.37.

Matthew Birkhold states that. '[t]he CIA has a longstanding policy of promoting the accuracy of television shows and films that portray (the) agency. Langley's collaboration with Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal in the creation of *Zero Dark Thirty* is not the exception, but the rule.'<sup>21</sup> Birkhold agrees with Tricia Jenkins, in that the CIA would only agree to collaborate with filmmakers in order to 'project a favourable image of itself in order to boost both its congressional and public support.'<sup>22</sup> In exchange for this positive spin filmmakers gain credibility for their projects. 'The CIA brings a high degree of verisimilitude to Hollywood films. By associating their films with the CIA, filmmakers are empowered to market their projects as "authentic," "accurate," and a "rare insider's look" at the Agency.'<sup>23</sup>

Birkhold's analysis, of how the CIA supports Bigelow's aim of creating a sense of verisimilitude in her film through proving her access to their records and expertise, indicates that the filmmakers themselves understand the CIA as authority on this subject matter. Rather than aiming at an interpretation, the filmmakers translated CIA data point blank into cinema narrative. This preference by the filmmakers, for taking on facts as issued by the government, combined with the CIA's own interest in promoting their agency, has added to the debates around the film in terms of its relationship to reality, and the possible ideological biases that informed the film.

### ***Zero Dark Thirty* at the centre of public debate**

*Zero Dark Thirty* was promoted heavily on the American Late Night talk show circuit, as it is customary with big Hollywood productions. However, the ways in which the film was understood by the shows' hosts was particular. On the *Late Show with David Letterman*, the host interviewed actor Chris Pratt (Justin – DEVGRU) on 2 January 2013, the actress Jessica Chastain (Maya) on

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p.20.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p.29. quoting: Jenkins, Tricia, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television*, 1st edn (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2012) p.39.

<sup>23</sup> Birkhold, 2014, p.37.

7 January 2013 and director Kathryn Bigelow on 9 January 2013. The first question Letterman asked each of his guests was about the accuracy of the movie: 'Is it an accurate historical document?'<sup>24</sup> This repetition of the same question, aimed at the filmmaker and actors, is significant in that in the USA in particular, late night talk shows often feed or tap into political discourse.<sup>25</sup>

Debates about the accuracy of the film went from the technicalities of historical accuracy in the depiction of the raid of the compound; from details such as comments about the direction the helicopters were facing,<sup>26</sup> the correct breed of dog,<sup>27</sup> to criticism of the tendency within the film to portray CIA work as the work of one single female analyst rather than that of a team.<sup>28</sup> As we have seen above, debates such as these were reflected by Bigelow's mandate of verisimilitude, her filmic techniques as well as the film's translation of CIA information.

The main focus of the debate about accuracy is centred on the film's portrayal of torture. *The New York Times* wrote that the film's depiction of an array of so-called 'enhanced interrogation techniques' became a 'national

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24 Kathryn Bigelow on David Letterman (9 Jan 2013) Full HD Interview. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YxQXu5nM9o>> [last access 4 September 2014]

25 Joshua Compton describes how 'research found a positive association between late night comedy viewing and political involvement and political discussions.'

Joshua Compton, 'More than laughing? Survey of political humor effects research'. Jody Baumgartner, Jonathan S. Morris (ed.) *Laughing matters: Humor and American politics in the media age* (2008) pp.39–63, p.44.

26 The source for these technical issues are mostly drawn from an interview with 'The man who shot

Phil Bronstein, 'The Man Who Killed Osama bin Laden ... Is Screwed.', *Esquire* <<http://www.esquire.com/print-this/man-who-shot-osama-bin-laden-0313?page=all>> [last access 4 September 2014]

27 Apparently the dog in the raid was not a German Shepherd but a Belgian Malinois. in:

Julie Miller, 'Navy SEAL Who Shot Osama bin Laden Reviews Zero Dark Thirty In Time for Oscar Voting', *Vanity Fair* (February 11 2013) <<http://www.vanityfair.com/online/oscars/2013/02/zero-dark-thirty-navy-seal-shot-osama-bin-laden>> [last access 4 September 2014]

28 Nada Bakos, 'How True is Zero Dark Thirty? A Former Operative Weighs In', *Pacific Standard: The Science of Society* (January 16, 2013) <<http://www.psmag.com/legal-affairs/how-true-is-zero-dark-thirty-a-former-operative-weighs-in-51659/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

Rorschach test' on the divisive subject of torture.<sup>29</sup> The main contention was the question: did the film's portrayal of abusive interrogation show that torture had been necessary to find bin Laden? Did the depiction of these events constitute an implicit criticism of them or fulfil the role of a neutral documentation of them?

On the one hand, the liberal left claimed that the film promoted the effectiveness of torture by showing that torture more or less led to the killing of bin Laden. A report by the Senate Intelligence Committee professing that the brutal interrogation of prisoners was not 'a central component' in finding bin Laden challenged this view.<sup>30</sup> Left-liberal critics also criticised the film for conflating complex, disparate events (for example the interrogation of prisoners, different terrorist attacks, such as the London bombings and The Islamabad Marriott Hotel bombing) into one joined up, orderly narrative, 'thereby bringing a purifying coherence to the chaos and contingency of past events.'<sup>31</sup> On the other, on the conservative right, Republican congressman Pete King accused the Obama administration of bias towards certain filmmakers by giving them access to secret information, and by doing so 'crafting a pro-administration movie timed for release a month before the election.'<sup>32</sup>

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29 Shane, Scott, 'Portrayal of C. I.A. Torture in bin Laden Film Reopens a Debate', *New York Times* (December 12, 2012) <[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/13/us/zero-dark-thirty-torture-scenes-reopen-debate.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/13/us/zero-dark-thirty-torture-scenes-reopen-debate.html?_r=0)> [last access 4 September 2014]

30 Relating to the Senate intelligence committee report see: Patricia Zengerle, 'Senate committee approves report on CIA interrogations, revives torture debate', *Reuters* (13 December 2012) <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/14/us-usa-interrogations-idUSBRE8BD01420121214>> [last access 4 September 2014]

31 Simon Cooper, 'Enlightened Barbarism: *Zero Dark Thirty* and the Torture Debate' *Arena Magazine*, (2013) 122, pp.54–5.

32 Sacks, Ethan, '*Zero Dark Thirty* director Kathryn Bigelow addresses criticism film is pro-torture', *New York Daily News* (December 2012) <[www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/bigelow-dismisses-claims-zero-dark-pro-torture-article-1.1222125#ixzz34LsOMBxp](http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/bigelow-dismisses-claims-zero-dark-pro-torture-article-1.1222125#ixzz34LsOMBxp)> [last access 4 September 2014]

For the statement issued by King, <http://peteking.house.gov/media-center/king-on-the-issues/chairman-king-statement-on-report-of-criminal-referral-relating-to>

The left-liberal critique is supported by Birkhold's claim that, according to recently realised disclosed FOIA<sup>33</sup> records, the CIA worked closely with the filmmakers. His argument is that the CIA have always been keen to present themselves in a positive light.<sup>34</sup> So, his argument goes, why would they support a film that makes them look bad? Birkhold writes that Marie Harf (State Department spokeswoman) 'extolled *Zero Dark Thirty* in an OPA e-mail, emphasising, "[w]e really do have a sense that this is going to be the movie on the UBL operation – and we all want [the] CIA to be as well-represented in it as possible".<sup>35</sup> But the film's adherence to verisimilitude, its insistence of telling the authentic story of the hunt for bin Laden, was ultimately the very element that made it open for critique, Birkhold argues, 'The drive to document the film's inaccuracies derived, in part, from the conviction that audiences were accepting the film as an authentic record.'<sup>36</sup>

In the long run, the criticism directed at *Zero Dark Thirty* from the liberal left, in its fixation with verisimilitude, could only lead to frustration. By posing the analysis in terms of the relationship between real life and authenticity, the opportunity to discuss the need for verisimilitude itself was overlooked.

### **The Hunt for bin Laden – giving meaning to the 'war on terror'**

In order to make sense of the relationship between *Zero Dark Thirty* and the post-political it is necessary to pose the analysis of this film in terms of Žižek's understanding of ideological fantasy. The hunt for bin Laden can then be interpreted as a narrative fantasy of the post-political.

As already noted, in Žižek's reading of Lacan, fantasy is not the opposite of reality but is the very thing that constructs reality, 'As Lacan puts it, "Reality" is always framed by a fantasy, i.e. for something real to be experienced as part of "reality," it must fit the preordained coordinates of our

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33 Freedom of Information Act 2000

34 Birkhold, 2014, p.29.

35 *ibid.*

36 *ibid.* p.40.

fantasy-space.<sup>37</sup> Fantasy brings about reality by giving it a fictional coherence and consistency, it makes reality function. Following Althusser's definition that ideology is the 'imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence',<sup>38</sup> Žižek argues that fantasy functions as the dynamic which makes ideology efficient and workable, noting '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.'<sup>39</sup> In other words, for Žižek, fantasy both helps to make and is in itself ideology by providing the framework within which the contradictions and antagonisms of reality are consolidated and rationalised, where they are given meaning.

It can be argued that the hunt for bin Laden has a quasi-mythological narrative attached to it, produced to corroborate the fantasy, in a Žižekian sense, that is the 'war on terror'. To put it another way, the hunt for bin Laden is a fantasy in a Žižekian sense, a narrative that reproduces the established conventions of Hollywood narrative in order to structure US politics and policies.

Making meaning of the 'war on terror' through ideological fantasy in this way can only be conditioned by post-political ideology. As described elsewhere in this thesis, by Žižek's definition, the post-political is a politics of consensus of liberal democracy that forecloses the possibility of emancipatory politics. Emancipatory politics relies on universal principles that provide the parameters of meaning. By ruling out these principles, the post-political brings about a situation where society cannot contextualise events in a meaningful way.<sup>40</sup> Zaki Laïdi writes that this is what happened in the post-political. He describes how the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of political ideologies,

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37 Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993) p.43.

38 Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)', Sharma, Aradhana, and Akhil Gupta, (ed.) *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell (an imprint of John Wiley & Sons, 2005) pp.86–111, p.100–101.

39 Žižek, 1989a, p.33.

40 Žižek, 1999a, p.204.



created a 'world without meaning,'<sup>41</sup> resulting in a desperate search for meaning and identity in contemporary society. As Hammond describes, the post-political has created a situation where 'war and intervention since the Cold War have been driven by attempts on the part of Western leaders to recapture a sense of purpose and meaning, both for themselves and for their societies.'<sup>42</sup> Furedi argues that wars have often fulfilled the purpose of giving at least a temporary sense of meaning, a cause to rally behind, but that the Anglo/American policies post 9/11 have failed to 'make sense' of the global conflict.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, the fantasy of the 'war on terror' failed to function in a Žižekian sense to pull reality into an acceptably orderly and satisfying narrative. As Furedi puts it, 'Western political elites lack a web of meaning through which they can make sense of the threat of terrorism.'<sup>44</sup> The failure of the 'elite to narrate', to contextualise the 'war on terror' and terrorism in a way that was recognisable and logical, 'created a 'void in meaning' that exacerbated the disorienting impact of the disaster'.<sup>45</sup>

As I describe below, *Zero Dark Thirty* is the expression of the fantasy of the 'war on terror.' It gives a cultural expression to how the reactions of the US government to the understandable shock experienced on 9/11 was to frame it in terms of vulnerability and new unknowns. A new politics of fear was established in America that was fuelled by uncertainty which saw the nation as vulnerable and under threat.<sup>46</sup> 'The war on terror was less a focused campaign than an expression of generalised and diffused fearfulness.'<sup>47</sup>

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41 Laïdi, Zaki, *A World without Meaning: Crisis of Meaning in International Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998) p.1.

42 Philip Hammond, *Media, War and Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 2007) p.11.

43 Frank Furedi, *First World War: Still No End in Sight* (London: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2014) p.227.

44 Furedi, 2007, p.xvi.

45 Hammond, 2011, 'Where did all the goodies and baddies go?'

46 As was expressed by president Bush in his speech on Iraq in Cincinnati, Ohio Speech on 7 October 2002: 'America felt its vulnerability – even to threats that gather on the other side of the earth.'

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/2309049.stm>> [last access 4 September 2014]

47 Hammond, 2007, p.73.

Stuart Croft writes that the major shift in foreign policy after 9/11 was constructed by a republican-led, coherent 'meta-narrative' which rapidly emerged as 'the hegemonic common sense' that would inform society's responses to the 'war terror.'<sup>48</sup> Croft describes how this meta-narrative is composed of four key elements, with the number one element being the construction of an 'absolute enemy' who is out to end civilisation as we know it.<sup>49</sup> He refers to Bush's address to a joint session of Congress on 20 September 2001 in which he defined Al Qaida and the Taliban regime for this purpose as evil doers who are, in essence, set in direct opposition to US values of freedom and democracy, 'They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.'<sup>50</sup> The enemy is constructed as the binary opposite to American values, binary opposition being the trademark of the Hollywood villain. This sentiment, can also be found in the film *Unbreakable* (2000), a drama about the nature of superheroes, where the character Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson) says that the comic book bad guy in American mythology is easily identifiable by being the opposite of the hero, 'It all makes sense, in the comic you know how you can tell who the arch villain is going to be? He's the exact opposite of the hero!'

Traditionally, the villain of dramatic narrative is the 'character who energises dramatic action by desiring or performing what the play represents as culturally evil. Directly opposed to the hero or protagonist, a villain is distinguished from a morally acceptable antagonist only by his or her wickedness.'<sup>51</sup> In postmodern, self-knowing culture, the source of all bad things in a narrative is often simply the Big Bad, popularised by the TV

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48 Stuart Croft, *Culture, Crisis and America's War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p.12.

49 Croft, 2006, p.70.

50 Transcript of President Bush's address to a joint session of Congress on Thursday night, September 20, 2001. <<http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

51 Dennis Kennedy, 'villain', *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*:Oxford: Oxford University Press (2003) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198601746.001.0001/acref-9780198601746-e-4091>>.[last access 4 September 2014].

program *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), where over the course of a whole series one main threat would directly or indirectly be responsible for each week's particular monster but is ultimately defeated at the end of each series. The Big Bad's menace can never be defined simply, it is ominous, far reaching and complicated yet always reducible to one person or entity.

When cultural landmarks were attacked on 9/11, terrorists managed to evoke established movie tropes of action cinema such as, what the light-hearted website TV tropes has coined 'monumental damage', where the Big Bad by 'behead(ing) the Statue of Liberty, or blow(ing) up the White House, or anything recognisable enough that by destroying it, (...) can show the world that you mean business.'<sup>52</sup> The language of fiction film already established in American culture was employed to fill the gap of meaning in the post-political after 9/11. The founder of a relatively small group of terrorists, was cast into the cultural narrative as an evil mastermind, straight out of a Hollywood movie.

The image of bin Laden – the tall, skinny, bearded man in home video images surrounded by beige rocks and followers that look like postulant clones – has become the archetype for the figure of Islamic fundamentalist. This mythologizing of bin Laden was also achieved by associating and even explaining his character through established figures of US cultural history. The way the US state contextualised bin Laden came to light when in the raid on his compound in Abbottabad when the operating Navy SEAL team leader radioed after killing bin Laden, 'For God and country – Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo,' followed 'Geronimo E.K.I.A.' (enemy killed in action).<sup>53</sup> The code name of the US military for bin Laden was Geronimo,<sup>54</sup> named after the

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<sup>52</sup> 'Monumental Damage', *tv tropes* <<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MonumentalDamage>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>53</sup> Mark Mazzetti, Helene Cooper, and Peter Baker, 'Behind the hunt for bin Laden', *The New York Times* (2011): A1. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/03/world/asia/03intel.html?\\_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1402376580-qIBTXTwYifMzhdipndfFkQ](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/03/world/asia/03intel.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1402376580-qIBTXTwYifMzhdipndfFkQ)> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>54</sup> Joseph Pugliese, *State Violence and the Execution of Law: Biopolitical Caesurae of Torture, Black Sites, Drones* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2013) p.52–53.

nineteenth Century Apache leader who managed to evade capture by US and Mexican troops through his cunning and the army's incompetence. Although it can be assumed the al-Qaida leader has been named Geronimo because the name evokes the image of a formidable opponent to many Americans, the name nevertheless stands for the notion of antagonist to the US state. Over time the portrayal of Geronimo in US culture has changed from the image taken from historical accounts in which he was regarded as a 'hostile,' ... 'that meant that he was treacherous, slippery, and without honour',<sup>55</sup> to portraying him as 'the embodiment of freedom, courageous resistance and principled defiance of overwhelming odds.'<sup>56</sup> However, what still prevails is one characteristic, drawn from the original historical interpretations of Geronimo where the name was 'synonymous with terror',<sup>57</sup> that he is a fighter who is first and foremost an enemy to the state. In an interview shown on CNN in 2001, Bush called to get bin Laden 'Dead or Alive', inspired by the 'old poster(s) out west',<sup>58</sup> directly explaining bin Laden by invoking clichéd tropes of Old West justice and cowboy vigilantism. As is pointed out by Dan Moos, 'Born in 1946, Bush likely saw a "Wanted" poster only on a flickering screen in a darkened theatre.'<sup>59</sup> However, this tactic indicates that the concepts of American mythology as created by Hollywood cinema are so well established that Bush felt that he could reach people by evoking these platitudinous images.

Where the figure of bin Laden is understood as a storybook villain of post-political America, the Hunt for bin Laden can be read in terms of established cinematic dramaturgy. In *The Way Hollywood tells It*, Bordwell

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55 Charles Sonnichsen and L. Schroeder, 'The Remodeling of Geronimo', Charles P. Western Heritage: *A Selection of Wrangler Award-Winning Articles*. (ed.) Paul Andrew Hutton. Vol. 9. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013). pp.47–57.

56 Clements, William M, *Imagining Geronimo: An Apache Icon in Popular Culture* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2013) p.5.

57 Mike Levy, Leach *Geronimo: Leadership Strategies of an American Warrior* (New York: Gallery, 2014) p.106. and Martin J. Manning, and Clarence R. Wyatt, *Encyclopedia of Media and Propaganda in Wartime America* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2010) p.199.

58 Sonnichsen, et al, 2013, p.51.

cites screen-writer William Martell's exhortation, that 'the most important element of the action film is the villain's plan, and he insists that it be well motivated. He (Martell) points out that in the first half the hero is likely to be reactive, whereas in the second half the hero seizes the initiative.'<sup>60</sup> Seen this way, the 'war on terror' has become the second act -- where the hero goes after the villain -- of American history since the Cold War. The terrorist threat from Islamic extremists was not considered a 'high order threat' before 9/11, even after the attacks on the USS Cole in 2000 and the rise of what the 9/11 commission report describes as 'New Terrorism' in the 1990s.<sup>61</sup> This could be considered the first act of classic dramatic structure, full of exposition and rising intent but in which the hero remains passive until the climax, or crisis point at the end of first act, which in this case would be 9/11. The second act sees the hero take up action, he goes through trials and tribulations, cause-effect relationships propel the main characters along, this would be 'the war on terror'. When reaching the final act – the death of bin Laden should have brought resolution. However, it seems that rather than the real death of bin Laden, the filmic version of *Zero Dark Thirty* has created more reflective and analytical discourse amongst critics about the meaning of the 'war on terror' of the past ten years.

The failure to capture bin Laden in the aftermath of 9/11, meant that the danger posed by terrorism simply added to the sum of formless fears.

The figure of bin Laden himself became 'a constant and iniquitous source of menace rather than an identifiable enemy who could engaged and defeated.'<sup>62</sup>

When Bigelow and Boal learned of bin Laden's death during their scripting of their idea of the Battle of Tora Bora, they immediately stopped to

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59 Dan Moos, *Outside America: Race, Ethnicity, and the Role of the American West in National Belonging* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College, 2005) p.1.

60 David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2006) p.109.

61 The 9/11 commission report: Final report of the national commission on terrorist attacks upon the United States. (Government Printing Office, 2011) p.343, 71.

62 Hammond, 2007, p.73.

make a film about the ten year long hunt for bin Laden. Mark Harris emphasises that, 'Before the raid, the filmmakers had planned to make a narrowly focused, closed-ended story that would have ended on a note of irresolution and futility.'<sup>63</sup> What is interesting is that they have opted for the second storyline rather than the original one, although the story would still have been valid and probably an interesting exploration of the failed mission in 2001. Instead Bigelow and Boal opted to tell the story that seemed to fit more closely with the version of the 'war on terror' that had emerged as a traditional American narrative, complete with cowboys and baddies and a recognisable dramatic structure. Rather than a film that would have ended in 'irresolution', they chose to express the established fantasy of the hunt for bin Laden with the mandate of highest verisimilitude. This ideological paradox, of fantasy and verisimilitude, has attracted several readings of the film which place it firmly in the post-political.

### **Post-political readings of *Zero Dark Thirty* – Shaviro and Žižek**

The subject matter of *Zero Dark Thirty* and its political significance attracted two post-political readings that were concerned with the ideological impact of the film.

Shaviro and Žižek place the film firmly in the post-political. However, they place the film differently. For Shaviro the film exposes the managerial reality of neoliberal ideology and practice. For Žižek, *Zero Dark Thirty*, by promoting a normalisation of neoliberalism, functions as an enabler of post-political ideology.

Although both writers provide different understandings of how to relate to the post-political, they find their commonality in their mutual rejection of the 'anti-realist' theories that<sup>64</sup> dominated the second half of the twentieth

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<sup>63</sup> Harris, 2012.

<sup>64</sup> As identified in the *The Speculative Turn*, 'In this respect phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism have all been perfect exemplars of the anti-realist trend in continental philosophy.', Bryant, Levin, Nick Srnicek, and Graham

century, and in their denunciation of today's ideal of liberal capitalism these theories promoted. Both are contributors to *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, a collection of essays published in 2011 that acknowledged a shift in philosophical writing starting roughly at the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>65</sup> The critique of contemporary liberal capitalism is what unites Shaviro and Žižek. Both advance ways of thinking in which the limits and contradictions of contemporary neoliberalism are recognised and questioned. Both have made the scrutiny of the political consensus of neoliberalism the linchpin of their analysis. As Shaviro puts it, 'Neoliberalism has entered into all our preconscious assumptions; it permeates our habits of thought and speech (...) We no longer have the language to articulate radical demands. We suffer from a failure of imagination. As Jameson and Žižek have both suggested, we find it easier today to imagine the total extermination of human existence than to imagine a humane alternative to global capitalism.'<sup>66</sup>

Shaviro and Žižek have both written on *Zero Dark Thirty*, and agree that the film depicts the real of liberal capitalism and by extension, post-politics. However, their different evaluations of the film reveal their diverging politics. For each, the film functions differently. Shaviro says the film 'expresses' this

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Harman, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Australia: re.press, 2010) p.3.

65 Other writers that are part of this collection are Alain Badiou, Isabelle Stengers, Iain Hamilton Grant to name but a few. In their introduction titled *Towards a Speculative Philosophy* the editors, Levi Bryant, Nick Snick and Graham Harman, posit a new canon of speculative ideas emerging that turn away from 'phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism'(as these) have all been perfect exemplars of the anti-realist trend in continental philosophy.' Even though the methods and personal philosophies of the contributors are often disparate and opposed from one another, the editors explain that what the thinkers of the 'Speculative turn' have in common, is a rejection of the linguistic model of philosophy as 'such a doctrine, in its countless variations, maintains that knowledge of a reality independent of thought is untenable.' They argue that it was anti-materialist thinking that promoted 'the lack of genuine and effective political action in continental philosophy – arguably a result of the 'cultural' turn taken by Marxism, and the increased focus on textual and ideological critique at the expense of the economic realm.'

Levin Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Australia: re.press, 2010) p.2, 4

state of affairs, an artistic experience of political managerialism, whereas Žižek's argument is that the film works as an ideological 'gift to American power.'<sup>67</sup>

In his work Shaviro aims to 'develop an account of what it feels like to live in the early twenty-first century,'<sup>68</sup> by investigating the relationship between digital technologies of filmmaking together with neoliberal economic relations. He writes, 'I am interested in the ways that recent film and video works are expressive: that is to say, in the ways that they give voice [or better, give sounds and images) to a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today.'<sup>69</sup>

One characteristic of the post-political is that politics is reduced to the administration and management of individuals; Scott G. Nelson argues that in post-politics 'liberal doctrines are institutionalised to administer the 'flow of things' now that the 'big questions' of international politics have ostensibly been answered.'<sup>70</sup> This proceduralism is the '*modus operandi*' of government bodies and its administrations, and reveals the 'institutionalisation of non-politics, of government by artificial consensus' – technocratic and seemingly ideology-free.<sup>71</sup> Shaviro proposes that this proceduralism that permeates the polis is responsible for the rise of procedural dramas on screen, noting that 'we live in such an overwhelmingly "procedurals" society that the genre of the "procedural" has become so ubiquitous in television and film.'<sup>72</sup>

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66 Steven Shaviro, 'The 'Bitter Necessity' of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control', *Concentric: Literacy & Cultural Studies* 37.1 (2011) p.6.

67 Slavoj Žižek, 'Zero Dark Thirty: Hollywood's Gift to American Power.' *The Guardian*, (January 25, 2013b): 99. <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/25/zero-dark-thirty-normalises-torture-unjustifiable>> [last access 4 September 2014]

68 Steven Shaviro, 'Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, Boarding Gate and Southland Tales', *Film-Philosophy* 14.1 (2010a) pp.1–102, p.2.

69 *ibid.*

70 Scott G. Nelson, *Sovereignty and the Limits of the Liberal Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2011) p.35.

71 Brendan O'Neill, 'Their politics and ours', *Spiked*, (18 May 2010) <[http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/8889#.U5m8WRbcg\\_s](http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/8889#.U5m8WRbcg_s)> [last access 4 September 2014]

72 Steven Shaviro, 'A brief remark on *Zero Dark Thirty*', *The Pinocchio Theory* (2013) <<http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1114>> [last access 4 September 2014]



Shaviro claims that *Zero Dark Thirty* is the ‘non plus ultra of proceduralism, its ultimate expansion and reduction ad absurdum.’<sup>73</sup> He describes how the film’s depiction of torture at the hands of civil servants is just as much a part of the overall sentiment of proceduralism as are the correlating images of the painstaking research over years. He emphasises that the film is relentless in its focus on showing the ‘war on terror’ as bureaucratic procedure, especially in the scene where the compound is raided. He writes that this depiction of the American military operation is shown in such ‘a manner that is utterly devoid alike of the horror of war and of the glory and heroism that are so often invoked to justify it.’<sup>74</sup> The goal has been so absorbed into procedural routine that the ostensible climax of the film, the actual killing of bin Laden, occurs off-screen; and we barely even get a glimpse of the corpse, zipped as it is into a body bag, which is to say treated entirely (and literally) according to Standard Operating Procedure.’ He continues to describe how the film manages to drain the ‘very potentially dramatic action in which she (Maya) finds herself (...) of drama, and (the drama is then) subsumed within proceduralist routine.’<sup>75</sup>

As a declared fan of the work of Bigelow, Shaviro lauds her ability to create atmosphere and thus a certain affect.<sup>76</sup> Shaviro favours films that ‘provide indices of complex social processes, which they transcend, condense and rearticulate in the form of what can be called, after Deleuze and Guattari, ‘blocs of affect’.’<sup>77</sup>

For Shaviro the experience of certain films can demonstrate what it is like to live in the post-political. It is the affect of the well-crafted images that can be turned into what he, taking a page from Frederic Jameson’s idea of

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73 *ibid.*

74 *ibid.*

75 *ibid.*

76 For his analysis of Bigelow’s past work see: Steven Shaviro, ‘Kathryn Bigelow’, *The Pinocchio Theory* (March, 2010b) <<http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=862>> [last access 4 September 2014]

77 Shaviro, 2010a, p.2, p.2 -3.

cognitive mapping, describes as affective maps, ‘which do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, flows and feelings that they are ostensibly ‘about.’<sup>78</sup> The affect of *Zero Dark Thirty* embodies the truth of liberal proceduralism as an organising principle of all governmentality and all social life today.<sup>79</sup> But he himself admits that, ‘Embodying and testifying to a truth in this manner is not the same as offering a “critique”.’<sup>80</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty* as affect does not provide a way out of the situation, it only helps the viewer to recognise their place in the post-political. For Shaviro, the film provides an insight into the lived experience of how state institutions such as the CIA have become bureaucratic machines in the post-political, rather than contestable political institutions where political acts, such as war, become an administrative matter.

For Žižek, on the other hand, film works in a multitude of ways. It not only provides him with illustrations that help him explain and express his ideas, but also cinema is ‘literally’<sup>81</sup> needed, he says, as it has the unique ability to frame people’s fantasies and let them experience these in a ‘safe’ way. ‘Fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real’.<sup>82</sup> Informed by his Lacanian, psychoanalytic background, he says that cinema is crucial in that it illustrates ideology by providing that crucial dimension which we are not ready to confront in our reality.<sup>83</sup> It is a parallel reality than can articulate what can be described as the abstract reality of ideology. By looking at the fantasy of ideology, as done in cinema, can we recognise the true extent of ideology.

Žižek’s criticism of *Zero Dark Thirty* is that it neutralises the violence that is part of the post-political – and thus the post-political itself. He writes

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78 *ibid.* p.2, p.7.

79 Shaviro, 2013, ‘A brief remark on Zero Dark Thirty’

80 *ibid.*

81 *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, dir., Sophie Fiennes, (2006)

82 Žižek, 2011a, p.57.

83 *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, dir., Sophie Fiennes, (2006)

that, 'While liberal capitalism presents itself as anti-utopia embodied, and today's neoliberalism as the sign of the new era of humanity, which left behind the utopian projects responsible for the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century, it is now becoming clear that there is a utopian core in the liberal project itself – the violence that accompanies the victories of liberal capitalism is the price we are paying for this utopia.'<sup>84</sup>

For Žižek, that fact that torture, a violent act, has become debatable today, discussed in terms of pros and cons, is in itself one of the moral failings of the post-political. 'The normalisation of torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* is a sign of the moral vacuum we are gradually approaching. If there is any doubt about this, just try to imagine a major Hollywood film depicting torture in a similar way twenty or thirty years ago – it's unthinkable.'<sup>85</sup>

For him the real argument is not about the question of whether or not the film is for or against torture, or if torture does or does not work (because even if it did work it would still be wrong).<sup>86</sup> In fact, for Žižek, the problem is that the film puts torture forward as a legitimate topic of debate. He illustrates the argument – that it is morally wrong to debate torture in and of itself – by comparing it with other concepts that are unquestionably beyond the pale in our society, such as rape and the Holocaust.

Imagine a documentary on the Holocaust depicting it in a cool disinterested way as a big industrial-logistic operation, dealing with the technical problems (transport, disposal of the bodies, preventing panic among the prisoners to be gassed, etc.) – such a film would either embody a perverse and deeply immoral fascination with its topic, or it would count on the very obscene neutrality of its style to engender dismay and horror in spectators.<sup>87</sup>

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84 Slavoj Žižek, 'The violence of the liberal utopia', *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 9.2 (2008c) pp.9–25. online version < <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-Žižek/articles/the-violence-of-the-liberal-utopia/> > [last access 4 September 2014]

85 Žižek, 2014, p.168.

86 Cornelius Janzen, 'Interview mit Slavoj Žižek', *3sat.online – Mediathek* (27 February 2013) <<http://www.3sat.de/mediathek/index.php?display=1&mode=play&obj=35116>> [last access 4 September 2014]]

87 Žižek, 2014, p.165.

The film evokes for Žižek a ‘disturbing ambiguity’<sup>88</sup> which is most of all represented by the character Daniel (Jason Clarke). He is described in the script as ‘a big American, late 30s, with a long, anarchical beard snaking down to his tattooed neck. He looks like a paramilitary Hipster, a punk rocker with a Glock.’<sup>89</sup> He holds a PhD and his demeanour is rational and well reasoned. He likes animals, keeping a group of monkeys on site which he feeds with ice-cream. However, it is because Dan is portrayed as a paragon of American liberalism which makes the film so disturbing, according to Žižek. He takes issue with Dan’s casual transition between jovial torturer in the first half of the film, and his hipster liberal politician manner in the second half. For Žižek this smooth change has the effect of normalising the torture as something people just do. ‘This is normalisation at its purest and most efficient – a little bit of uneasiness, more about hurt sensitivity than about ethics, but the job has to be done. This awareness of the hurt sensitivity as the (main) human cost of torture makes sure that the film is not just cheap right-wing propaganda: the psychological complexity is properly depicted, so that well-meaning liberals can enjoy the film without feeling guilty.’<sup>90</sup>

Žižek’s contention is that the film functions as a fulfilment of post-political fantasy, by making the inherent violence of the post-political acceptable, or normal. What the film is saying, according to Žižek, is that in the post-political you can be a torturer, because you ‘have to be’ not because you want to be, and still be a normal, liberal member of society.

Both Žižek’s and Shaviro’s criticisms of *Zero Dark Thirty* show how the film conveys a deadlock central to the ideology of post-political society. Where Shaviro poses the film in terms of affect, an impulse for people to map themselves in the post political, for Žižek, the film has ‘normalising’ effect, where the post-political becomes everyday practice.

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88 ibid.

89 Boal, Mark, ‘*Zero Dark Thirty*: The Shooting Script’ (Harper Collins, 2013)

<[http://flash.sonypictures.com/shared/movies/zerodarkthirty/Zero Dark Thirty\\_script.pdf](http://flash.sonypictures.com/shared/movies/zerodarkthirty/Zero%20Dark%20Thirty_script.pdf)> [last access 4 September 2014]

However, these two readings start with the impact of the ideological, and read it into the film. The next chapter ventures another reading of the film that reveals the absurdity and camp within ‘the war on terror’, by engaging with *Zero Dark Thirty* firstly as a film. Here Žižek’s thinking is directly applied to the reading of the film’s aesthetics. By looking at the film in terms of surplus enjoyment, or *jouissance*, the film’s aesthetic can be scrutinised as an expression of the failure of governments to generate meaning in the post-political.

### ***Zero Dark Thirty* as a camp film**

The question of how ideology is stylised and given form is addressed in this section by making a connection between the idea of the expression of excess that is found in the Žižekian concept of *jouissance* and in Sontag’s idea of camp as an aesthetic sensibility.

Žižek posits that, because enjoyment sustains the ideological belief in the symbolic order, ‘enjoyment is a political factor.’ But what is also controlled and sublimated by fantasy, including ideological fantasy, is peoples’ surplus of enjoyment – *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is the excess of enjoyment, a transgression of the generally accepted way of finding meaning in the world through the pursuit of sublime objects (the Žižekian idea of the unconscious, unattainable fantasy object, that, as formulated by Kant, evokes passion in the subject).<sup>91</sup>

Ideology frames *jouissance* for people, and so ‘bribes the subject into accepting repression /renunciation by providing access to a surplus enjoyment,’ which however is always experienced as excessive and over the top.<sup>92</sup> *Jouissance* always accompanies, but also always undermines peoples’ imaginary and symbolic identification. An uncomfortable *jouissance* or indivisible remainder, that cannot be accommodated within any greater

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<sup>90</sup> Žižek, 2014, p.166.

<sup>91</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, 1764, (Public domain, 27 October 2012) [EBook #41197] <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/41197/41197-h/41197-h.htm>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>92</sup> Žižek, 2013, p.308.

meaning, which is, as Žižek describes ‘the “irrationality”, the unaccountable “madness” of the very founding gesture of idealisation.’<sup>93</sup> The surplus of enjoyment is not only a political gesture it is also often an absurd one, especially in the post-political that is seen as having no strong symbolic order.<sup>94</sup>

The Žižekian *jouissance*, can be compared fruitfully with Susan Sontag’s concept of naïve camp. Writing in 1964, Sontag observed that the camp aesthetic is recognised as the ‘too much’ in art, an overabundance or surplus of meaning that defeats the object’s seriousness.<sup>95</sup> Sontag wrote that she was equally attracted to and repulsed by it, making camp a succinct expression of a person’s experience of *jouissance*. She writes that ‘camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is “too much”.’<sup>96</sup> This surplus of meaning has nowhere to go, there are no parameters ‘of traditional seriousness’ or ‘the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling.’<sup>97</sup> This calls to mind the lack of political parameters of meaning in the post-political; like *jouissance*, camp can only be organised in a ridiculous fantasy. A meaningful parallel can be drawn between Žižek’s surplus of

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93 Slavoj Žižek. *The Indivisible Remainder: Essays on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso Books, 1996) p.52.

94 Without the other, through which the subject experiences the symbolic, the super ego has no guidance – people are permitted to enjoy everything. So in order to create *jouissance* – the surplus value of enjoyment – people have to create their own limits of enjoyment. And these are always much harsher than those provided by the other. This is what happens, according to Žižek, in today’s post-political landscape. Without a greater social framework our own personal behaviour is turned ideology i.e. political values are replaced by moral ones. For Žižek, this also accounts for paradoxes within late capitalism that try to accommodate these new laws on personal behaviour. Whenever the situation calls for it, he lists the moral limitations we impose on our own consumption of pleasurable goods; caffeine-free coffee, beer without alcohol, fat free fat, chocolate laxative etc. – *Jouissance* in the post-political often expresses the failure to account for a big other in ridiculous symptoms. Here, Žižek reverses Dostoyevsky’s statement in *The Brothers Karamazov* and says that instead of ‘there is no god (Other) – everything is allowed’, it should be ‘there is no god – everything is forbidden.’ *Žižek!*, dir., Astra Taylor (2005), Žižek, 1991, p.9.

95 Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009) pp.275–292, p.283.

96 *ibid.* p.283.

97 *ibid.* p.286–287.

enjoyment and the surplus of meaning responsible for the camp aesthetic in Sontag.

Ultimately, camp is 'the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience.'<sup>98</sup> Today, narrative of excess has replaced political analysis indicating the degree to which the lack of political seriousness accompanies the post-political.

The camp aesthetic is always askew, awry to the world it represents. Sontag writes, 'camp is a vision of the world in terms of style -- but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the "off," of things-being-what-they-are-not.'<sup>99</sup> Camp films reveal in their too-muchness their at-odds status to the world, they show a displacement of ideology. This idea can be paralleled with Žižek, who writes that, 'The easiest way to detect ideological surplus-enjoyment in an ideological formation is to read it as a dream and analyse the displacement at work in it.'<sup>100</sup> The conclusion to be made here is that film is this fantasy, the dream of the ideological formation, which is scrutinised for the surplus of ideological enjoyment – its campness.

The following analysis of *Zero Dark Thirty* aims to demonstrate how the film is an expression of the surplus of enjoyment of post-politics, an excessive, over the top, absurd remainder, in the cinematic form of camp on screen. It aims to show how *Zero Dark Thirty* embodies a set of elite ideas that are over-invested in, by considering how the film in itself is marked by a failed seriousness – a camp theatricalisation of the 'war on terror'. The ideology in *Zero Dark Thirty* is enjoyed and stylised to excess, in an aesthetically appealing way that speaks of a too-muchness of ideological fantasy that finds its aesthetic realisation in camp.

To consider *Zero Dark Thirty* as a camp film may at first reading appear to be contradictory. Camp is kitschy, flippant, self knowingly garish and corny.

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<sup>98</sup> *ibid.* p.287.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.* p.279.

<sup>100</sup> Žižek, 1991, p.xci.

How can such an earnest, unglamorous film be camp? *Zero Dark Thirty* is these things but not in an immediately obvious way.

Sontag separates Camp from camp to distinguish the word not only from the idea of the outdoor activity, but also to establish the concept as a new way of think about a particular sensibility. Since Sontag's concept has very much established itself in the cultural landscape and this grammatical distinction does not have to be emphasised anymore. Her understanding of camp is that of a sensibility, a way of feeling after being affected by an object or person.<sup>101</sup> Her definition of camp is that it is 'a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylisation.'<sup>102</sup> Camp is always excessive, transgressing the norm, often going far beyond what feels familiar and comfortable. Films can be camp in a multitude of ways; they can have camp aesthetics, subject matter, performances, ambition, etc. Sontag assays that a 'sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable', however it does have a certain amount of consistency.

*Zero Dark Thirty* is not camp in the same way as a self-knowingly, deliberately<sup>103</sup> camp movie, such as Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2001).<sup>104</sup> By deliberately producing a heightened artificiality, the point of a Baz Luhrmann film is to be camp; as Sontag states, 'deliberately camp' films are a 'Camp which knows itself to be Camp.'<sup>105</sup> The naïve camp of *Zero Dark Thirty*, on the other hand can be formulated in terms of Sontag's concept of camp as a failed seriousness, failure meaning that it does not conform to the logical demands of the film but exceeds them.

Making a film about the tracking and killing of bin Laden, a ten year long terrorist hunt that was unequalled in scope, manpower and cost, could never

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<sup>101</sup> Sontag, 2009, p.276.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.* p.277.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.* p.282.

<sup>104</sup> Harry M. Benshoff, and Sean Griffin, *Queer Cinema, the Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004) p.119.

<sup>105</sup> Sontag, 2009, p.282.



be less than a hugely ambitious project, in terms of storytelling, on the part of the filmmakers. Sontag suggests that campness is about the maker's 'spirit of extravagance', their drive to take on something that is bigger than themselves. The film's tagline is 'the greatest manhunt in US history', displaying its ambition and its eagerness, Bigelow herself proclaiming that making *Zero Dark Thirty* was like an 'epic puzzle'. 'Logistics. I know it sounds crazy, [but] I do enjoy it.'<sup>106</sup> It is the filmmaker's extravagance, ambition, and passion that opens up *Zero Dark Thirty* to a camp interpretation.

*Zero Dark Thirty* is a serious film, proposes David Fresko: 'advances in documentary technique with on-the-ground reporting give (it) the sobering imprimatur of serious films for serious audiences.'<sup>107</sup> In the film there is no intentional comic relief to break the tension of the unflinching brutality of prisoner interrogations, or the monomania of the person who found bin Laden. The film is finally resolved in an anticlimax for the protagonist.

The film's deliberate seriousness is the foundation of *Zero Dark Thirty* as a camp film, it does not set out to be camp. Sontag writes that, 'the pure examples of camp are unintentional; they are dead serious.'<sup>108</sup> It is therefore a reasonable assumption to make that *Zero Dark Thirty* can be seen as example of unintentional, pure camp. Sontag writes that, 'camp is either completely naïve or else wholly conscious', and 'pure camp' is always the naïve version.<sup>109</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty* falls into this category, being a mainstream straight film that is meant to be taken seriously. However, as Sontag writes, 'in naïve, or pure, camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails.'<sup>110</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty* fails, in the sense of Sontag's concept of fail, in its aim to be

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<sup>106</sup> Emma Brockes, 'Kathryn Bigelow: under fire', *The Guardian* (11 January 2013) <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jan/12/kathryn-bigelow-zero-dark-thirty>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>107</sup> David Fresko, 'Aesthetics of Politics: Zero Dark Thirty', *Visible Culture* issue 19: Blind Spots (Fall 2013) <<http://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/portfolio/aesthetics-of-politics-zero-dark-thirty/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>108</sup> Sontag, 2009, p.282.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.* p.283.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.* p.283.

serious – it does not stay within the limits of aesthetics that would guarantee a serious reading.

The ways in which it fails, or to be more precise, the way in which it is excessive, are not immediately obvious as the film's campness is found in the overall aesthetic of the film – *Zero Dark Thirty* is, more precisely, a collection of minor failings that bring about an overall change in quality, an overall failure at the level of seriousness. These failings, or excesses, are found in the film's audio and visual aesthetic, its characters and the film's dramaturgy. Each of these must be investigated.

### **The campness of the film's audio and visual aesthetic**

Sontag writes that camp is unnatural due to its affinity with hyperbole and over-the-topness, 'camp is (...) love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.' While camp focuses on artifice, *Zero Dark Thirty* is designed and produced on the principle of maximising the most possible verisimilitude. Yet it is this selfsame verisimilitude that pitches the film into camp.

The film's consistent use of hand-held camera is in the tradition of *cinéma vérité*, an observational camera style that aims to give realism (*veritas-truth*) to the narrative. Linda Cahir puts forward that, 'Recording every shimmy and shake of even the most stable human hand that is holding it, the hand-held camera can intensify the illusion that what is on the screen occurred, just as it was recorded by the cameraman who really was there, filming it.'<sup>111</sup> Handheld camera shots are imbued with the life, or energy, transmitted through movements from the body of the cameraman. In *Zero Dark Thirty* the images are constantly jittering, which does not allow the eye to rest, creating a sense of constant alertness. Most of the film is shot using standard focal length lenses, avoiding the overt stylisation that comes with the use of extreme focal lengths. The lenses were non-anamorphic spherical lenses because, says *Zero Dark Thirty* cinematographer Greig Fraser, anamorphic

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<sup>111</sup> Linda Costanzo Cahir, *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2006) p.62.

lenses would have given the film too much of an 'epic' feel by providing a wider frame.<sup>112</sup>

The film's soundtrack is minimal and is better described as a soundscape that is only heard in one third of the film. The only direction (composer) Alexandre Desplat got from Bigelow was that the music for the film 'shouldn't be a score.'<sup>113</sup>

One effect that the lack of underscore creates, is a seriousness, an evocation of the art-house.<sup>114</sup> The score surfaces notably in a few scenes often when Maya is by herself, or in a transitional moment from an old to a new situation. For example, when Maya drives to the Pakistani embassy for the first time or she sits on the floor of her office staring into space after hearing the news that Jennifer has been killed. Here, the music score is composed only of classical minor notes, mixed with a middle eastern undertone, that create a somewhat melancholic sound. The understated score of *Zero Dark Thirty* fits with Bigelow's general filmic approach of using sound to create atmosphere. The long absence of a score means that the non-musical sound is

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112 Michael Goldman, 'Zero Dark Thirty', directed by Kathryn Bigelow and shot by Greig Fraser, ACS, dramatises the hunt for Osama bin Laden with a run-and-gun style', *American Cinematographer*, February (2013), online archive <[http://www.theasc.com/ac\\_magazine/February2013/ZeroDarkThirty/page1.php](http://www.theasc.com/ac_magazine/February2013/ZeroDarkThirty/page1.php)> [last access 4 September 2014]

113 Sharon Knolle, 'Zero Dark Thirty composer Alexandre Desplat on his "non-score" for the film' *AXS* (December 19, 2012) *Entertainment* <<http://www.examiner.com/article/zero-dark-thirty-composer-alexander-desplat-on-his-non-score-for-the-film>> [last access 4 September 2014]

114 In his article on the Art-House Consensus, Richard Brody writes how *Cahiers du cinéma* listed the ten pitfalls of 'the *auteur* cinema' to demonstrate the 'imperfect intersection between what's produced, marketed, and accepted as an art-house movie and what is actually significant movie art.' One of the points was made by Jean-Sébastien Chauvin as he talks about how contemporary auteurs put forward a 'Solemn Earnestness'. (Or un sérieux du pape—a papal seriousness.) 'A serious air + pessimism, thus a formidable cocktail that some filmmakers (Michael Haneke, Béla Tarr, Christopher Nolan, Nuri Bilge Ceylan) overuse in order to show us what they think of the world. Not laughing, approaching a painful subject, and putting on wise airs. Thus filmmakers philosophize gravely.' Richard Brody, 'The Art-House Consensus' *The New Yorker* (25 Jan 2013) <<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/movies/2013/01/the-art-house-consensus.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

foregrounded in the film, says sound designer Paul Ottosson, 'it has to have a raw and gritty feel, true to the subject at hand.'<sup>115</sup>

The same words about the film's aim for authenticity were used by *Zero Dark Thirty's* FX supervisor Chris Harvey who said in an interview, 'Kathryn wanted it to feel authentic, very raw, very gritty.'<sup>116</sup>

This 'gritty' cinematography has become a staple of contemporary cinematographic style, mostly associated with political thrillers. It was first commented on by David Bordwell and Roger Ebert in regard to the film *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), directed by Paul Greengrass.<sup>117</sup> Greengrass says that with this camera technique 'Your p.o.v. is limited to the eye of the character, instead of the camera being a godlike instrument choreographed to be in the right place at the right time.' Bordwell argues that 'the run-and-gun look (as he described Greengrass's technique in *The Bourne Ultimatum*) is 'one option within today's dominant Hollywood style', which combines wobbly camera work, ramshackle framing (where characters keep falling out of the frame and out of focus), with a fast editing technique or 'intensified continuity.'<sup>118</sup>

A new generation of lightweight cameras, most notably the Arricam introduced in 2000, has facilitated this new quality, turning the shaky sensation of earlier handheld camera effects into more of a wobble or vibration, giving the image an 'alive' feeling. This is often combined with a shutter speed much lower than the standard speed of 180° (To compare; *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) used a 45° shutter technique to give a disoriented

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<sup>115</sup> Mary Ann, Skweres 'Contender – Sound Mixer Paul Ottosson, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Below the Line* (December 17, 2012) <<http://www.btlnews.com/awards/contender-sound-mixer-paul-ottosson-zero-dark-thirty/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>116</sup> Ryan Lambie, 'FX supervisor Chris Harvey interview', *Den of Geek* (6 Jun 2013) <<http://www.denofgeek.com/movies/zero-dark-thirty/25851/fx-supervisor-chris-harvey-interview>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>117</sup> For a greater description of the Bourne film see: David Bordwell, 'Unsteadicam Chronicles', *Observations on Film Art* (17 August 2007a) <<http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2007/08/17/unsteadicam-chronicles/>> [last access 4 September 2014] and Ebert, Roger 'The Shaky-Queasy *Ultimatum*' review of *The Bourne Ultimatum*' August 22, 2007 <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/the-shaky-queasy-utimatum>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*

feel, simulating being in an ongoing war). However, this effect, often called jello- or queasicam, often feels more like a fashionable gimmick of filmmakers, which some say has become the ‘new normal’,<sup>119</sup> rather than adding a new level of realness. As Bordwell points out, ‘the style achieves a visceral impact, but at the cost of coherence and spatial orientation.’<sup>120</sup>

The shying away from usual steadiness suggests a reluctance to find a critical perspective for the narrative, a retreat from certainty.

Bordwell claims that the impression that a documentary truth is shown, through a camera technique that induces ‘visceral disorientation’, is a false one. ‘So with run-and-gun, the filmmakers in effect cover the action through a troupe of invisible, highly mobile camera operators. That’s to say, another brand of artifice.’<sup>121</sup>

James Buhler and Alex Newton criticise Bordwell’s assumptions, interpreting his review of the ‘run-and-gun technique’ as a ‘fear of fragmentation’, of what could be a step toward ‘ontological realism, from the Bazinian “window on the world” or the Cavellian “automatic world projection”’.<sup>122</sup>

However, it can be argued that the idea of an ontological realism as Buhler and Newton see it, as fragmented and subjective, is itself a contemporary understanding of postmodern society. The stylised rejection of

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119 Owen Gleiberman ‘From ‘The Fighter’ to ‘Black Swan,’ jittery nausea-inducing shaky cam is the new normal. Can you handle it?’, *Entertainment Weekly* (January 2011) <<http://insidemovies.ew.com/2011/01/07/nausea-inducing-shakycam-the-new-normal/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

120 David Bordwell, ‘Insert Your Favorite Bourne Pun Here’, *Observations on Film Art*, (30 August 2007b) <<http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2007/08/30/insert-your-favorite-bourne-pun-here/>> [last accessed 27 September 2011]

121 Bordwell, 2007b.

122 James Buhler, and Alex Newton, ‘Outside the Law of Action: Music and Sound in the Bourne Trilogy’, *Oxford Handbooks Online*. (2013–12–16.)Oxford: Oxford University Press <<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199757640.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199757640-e-008>> [last access 4 September 2014]

certainty of perspective through a 'run-and-gun' style is symptomatic of a greater loss of certainty in contemporary post-political society.<sup>123</sup>

In the run-and gun style in contemporary film, this evasion of certainty is evident in how, as Bordwell points out, this tactic is used to hide the plotoles of the movie. 'By whisking the action past us and forcing us to keep up, the film doesn't allow us to dwell on its holes and thin patches.'<sup>124</sup>

Because *Zero Dark Thirty* is a story mimicking real events, it is difficult to accuse it of having plotoles. Real life does not have plotoles. What is problematic, in terms of the accessibility of the logic of the plot, is that the film has taken on a highly complex content with the idea of reproducing complexity rather than explaining it.

Here, Bordwell's criticism of contemporary visual tendencies towards a fragmented viewing experience, help to illustrate the deliberate incoherence of the film. The film's visual aesthetics add confusion to an already complicated narrative. On the one hand, the vérité style aims to give authenticity to the experience by hinting at the complexity of the issue. On the other hand, the jerky camera aesthetic obscures the complicated history, by creating an incoherent, fragment and subjective visual narrative.

Sontag writes that camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of "style" over "content," "aesthetics" over "morality," of irony over tragedy.<sup>125</sup> The cumulative effect is that the film shies away from certainty, replacing it with fashionable visual aesthetics, privileging style over content, bringing camp into being as a consequence.

Another indicator of the film's adherence to a fashionable aesthetic, rather than an adherence to verisimilitude, is the film's colouring. In 2010 filmmaker and blogger Toss Miro described a trend in Hollywood cinema that uses Digital Intermediary (short DI, the digitalisation process of images)

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<sup>123</sup> This 'lack of certainty' is described by Frank Furedi, in Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (London: Routledge, 2003) p.197.

<sup>124</sup> Bordwell, 2007a.

<sup>125</sup> Sontag, 2009, p.287.

excessively, heightening complementary colours, in particular those found in all flesh tones and their complementary cold tones, in order to make the subjects pop from the background. Even in 2008, film blogger Stu Maschwitz wrote that, ‘This look will be the hallmark of films of the late 2000s. Whether you like it or not, films of only a few years ago do look less polished by comparison with their blue tints, gasp, actually having an effect on human beings.’ The main effect of this ‘excessive abuse’<sup>126</sup> of colour correction became informally known as ‘orange and teal’, a combination used heavily in a number of contemporary movies. For the most part, this colour scheme was associated with ‘hectic’ movies such as the *Transformers* (2007-14) franchise, which consisted of intricate, fast edited images showing the relationship between humans (fleshy, orange colours) and robots (cool colours). In *Zero Dark Thirty*, the ‘orange and teal’ creates a heightened contrast within the images, a sensation of hyperreality which ‘strives to produce an effect that is more real than the real thing being copied’,<sup>127</sup> and which counteracts the desired ‘authentic’, ‘gritty’ style.<sup>128</sup>

The film’s adherence to a voguish colour palette lays it open to a reading of it as camp. Sontag writes that ‘Life is not stylish. Neither is nature.’<sup>129</sup> The highly stylised ‘orange and teal’ colour palette used in the film gives the images an over the top, artificial look, rather than a realistic one.

The film’s score is conspicuously understated in most of the film, until the climactic moment when the Navy SEALs set out to board the helicopters which will take them to the compound in Abbottabad. The images of the soldiers getting ready, checking their guns, walking to the waiting helicopters,

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126 Todd Miro, ‘Teal and Orange – Hollywood, Please Stop the Madness’ *Into the Abyss*, March 14 2010 <<http://theabyssgazes.blogspot.co.uk/2010/03/teal-and-orange-hollywood-please-stop.html>> [last access 4 September 2014], Stu Maschwitz, ‘Save our Skins’, *Prolost* <<http://prolost.com/blog/2008/3/23/save-our-skins.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

127 Ian Buchanan, hyperreality’, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2010) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-334>> [last access 4 September 2014]

128 Goldman, 2013.

129 Sontag, 2009, p.11.

is underscored with a mix of diegetic sounds of chopping helicopter blades and a musical score of militaristic brass elements and tense strings. Here the score is reminiscent of the style of music that is associated with a James Bond movie score. The 'blueprint of what became the James Bond sound' is an orchestral sound with emphasis of brass and strings, a sound came to represent the 'cocky, swaggering, confident, dark and dangerous' Bond. This change in (musical) gear in *Zero Dark Thirty* also brings about a change in the nature of the film. It is hard to separate the scenes of the soldiers entering the helicopter, flying to be dropped into Pakistan, from the specific equivalent scenes in exemplars of the 1980s genre films *Predator* (1987) and *Aliens* (1986), where characters are dropped from an aircraft into enemy territory, as these scenes are already freighted with genre expectation. The film, rather than making fiction sound true, makes true events sound fictional by reverting to a conventional action movie score when showing military action. By associating the real life event of the deployment of Navy SEALs to kill bin Laden with clichéd action film tropes, the film fails in its seriousness as it 'theatricalises experience'.<sup>130</sup> According to Sontag, this 'exaggerated' take on real life is a component of the failed seriousness of camp sensibility.<sup>131</sup>

### **The campness of the film's protagonist**

By investigating the character Maya as a camp figure, a connection can be made between the way she is portrayed in the film and how this evokes a post-political character on screen.

Žižek describes Maya as a new kind of feminist heroine of the post-political age.<sup>132</sup> Rather than a real person she is a symbolic cypher of the hidden violence of liberal capitalism. She is 'the ideal executioner,' he says: 'On the one hand she does the male job even better than the man, she is far

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<sup>130</sup> *ibid.* p.287.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.* p.275–292.

<sup>132</sup> Cornelius Janzen, 'Interview mit Slavoj Žižek' *3sat.online – Mediathek* 27. Februar 2013 <<http://www.3sat.de/mediathek/index.php?display=1&mode=play&obj=35116>> [last access 4 September 2014]



more determined. On the other hand she retains her sensitivity.<sup>133</sup> He states that she 'is not Chuck Norris or Clint Eastwood playing Dirty Harry', meaning she is not a testosterone fuelled macho man, acting out of physical strength. Instead, he claims that the character Maya is the latent violence of liberal capitalism personified, 'this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their "evil" intentions, but is purely "objective", systemic, anonymous.'<sup>134</sup>

Paul Joseph Gulino, writing specifically about the character of Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty*, makes a useful generalisation: 'Theme is often delivered through the main character and his or her character arc, or transformation in awareness about a universal truth. Here, the storytellers made a choice that undermines any chance of using the main character to serve this function.'<sup>135</sup> Like the rest of the characters in the film, Maya's character does not follow what is thought of as a traditional character arc.<sup>136</sup> The character does not change significantly over the course of the film, and it is not a change within the character that leads to a resolution at the end of the film. The lack of character development serves to flag up Maya's single notable characteristic, her doggedness, which has been described as 'Ahab-like' by reviewers on several occasions.<sup>137</sup> (The monomaniacal Ahab in Hermann Melville's novel,

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<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Žižek, 2008g, p.11.

<sup>135</sup> Paul Joseph Gulino 'Storytelling Strategies: *Zero Dark Thirty's* Expiration Date' *Script* (11 February 2013) <<http://www.scriptmag.com/features/storytelling-opportunities-zero-dark-thirtys-expiration-date#sthash.TLsnLXSI.dpuf>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>136</sup> A classic character arc is a main element of Hollywood cinema, according to Bordwell. Bordwell, 2006, p.30-34.

<sup>137</sup> A few examples are:

Matt Taibbi, '*Zero Dark Thirty* Is Osama bin Laden's Last Victory Over America', *Rolling Stone* (January 2013) <<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/blogs/taibblog/zero-dark-thirty-is-osama-bin-ladens-last-victory-over-america-20130116>> [last access 4 September 2014], Brian Egger, '*Zero Dark Thirty*', *Deep Focus Review* 01/12/2013 <<http://www.deepfocusreview.com/reviews/zerodarkthirty.asp>> [last access 4 September 2014], Mark Bowden, '*Zero Dark Thirty* Is Not Pro-Torture', *The Atlantic* (January 2013) <<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/zero-dark-thirty-is-not-pro-torture/266759/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

says Michael Davey, 'defies everyone and everything in his rageful and dogged pursuit of Moby Dick.')

<sup>138</sup>

The lack of character development makes a reading of *Zero Dark Thirty* as camp especially inviting. 'What camp taste responds to is "instant character"', says Sontag, 'and, conversely, what it is not stirred by is the sense of the development of character. Character is understood as a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing.'

<sup>139</sup>

All the characters in *Zero Dark Thirty* can all be described as 'one, intense thing'. However Maya's intensity is particular, as it is not her dramatic character but also the aesthetic presentation of her character that, in combination, give her person an exaggerated presence.

What is presented of Maya does little to contradict the idea that she is 'one, intense thing'. She is recruited into the CIA straight out of high school. The hunt for bin Laden is all she knows and all she does. She has no private life outside her job. The only hint of personal story is when Maya meets Jennifer for a drink. Jennifer asks if Maya has 'hooked up' with her colleague Jack, to which Maya replies, 'Hello, I work with him. I'm not that girl that fucks.' Maya does not lose focus of her goal because of personal relationships. Rather, she pursues them with a Joan-of-Arc like idealism, even saying in one scene to Larry (Édgar Ramírez) 'A lot of my friends have died trying to do this. I believe I was spared so I could finish the job.'

Maya's drive does not stem from any obvious physicality (a 'Chuck Norris' style machismo, as Žižek says) but from the very lack of this physicality. Her campness derives from what she is not rather than what she is. Maya is driven by ideals, not testosterone. She is prompted by reason and feeling, promoting the impression that her violent actions are a necessary evil, not a sadistic pleasure – the very thing that Žižek identifies as the disavowed

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<sup>138</sup> Michael J. Davey, *Herman Melville's 'Moby-Dick': A Routledge Study Guide and Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2003) p.3.

<sup>139</sup> Sontag, 2009, p.286.

violence of the post-political.<sup>140</sup> This disavowed violence, which makes Maya an ideological figure, is supported in the film by the highly artificial visual presentation of the character, in particular the character's androgynous qualities.

Sontag writes, 'Camp is the triumph of the epicene style. (The convertibility of "man" and "woman," "person" and "thing.") But all style, that is, artifice, is, ultimately, epicene.'<sup>141</sup> The notion of the epicene, the conflation of gender characteristics, is closely connected to Bigelow's own image as well as her films. Bigelow's films 'loosely correspond to her own persona', writes Pam Cook.<sup>142</sup> The characters in her films often share the trademarks of Bigelow's own persona, characteristics such as diligence, being 'cool and reserved', as well as a distinct epicene style.<sup>143</sup> Maya's epicene persona in *Zero Dark Thirty* is a very close copy of a certain, rather complex kind of androgyny that Cook associates with Bigelow herself:

She (Bigelow) has long hair and wears make-up, at the same time as dressing in masculine-style, dark tailored suits with simple white shirt or T-shirt. (...) This is an androgynous look, but it is not the androgyny associated with cross-dressing or gay and lesbian identity. There is, I would suggest, no vocabulary for this particular style, though it may be related to the power-dressing phenomenon of the 1980s, when women making their way up the corporate ladder to the boardroom adopted masculine-style tailored clothing with exaggerated padded shoulders. (...) What is interesting about her fashionable designer suits is that, unlike cross-dressing and drag, they do not seem to suggest a crisis or parody of gender or sexuality. Rather, they project a stylish heterosexual woman who is at ease in male clothing.<sup>144</sup>

This 'particular style' of what could be called 'power androgyny' is evident in the character of Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty* and worth dwelling on. Maya also

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<sup>140</sup> As described by Daly, Slavoj Žižek, and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (London: Polity Press, 2003) p.15.

<sup>141</sup> Sontag, 2009, p.280.

<sup>142</sup> Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004) p.232.

<sup>143</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *ibid.* p.230.

wears mainly expensive looking, dark trouser suits. Women's trouser suits are modelled on the traditional male suit which is regarded as, 'the standard masculine civil costume.'<sup>145</sup> The film communicates that the character wants to appear serious, non-frivolous: that she is doing a 'man's job'. It is noticeable that the other female character, and Maya's initial rival, Jessica, wears skirts and dresses more often than trousers.

One of the effects of wearing a suit is to de-sexualise the wearer. This goes equally for men as well as women. The suit, in the words of Rosemary Hunter, erases 'the sexed specificity of the individual (...) body.'<sup>146</sup> Rather than accentuating each person's individual figure, the suit literally uniformises an abstract masculine power by outlining the wearer's physique as an anonymous male silhouette. The suit imbues the wearer with the symbolic power of a masculine environment. In the psychoanalytic language of Žižek this is the phallus, an object through which one assumes power: 'One has to think of the phallus not as the organ that immediately expresses the vital force of my being, my virility, ... but, precisely, as such an insignia, as a mask that I put on in the same way a king or judge puts on his insignia.'<sup>147</sup>

Maya's suit is a phallic symbol. It has the effect of conveying multiple meanings. Not only is her character doing serious work in an environment delineated by stereotypically male characteristics such as violence and logic, but also she is driven by the mind over the body. Her suit is her performance as well as her persona. Moreover, as Cook suggests for Bigelow, Maya is comfortable in being that person.

There is an exemption to the trouser suit that bears scrutiny. At one point when doing field work in Pakistan, Maya wears jeans and a t-shirt. Even this

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<sup>145</sup> Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress* (Brinkworth: Claridge Press, 1994) p.3.

<sup>146</sup> Rosemary Hunter, '(De-)Sexing the Woman Lawyer', Jones, Jackie, Anna Grear, and Rachel Anne Fenton, *Gender, Sexualities and Law* (London: Routledge, 2012) pp.26–38, p.31.

<sup>147</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2003b) p.73.

outfit still conveys the idea, as Hollander suggests, of a woman dressed in male regalia, and ‘that sex is not of the issue at the moment.’<sup>148</sup>

Maya’s distinctive looks can also be classed as androgynous. Underneath the power suits, her body is small-framed and suggests fragility. She shows no archetypically female curves but neither is she heavily muscled, in the way of Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *The Terminator* (1984), or even Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in the *Alien* franchise. Maya does not wear make up, her cheekbones are distinctly masculine, but she also has voluminous red hair, porcelain skin and plump lips.

Maya’s androgyny, however, does not desexualise her. On the contrary, her androgyny conveys a sexuality often regarded be accessible only to connoisseurs. Sontag writes that ‘camp taste draws on a mostly unacknowledged truth of taste: the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists of going against the grain of one’s sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine.’<sup>149</sup>

Maya’s sexual power lies in her androgyny, making her sexuality as overt as the sexual powers associated with the excessively obvious sexuality identified by Sontag, ‘Allied to the camp taste for the androgynous is something that seems quite different but isn’t: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms.’<sup>150</sup>

Maya’s surface androgyny, her exaggerated epicene sexual characteristics, are often referred to in texts on *Zero Dark Thirty* who describe her appearance as pre-Raphaelite (e.g. Andrews, Combs).<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Hollander, 1994, p.175.

<sup>149</sup> Sontag, 2009, p.279.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Richard Combs, ‘Women in War: Revisiting Zero Dark Thirty’ *FilmComment* April 22, 2013 <<http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/revisiting-zero-dark-thirty-kathryn-bigelow>> [last access 4 September 2014], Andrews, Nigel ‘Cinema review: Lincoln, *Zero Dark Thirty* and The Last Stand’ *FT* January 24, 2013 6: 05 pm <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/626fedea-6610-11e2-b967-00144feab49a.html#axzz35qMfiaSZ>> [last access 4 September 2014]

The woman depicted in pre-Raphaelite paintings are an example of camp, says Sontag, ‘The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility. Examples: the swooning, slim, sinuous figures of pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry.’<sup>152</sup> John Hunt writes about the Pre-Raphaelites’ preference for androgyny, ‘The myth of the ideal union of male and female in one person had absorbed the Pre-Raphaelite imagination, no doubt because it provided a certain erotic fascination.’<sup>153</sup>

Christine Kortsch writes that ‘the ideal Pre-Raphaelite beauty had pale skin, green eyes, and red hair.’<sup>154</sup> This perfectly describes actress Jessica Chastain who plays Maya. The casting of Chastain must be taken at face value, as a conscious choice, designed to evoke and to elicit particular emotions and ideas in particular a certain physicality. Even before her appearance in *Zero Dark Thirty* Jessica Chastain was described by critics as pre-Raphaelite.<sup>155</sup> This look is part of Chastain’s star persona and is fostered in images, for example in photo-shoots for magazines such as *Vogue*,<sup>156</sup> and in dresses that accentuate this look, such as the dress she wore on the red carpet for the Academy Awards ceremony in 2012.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Sontag, 2009, p.279.

<sup>153</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *The Pre – Raphaelite Imagination, 1848 – 1900* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968) p.207

<sup>154</sup> Christine Bayles Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women’s Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009) p.81.

<sup>155</sup> For example: Tim Masters, ‘Is Jessica Chastain Hollywood’s best kept secret?’ *BBC* (10 July 2011) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-13974210>> [last access 4 September 2014], or Mary Greenwell, ‘Mary Greenwell Cannes Diary: Day Three’, *Vogue* (21 May 2012) <<http://www.vogue.co.uk/beauty/2012/05/21/mary-greenwell-cannes---jessica-chastain-make-up>> [last access 4 September 2014], or Marcelo Gleiser, ‘“The Tree Of Life”: Need We Choose Between Grace And Nature?’ *NPR* (August 2011) <<http://www.npr.org/blogs/13.7/2011/08/17/139680194/the-tree-of-life-need-we-choose-between-grace-and-nature>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>156</sup> Tom Shone, ‘Jessica Chastain, Hollywood’s Most Versatile Star’ photographed by Annie Leibovitz’ *Vogue* (November 2013) <<http://www.vogue.com/magazine/article/jessica-chastain-hollywoods-most-versatile-star/#1>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>157</sup> Associate curator at the TATE Diane Waggoner said, ‘When Chastain wore that great Alexander McQueen dress to the Oscars last year, that was a Pre-Raphaelite dress, very sumptuous, with the brocade.’ Susan Watters, ‘National Gallery’s Pre-Raphaelite Exhibit Stirs Power Debate’, *WWD* (February 2013) <<http://www.wwd.com/eye/design/soft-power-6804551>> [last access 4 September 2014]

Bigelow says of her choice of actress for Maya that she wanted a relatively unknown actress because, ‘in a piece like this, where you want the aesthetic to feel as real as possible, you need the audience to be able to create an original relationship with the person onscreen.’<sup>158</sup> The choice of Chastain is revealing especially as in the first instance the actress Rooney Mara was cast but had to drop out due to scheduling conflicts. Mara is similar in type to Chastain, both physically and in terms of star persona. She also has a small body frame and androgynous features. She was cast as the ‘gender outlaw’ (termed by Misty Hook)<sup>159</sup> Lisbeth Sander in the remake of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), and it would seem this androgynous persona has stuck.<sup>160</sup> Mara too was photographed by Vogue in the style of a pre-Raphaelite painting in 2011.<sup>161</sup>

The type of androgynous woman of pre-Raphaelite paintings is visually adopted in *Zero Dark Thirty*. This is evident not only in the type of actress cast for the film but also in how the film’s colour palette presents the character of Maya.

The pre-Raphaelite quality of Chastain’s features are highly suited to the visual style of orange and teal colouring.<sup>162</sup> Maya’s red hair and pale features

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<sup>158</sup> Harris, 2012.

<sup>159</sup> Misty. K. Hook, ‘Lisbeth Salander as a Gender Outlaw’, Rosenberg, Robin S., Shannon O’Neill, and Lynne McDonald-Smith, (ed.), *The Psychology of The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo: Understanding Lisbeth Salander and Stieg Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy* (Dallas, Texas: BenBella Books, 2011) pp.47–64

<sup>160</sup> The Hollywood Reporter wrote that, ‘Rooney Mara still hasn’t jettisoned the edgy, androgynous style that she initially adopted when she was cast to play punk hacker Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* in 2011.’ Elizabeth Snead, ‘Rooney Mara vs. Taylor Swift: Time For a Style Swap?’ *The Hollywood Reporter* (June 2013) <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/rooney-mara-taylor-swift-time-570696>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>161</sup> Jonathan Van Meter, ‘Rooney Mara: Playing with Fire, photographed by Mert Alas and Marcus Pigg’, *Vogue* (October 2011) <<http://www.vogue.com/magazine/article/rooney-mara-playing-with-fire/#1>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>162</sup> Michael Collins points out that the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood were ‘influenced by the Eugene Chevreul’s laws of simultaneous contrast of complimentary colours.’<sup>1</sup> And Jane Block, writes how Chevreul’s laws showed that when two complementaries are juxtaposed, ‘a greater intensity and vibrancy results in simultaneous contrast—for example, orange intensifies blue; successive contrast produces greater vibrancy between adjoining coloured passages and the characteristic optical illusion of a halo around figures.’<sup>2</sup> Chevreul’s laws of colour complementation are the foundation for the method of complementary colour

on cool background colours also create a contrast that ‘produces greater vibrancy’ and gives the ‘optical illusion of a halo.’ In many scenes Maya looks ethereal, standing out from surroundings. Her clothes are almost always a shade of blue, a complement to her hair and complexion. This is especially so in the scenes when she talks to prisoners. Her hair is always covered by a blue scarf, with the effect that her presence appears even more glowing. It is an invocation of cerebral power, standing in contrast to the male characters’ physicality, both prisoners and colleagues.

The visual presentation of Maya, her androgynous physique in orange and teal, captures a subtle menace that is generated by how her character visually seems to transcend her physical environment. This ‘disavowed violence’, as Žižek calls it, comes across especially in Maya’s interrogation scenes. When interrogating Faraj, for example, Maya does not hit him herself. With a slight hand movement she touches a guard on the shoulder who then immediately punches Faraj. Maya is the first female action protagonist in Bigelow’s films since *Blue Steel*, prompting Armond White to write in his critique of *Zero Dark Thirty* that Maya ‘gets closer than the all-male *The Hurt Locker* to articulating Bigelow’s trademark interest in the androgynous erotics of violence.’<sup>163</sup> The claim he makes is that the film, by choosing a female protagonist, imbues the film’s violence with a fetishistic eroticism, a sublime fantasy, that is not as evident in her treatment of the violence of the ‘war on terror’ in *The Hurt Locker*. This sentiment, that the film’s violence is executed through the exaggerated androgynous sexuality of Maya, echoes Žižek’s analysis of the film as a portrayal of the inherent violence of late capitalism. Žižek describes how Maya’s lack of obvious physical brutality disguises the objective, systemic violence that she conducts. Unlike the character of Dan,

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correction of the contemporary visual style of action films – ‘the ‘orange and teal’ tendency, described earlier. Michael Collins, *Towards Post-Modernism: Design Since 1851* (London: British Museum Press, 1994) p.16., Jane Block and Ellen Wardwell Leeds. *The Neo-Impressionist Portrait, 1886–1904* (Yale University Press, 2014) p.3.

163 Armond White, ‘Zero for Conduct’, *CityArts* (December 2012) <<http://cityarts.info/2012/12/28/zero-for-conduct/>> [last access 4 September 2014]



she does not get her hands dirty torturing the prisoners, she lets prison guards do the job while she remains in the background.

Maya's dogged determination and androgynous sexuality imbue her with a power of persuasion that is 'objective, systemic, anonymous',<sup>164</sup> helping her to convince the men in the film to follow her lead. The *Zero Dark Thirty* script conveys this clearly: 'The girl is a true believer – as pure as they come. Larry looks at her. Her sincerity is persuasive. And just like that, he decides to help her.'<sup>165</sup> Similarly Dan is so convinced by Maya's lead that he is willing to be the fall guy for the CIA.<sup>166</sup>

The high artifice of the character Maya is best seen in her physicality and lack of character arc. The character is exaggerated by her aesthetics; making Maya a case of camp failed seriousness. That does not mean that this failed seriousness is not to be taken seriously: rather, it indicates that a trademark of post-politics is an inherent ridiculousness. This can be determined in films such as *Zero Dark Thirty* by the ways in which this absurdity presents itself, in this case in the faintly ridiculous camp of a stylised androgyny.

### ***Zero Dark Thirty* and camp theatricality**

Sontag writes that, 'There is seriousness in Camp (seriousness in the degree of the artist's involvement) and, often, pathos.'<sup>167</sup> The aim of this analysis is to demonstrate that camp can be found in the incoherent dramaturgy of *Zero Dark Thirty*, and that this incoherence is due to an aesthetic in which the performances are overburdened with an excess of meaning.

Dramaturgy, in the traditional sense describes the coherence of a drama in terms of space, time and action. This model derives from the rules for

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<sup>164</sup> Žižek, 2008g, p.11.

<sup>165</sup> Boal, 2013.

<sup>166</sup> Dan offers to be questioned when it comes to defending the interrogation policies of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay if the agency is hauled before congress. This is the sacrifice 'Wolf' (Fredric Lehne), the director of the counter terrorism unit of the CIA, demands from Dan in exchange for CIA money.

<sup>167</sup> Sontag, 2009, p.287.

drama as formulated by Aristotle that, in turn, informed the fundamentals of modern dramaturgy as devised by Lessing for the theatre,<sup>168</sup> and again, more recently by film critics such as Bordwell, for the purpose of describing a filmic dramaturgy. Bordwell uses the term *syuzhet* to characterise the notion of how the story in film is told, 'The *syuzhet*, then, is the dramaturgy of the fiction film, the organised set of cues prompting us to infer and assemble story information.'<sup>169</sup>

However, dramaturgy implies a more complex relationship between the elements of drama. Dramaturgy gives 'aesthetic *Gestalt*'<sup>170</sup> to dramatisation, *Gestalt* being more than just form or shape but, a 'unified structure, shape, or form that is greater (i.e. more meaningful) than the sum of its parts, and which takes perceptual precedence over these.'<sup>171</sup> Dramaturgy is better described as 'the dialectics of aesthetics of dramatic presentation and performance.'<sup>172</sup> With this definition the parameters of dramaturgy have to be extended to go beyond the idea of coherence of plot, space and time, and must also include the coherence of the dramatic and its aesthetic as well as the dynamics of this coherence – in short, dramaturgy is also the coherence of dramatic performance.

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168 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1768) online text <[http://s1.teamlearn.de/LotusQuickr/b-1-mv\\_voli/PageLibraryC12571E7003E1B23.nsf/0/A4FBBA66D216CDF5C12571E7003EA235/\\$file/Was%20ist%20eine%20Tragödie%20-%20Hamburgische%20Dramaturgie.pdf](http://s1.teamlearn.de/LotusQuickr/b-1-mv_voli/PageLibraryC12571E7003E1B23.nsf/0/A4FBBA66D216CDF5C12571E7003EA235/$file/Was%20ist%20eine%20Tragödie%20-%20Hamburgische%20Dramaturgie.pdf)> [last access 4 September 2014]

169 David Bordwell, 'Principles of narration', Philip Simpson ... [et al.] (eds.): *Film theory: critical concepts in media and cultural studies*. Vol. 2. London [etc.]: Routledge, 2004, 5. 245–267. [Ursprünglich, David Bordwell: *Narration in the fiction film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, 5. 48–62] p.6,7,8.

170 Annegret Gertz & Rohmer, Rolf 'Versteckte Dramaturgien im amerikanischen Bühnen Entertainment', Peter Reichel (ed.) *Studien Zur Dramaturgie: Kontexte, Implikationen, Berufspraxis* (Tübingen, G. Narr, 2000) pp.81–135, p.132.

171 Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, 'gestalt', *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Oxford University Press, 2011. Oxford Reference. 2011. Date Accessed 23 Jun. 2014 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199568758.001.0001/acref-9780199568758-e-1108>> [last access 4 September 2014].

172 Kerstin Stutterheim, 'Was ist Filmdramaturgie – worüber diskutieren wir hier?' *GLAZ!* (2011) <<http://www.kino-glaz.de/archives/19>> [last access 4 September 2014]

The inconsistencies of the dramaturgy of *Zero Dark Thirty*, which coincide with Sontag's concept of 'failure' in terms of the logical demands of a piece in its own terms, are not the result of incoherent space, time and action. Rather they are more of a disjunction in the dramatic, between text, aesthetics and characters. To be clear, it is not a failure in terms of the craft of acting, it is not bad acting in the sense of incompetent or amateurish performance, but in the conflict between the internal logic of the drama and the logic of the characters.

There is first of all a disjunction between the film's premise as a procedural drama (the presentation of the work done by the CIA with highest possible degree of verisimilitude), and its visual aesthetics (what Bordwell would call a cinematography of 'visceral disorientation'). Procedural dramas (such as the *CSI* series or the film *Zodiac* (2007) are generally 'plot driven'.<sup>173</sup> It is the investigation that pushes the narrative forward, rather than the character's inner conflict. In *Zero Dark Thirty*, instead of a classical three act structure and character driven plot, where cause-effect relationships propel the main characters, scenes are set up as a sequence of episodes assembled in chronological order. 'It is a very, very different kind of narrative,' Amy Pascal (Sony Co-Chairman) acknowledges, 'It doesn't have three acts. It doesn't tell its story conventionally. But we felt that if, at the end, you feel the way you're supposed to feel, that after this epic but also intimate odyssey, the world has changed, then it didn't matter if there was a traditional 'character arc.'<sup>174</sup> In procedurals, such as *Zero Dark Thirty*, drama, or conflict, arises out of the hurdles that are put in the path of investigation and which have to be overcome by the protagonist; difficult superiors, failing technology, bad luck etc. However, often this conflict is decidedly un-dramatic in the film.

The film's dramaturgy plays the everyday events of CIA administration through a story of constant browbeating where one character tries to persuade

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<sup>173</sup> Neil Landau, *The TV Showrunner's Roadmap: 21 Navigational Tips for Screenwriters to Create and Sustain a Hit TV Series* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Focal Press, 2014) p.98.

<sup>174</sup> Harris, 2012.

the other.<sup>175</sup> Yet, these persuasion scenes do not provide recognisable conflict. For example, in a series of events Maya persuades her male colleagues to aid her in various ways. (She persuades Dan to ask Wolf for CIA money. With the money, Dan persuades a Kuwaiti prince to give him a phone number, and Maya talks Larry into finding the phone's signal.) None of these persuasive acts are met with resistance, only expository questions, but are presented in an aggressive manner. In filmic dramaturgy, such persuasion scenes are usually reversal scenes; reversal scenes, according to Aristotle, are scenes in which characters change their minds, are persuaded and change their motivation or goal because interests clash.<sup>176</sup> The persuasions in *Zero Dark Thirty* fail to deliver such reversal. There is no real clash of interest, people do not deliver counter arguments and the demands are always met.

In the film, the work done by CIA analysts, is in itself lacking in recognisable dramatic conflict. As Shaviro says, 'Every potentially dramatic action in which she [Maya] finds herself (bombings and armed ambushes included) is drained of drama, and subsumed within proceduralist routine. Every affect, and every reason for doing what one does, is sucked into a black hole.'<sup>177</sup> This lack of drama in the film is evident in the way it shows images of routine meetings, people doing endless research in front of old computers and staring at wall charts bearing the profiles of wanted terrorists.

However, the film's representation of the procedural slog of administration and business meetings is imbued with a heightened visual drama in the style of the 'visceral disorientation' placing the aesthetic in the genre of spy thrillers such as *The Bourne Ultimatum*.<sup>178</sup> This incoherence in the visual meaning and its content is magnified by an incoherence in the

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175 The torture scenes can be seen as the metaphorical acting out of the constant everyday persuasions the characters do to one another.

176 Elizabeth Belfiore, 'The Elements of Tragedy', Anagnostopoulos, Georgios, A., (ed.), *Companion to Aristotle* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013) pp.628–642, p.634.

177 Shaviro, 2013.

178 Referring back to earlier in the text. Bordwell, 2007a.

dramaturgy of performance in the film. The dramaturgic disjunction can be felt in the tension between the aesthetics and the dialogue.

Like many plot-driven stories, *Zero Dark Thirty* is thick with expositional dialogue. 'Its dense subject matter lends itself to exposition rather than poetics,' as one review described the film. Sarah Kozloff puts forward that, 'Expositional dialogue that seems clumsy fails adequately to cloak the fact that this information is for us, not the characters. Generally, there is something forced about the amount of specific detail crammed into presumably incidental conversation.'<sup>179</sup> In *Zero Dark Thirty*, in order to create drama through performance, the exposition heavy dialogue is performed dramatically, giving the impression that the information is 'for the characters', as Kozloff would say. For the actors to act out this information rather than to integrate into their character creates an incoherence with the other storytelling elements of the film, such as the camera techniques used. Filmic elements that also, like the performance and the dialogue, and the performance of dialogue, depend on their inner logic to fit the overall narrative.

Bordwell says this run-and-gun camera technique 'doesn't demand that you develop an ongoing sense of the figures within a spatial whole ... they exist in an architectural vacuum.'<sup>180</sup> Because the run-and-gun camera takes the bodies out of the spatial context, it forgoes an elementary part of the story – a subtext that could be found in the relationship between the body and the space it is in.<sup>181</sup> Bordwell described claims that many films hide plot holes with the help of a disorientating visual aesthetic; by relinquishing the visual subtext that is provided by clearly situating the body in space and time, these films hide the fact that such a meaning does not exist. It can be derived that this

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<sup>179</sup> Kozloff, Sarah, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2000) p.40.

<sup>180</sup> Bordwell, 2007a.

<sup>181</sup> Of course, this fragmented, decentered body is often the deliberate subject of post-modern films that want to highlight this particular alienation with the technique of the run-and-gun camera. An interesting example is the film *The Hunger Games* (2012)

visual style not only creates ‘an architectural vacuum’, but in some films, it also creates a vacuum of meaning.

That which other films would try to communicate by visual elements, visual subtext, is carried by the actual text in *Zero Dark Thirty*. The dialogue is burdened with exposition, resulting in performances that demonstrate the exposition rather than character. This has the effect that that many undramatic, procedural everyday events shown, are processed by the characters in an unnatural, theatrical manner.

As a consequence of the drama being created by the performance of the text’s exposition (since drama is not available through the film’s form) the dramaturgy undermines one of the principal elements of story telling: the notion of ‘show, don’t tell’ – the Aristotelian ideal of performance is that the diegesis should be visualised rather than expressed.<sup>182</sup> Again, this is to be understood as a ‘failure’, not in terms of failure to adhere to certain standards, but in terms of Sontag’s understanding, as an incoherence within the logical demands of a piece in its own terms. By telling the content of the scene, instead of showing it, the film produces an unsteady dynamic of how the audience receives its information.

Acting out the character, in the sense of acting the subtext rather than the character, is what Lee Strasberg would simply call acting, not being true to the ‘imaginary reality’.<sup>183</sup> He famously said to his actors when they started to act out their character: ‘No acting please.’<sup>184</sup> As soon as the character would start acting (acting out) Strasberg (standing in for the assumed the audience) would not suspend his disbelief.<sup>185</sup> In *Zero Dark Thirty*, the characters’ imbuing the expositional text with the overt dramatics of acting out their character has a

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182 Jacob Bernays, *Die Dialoge des Aristoteles in ihrem Verhältniss zu seinen übrigen Werken.* (Berlin: W. Hertz, 1863) <<https://archive.org/details/diedialogedesaroorberngoog> [last access 4 September 2014] p.6.

183 Strasberg, Lee, *The Lee Strasberg Notes* (London: Routledge, 2010) p.45.

184 *ibid.* p.110.

185 *ibid.* p.94.

similar effect. There is a suspension of disbelief in the 'reality' of the drama. It becomes overtly theatrical and consequently acquires a camp aesthetic.

This theatricality also ensues a lack of suspension of disbelief in the seriousness of the drama. Sontag writes that, 'the theatricalisation of experience (is) embodied in the camp sensibility',<sup>186</sup> meaning that in camp aesthetics events are heightened to such an extreme that they fail to be taken seriously, because they often take themselves too seriously, they become a parody of themselves.<sup>187</sup> In terms of film this means that in a camp aesthetic there is an inherent disbelief in the drama, and the suspension of disbelief is not worth while.

This is most evident in the scenes of daily interaction between the CIA agents. One scene depicts the agents being collectively excoriated by their senior supervisor George (Mark Strong). He paces among them in the conference room; the agents sit, heads down. He slams his fist on the table, shouting 'And what the fuck have we done about it, huh?' Another scene that illustrates the artificiality of performance is Maya's first meeting with the other CIA operatives. The team discusses the latest movements of bin Laden. Another agent talks about a possible sighting. The scene's purpose in terms of narrative is to convey the methodological failures of the CIA's hunt for bin Laden at the time, while at the same time revealing the personalities of Maya and Jessica. This is done by telling both plot-points through the narrative device of establishing a rivalry of work methodology, rank and philosophy between Jessica and Maya.

However, the dramatic performance in the scene does not correspond to its un-dramatic context. The difference in CIA strategy the two women represent is oddly hostile. This arises out of the circumstance that in the film the performances are often doubly loaded, the actors having to perform the

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<sup>186</sup> Sontag, 2009, p.286.

<sup>187</sup> *ibid.* p.282.

subtext of the plot as well as the subtext of the characters' emotion – what happens is an acting out of these subtexts.<sup>188</sup>

Maya's interactions with her colleagues repeatedly represent her stoicism, how she stands her ground. In her workplace she has to constantly win over colleagues and later government officials. Whenever somebody questions her she is prickly and indignant. The performance becomes most theatrical when she trying to convince her superiors to act on her intelligence.

For instance the scene in which she demonstratively writes on the door of her senior supervisor the number of days in which nothing is being done to action her intelligence. In another scene, she threatens her immediate boss, claiming that if he does not provide her with technical support he will fail to do his duty. The scene not only conveys what is going on in the story (the CIA has to acknowledge that Al Qaida is a global phenomenon rather than a distinguishable group) but also Maya's escalating monomania.

However, the seriousness of the scene is skewed by an excess of performance. The dialogue not only carries the heavy exposition of Maya's plan, but this procedural information is delivered in a dramatic way. The text is written with high emotional intensity, and the actor can do nothing but act out the emotionality in complex sentences such as, 'Either give me the team I need to follow this lead or the other thing you're gonna have on your résumé is being the first station chief to be called before a Congressional Committee for subverting the effort to capture or kill bin Laden.' There is a clash between the emotional intensity and seriousness of the situation, and the demonstrative performance of the scene, the intensity of which does not derive from the textual content. The critic Jiří Levý suggests that a good dramatist describes his characters from within, their language expression is controlled by the

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<sup>188</sup> Here the idea of to 'act out' is distinctly that of 'to directly represent in action in theatrical performance', rather than the psychological term of an *ersatz* action for personal frustration.



character and not vice versa.<sup>189</sup> The acting out of emotions as content compromises the actor's ability to act the character in a relatable way, resulting in a theatrical performance that is incongruous with the seriousness of the story.

The performers' acting out their characters' as well as the plot's subtext displays an incoherence in terms of dramaturgy as one of the minor failings that make up the film's more general quality of a failed seriousness. This surplus of meaning within the performance is responsible for the film's camp aesthetic, in the sense of Sontag's definition, it produces a 'too much', an exaggerated meaning that, in turn, causes the seriousness of the film to fail. In short, the film's aesthetics make it theatrical, too much, exaggerated and over the top – they are camp.

## Conclusion

Sontag's understanding of failure as the incoherence within the logical demands of a film in its own terms, can be confidently applied to *Zero Dark Thirty*, in that the film can be understood as a collection of minor failings that are camp. The film is camp in its over-dramatic theatricalisation of the procedural workplace, its bordering-on-caricature, incandescent protagonist and lack of character development, and visual voguishness.

By looking at Žižek's concepts of the surplus of enjoyment, the *jouissance* that stands for the too much of libidinal investment, through the parallels it shares with Sontag's concept of naïve camp, *Zero Dark Thirty*, can be regarded as an aesthetic demonstration of the ideological absurdity of the failed seriousness of western elites in the post-political. The filmmakers' goal, through the use of neutral images and characters, was to create a verisimilar account of the hunt for bin Laden, with the intent of delivering 'an

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<sup>189</sup> Trávníková, Dagmar, *The Translation and Analysis of " Butterflies are Free" by Leonard Gershe* (2005) <[http://is.muni.cz/th/53989/pedf\\_m/Diploma\\_thesis-T/](http://is.muni.cz/th/53989/pedf_m/Diploma_thesis-T/)> [last access 4 September 2014]

honest telling of the story as we know it.<sup>190</sup> In the deliberate stepping away from taking a position, be it on the subject of torture or the ‘war on terror’ itself, the film intentionally disengages with the politics of its narrative. What is left is an aesthetic surplus, the naïve camp of *Zero Dark Thirty*, the indivisible reminder of post-political ideology.

Susan Sontag writes in *Notes on Camp*, ‘It goes without saying that the camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticised – or at least apolitical.’<sup>191</sup> Recent attempts to re-politicise camp<sup>192</sup> do so in the name of postmodern identity politics, in which the idea of what is political is different to that of Sontag. For her, the personal is not political. A thoughtful description of her world view is told in *The Village Voice*:

She once told Dick Cavett, after the first of her struggles with cancer, that she didn’t find her own illness interesting. She stipulated that it was moving to her, but not interesting. To be interesting, experience has to yield a harvest of ideas, which her illness certainly did – but she communicated them in a form useful to others in ways a conventional memoir couldn’t be. (To be useful, one has to reach others on the level of thought, not only feeling – though the two are inseparable.)<sup>193</sup>

In her writing she understood how a particular experience resonates in the universal, the individual bears witness to the greater events in the world and articulates these.

Sontag’s description of camp as a-political resonates with, how the post-political is the continuing presentation and performance of politics in apolitical terms. ‘Every sensibility is self-serving to the group that promotes

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190 Kathryn Bigelow Defends Zero Dark Thirty on ‘Colbert’ *Rollingstone.com* (23 January 2013) <<http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/videos/director-defends-zero-dark-thirty-on-colbert-20130123>> [last access 4 September 2014]

191 Sontag, 2009, p.277.

192 A good example here is, Morris Meyer (ed.) *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 2011)

193 Gary Indiana, ‘Susan Sontag (1933–2004) Remembering the voice of moral responsibility – and unembarrassed hedonism, *The Village Voice* (28 December 2004) <<http://www.villagevoice.com/2004-12-28/news/susan-sontag-1933-2004/2/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

it',<sup>194</sup> says Sontag, and Žižek says, post-political ideology identifies itself in that it 'no longer lays claim to truth.'<sup>195</sup>

Camp can thus be regarded as an unconscious sensibility of the post-political, through which its a-political and a-historical ways of thinking are articulated. Following these sentiments it can be concluded that the post-political can be recognised by its campness, the camp of failed seriousness, where elites have substituted overly-dramatic narratives for politics with the purpose of making meaning.

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<sup>194</sup> Sontag, 2009, p.290.

<sup>195</sup> Žižek, 1989a, p.30.

## Part 2

### Post-politics in UK Cinema

The inability to act politically is for Žižek one of the most defining features of the post-political. By foreclosing this gesture, the only option for people is not to act but to act out. This part looks at terrorism in UK cinema through the prism of Žižek's political act, in order to analyse how this political deadlock is translated into film form in the films *Hunger* and *Four Lions*. The two films represent two artistic translations of the possibility to act. In *Hunger* the act is a political one – here the particular stands for the universal. *Four Lions* on the other hand thematises the foreclosure of this possibility in the post-political.

The foreclosure to act politically in the UK in the post-political has been highlighted by Žižek in his analysis of the London Riots. The riots took place from Saturday 6 August to Thursday 11 August 2011, following public unrest after the shooting of Mark Duggan by the police. Several buildings were burned down, shops were looted and the police arrested about 3,100 people. There have been many speculations about why these riots happened ranging from leftist interpretations of social inequality and government spending cuts, to conservative ones blaming gang culture.<sup>1</sup> A study by the London School of Economics (LSE) and *The Guardian* concluded that the rioters' motivation was a general sense of frustration, fuelled by a strained relationship with the police.<sup>2</sup> In fact the acting out of the rioters' frustrations could not be easily explained by social economic factors nor by the concept of gang culture. Instead, the incident was more often a vehicle for the media and political

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1 UK riots: text of David Cameron's address to Commons Telegraph (11 August 2011) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8695272/UK-riots-text-of-David-Camerons-address-to-Commons.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

2 Paul Lewis, Newburn, Tim, Taylor, Matthew, McGillivray, Catriona, Greenhill, Aster, Frayman, Harold and Proctor, Rob (2011) *Reading the riots: investigating England's summer of disorder*. Reading the riots, The London School of Economics and Political Science and The Guardian, London, UK. <<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/46297/1/Reading%20the%20riots%28published%29.pdf>> [last access 4 September 2014]

speakers form both the left and the right to voice their own agendas and prejudices. The rioters' actions, however, seem to point to a greater problem of foreclosure in the post-political. Žižek comments that,

The fact that the rioters have no programme is therefore itself a fact to be interpreted: it tells us a great deal about our ideological-political predicament and about the kind of society we inhabit, a society which celebrates choice but in which the only available alternative to enforced democratic consensus is a blind acting out.<sup>3</sup>

According to Žižek there is something 'inherently terroristic in every authentic act' in the way it reconstructs 'the rules of the game'.<sup>4</sup> This raises the question, are the actions and motivations of many terrorists today truly terroristic in a Žižekian sense? Does the ideological landscape allow space for such an act? And what happens if this space is denied? The answers can be sensed, at least partially in cinema. Žižek uses the psychoanalytic term of fantasy to demonstrate how cinema has the ability to display for us, and allow us to consume our own desires. He describes how people are often unable to articulate desires, either because they are deep in the subconscious or too horrible to admit. But these desires can find an outlet in cinematic fantasies.

Through investigating the cinematic depiction of terrorism – seen in a Žižekian way, as a fantasy of a liberating act – this thesis proposes that we can see if fantasies are actually fulfillable (by watching how the terrorist characters of the film are conducting their terrorist act). The films give form to the fantasy of such an act, or the foreclosure of the possibility for such an act.

The first chapter of this section analyses how the act is possible as a truly political act, and investigates how this is turned into an artistic experience in *Hunger*. The second chapter, looking at the film *Four Lions*, analyses how the post-political, in its foreclosing of an act, creates a climate in which people act

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<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Shoplifters of the world unite.' *London Review of Books* 19.08 (2011d) <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-žiček/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>4</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.377.

out. This is done by way of exposing the contradictions of the post-political in the comedy of director Chris Morris.

## Chapter 2.1

### A fantasy of emancipation: the cinema of Žižek's true act and Steve McQueen's *Hunger*

#### Introduction

A man in a rubber protective suit enters a room, looking like he is visiting a different planet, hostile to his living conditions. He begins to hose down an artistically arranged circle of shit from the wall. The whole room is covered in shit and rotten food, spread on the walls. The man proceeds very slowly and calmly but with unrelenting force. This scene from the film *Hunger* is a powerful image that brings home how the shit smeared walls of the H-Blocks at the Maze prison in Northern Ireland during the protests in the 1970s and 1980s were an ironic response to the 'civilising' sentiment of British imperialist politics. Also the scene, showing the implacable attitude of the cleaner/prison guard as an instrument of authority, is a reminder of the unswerving determination of the British government to pursue their colonialist politics.

Matthew Brown writes that this visual reminder of the dirty protests against the removal of political status for the prisoners is the limit of *Hunger's* ambition to engage with the radical politics that shaped Northern Irish identity. By concentrating on the isolated suffering of Bobby Sands, he writes, the film only provides a 'real or imagined somewhere else' instead of facing the complex social realities of the time.<sup>1</sup>

However, what is at the heart of *Hunger* is a greater desire; not to re-politicise Irish history, as Brown rightly says, but to show the radical within the Republican movement and thus go beyond a mere investigation of the intricacies of the struggles. Its effect is not that of a more complex

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Brown, 'Cities under Watch: Urban Northern Ireland in Film', *Éire-Ireland* Volume 45: 1&2, Spring/Summer, (2010) pp.56–88, p.74.

understanding of Irish history but a greater desire to create a possibility of liberation from unbearable circumstances. This chapter investigates how *Hunger* represents the fantasy of being able to liberate oneself from a social order that has become unbearable. The director Steve McQueen creates with *Hunger* a vision of an emancipatory act – the act described by Žižek in his theory of the true act. Although McQueen recreates in his film a non-fictional, 30 year old event, it evokes a contemporary fantasy for emancipatory change. Furthermore, by showing the radical ethos that determines the act, *Hunger* does not deny the terroristic character of the Republican movement.

This chapter looks at the construction of the act, following Žižek, and how it occurs in *Hunger*. The first part describes Žižek's concept of the true act in order to understand why the radicalism of *Hunger*, through the idea of the true act, goes further than just a re-imagining of the protests at the Maze prison. Five aspects of the act will be analysed, including Žižek's influences, an analysis of what does and does not make an act, as well as why Žižek regards the act as a political instrument.

The second part will look more closely at *Hunger* itself, starting with a reminder of why the idea of political status was such an important component in the self-concept of the Republican movement. This will be followed by a description of how the film fits into a cinema that tries to produce a new cultural memory of the struggles by evoking ideas of a 'stillness of image' according to Brown.<sup>2</sup> *Hunger* is investigated in its artistic presentation, its method of framing of the image, and its narrative structure, which will be addressed by dividing the film into three dramatic segments: the physical, the linguistic and the bodily.

The final part investigates how the act happens in *Hunger* and how it is possible for the film to create an acceptance of the terrorist mindset within the audience – an acceptance which is even more uncanny because it favours a radicalism that is relevant beyond the historical limits of a defused conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, 2010, p.71.



### Žižek and the true act

To explore the way in which *Hunger* does not shy away from the radical element of terrorism it is helpful to explore Žižek's understanding of the importance of cinema as platform for our fantasies, and why he would claim them to be important as a reminder of our fantasies of emancipation.

According to Žižek, cinema can show us our own potential to break with the oppressive structures that bind our freedom. For Žižek, to access a glimpse into this potential is almost impossible in real life. One needs the dimension of fantasy, especially the one created by cinema, to see beyond the ideology that determines our lives. In the documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006) he says:

In order to understand today's world, we need cinema, literally. It's only in cinema that we get that crucial dimension which we are not ready to confront in our reality. If you are looking for what is in reality more real than reality itself, look into the cinematic fiction.<sup>3</sup>

The cinema screen, for Žižek, shows how reality works by giving form to peoples' desires through showing them their fantasies. Cinema works here similar to ideology in that, 'We don't simply believe or do not believe. We always believe in a kind of conditional mode. I know very well it's a fake but, nonetheless, I let myself be emotionally effected.'<sup>4</sup>

Accessing this real reality (the Lacanian real) beyond our everyday reality (the symbolic) through the cinema screen, brings with it, according to Žižek, the possibility of changing the current reality we live in – a reality in which we are not as free as we can be. In real life we are often bound by unjust social constructs that do not allow for a change on a fundamental level. For Žižek a true emancipation of the subject can only be achieved through what he refers to as a true act.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, dir., Sophie Fiennes, (2006)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

Žižek identifies the true act as a violent reconstitution of events at a fundamental level. He insists that only such an act can bring about true political change. However, Žižek also emphasises that in the world today, dominated as it is by capitalist liberal democracy, 'in politics the space for an act is closing viciously.'<sup>5</sup>

Although contemporary politics may not provide an arena for the true act, it is still recognisable in its fantasies. These fantasies are, for Žižek, perfectly represented by cinematic fiction. So it is to cinema that we should turn in order to be shown not only the possibilities of a world that is more than our reality can give us but also a glimpse into the possibility of true emancipation.

### **The act**

Key to Žižek's ideas of a fantasy of emancipation within a cinematic narrative is the concept of the act. The act is an idea Žižek has taken from the work of Lacan and uses as the basis of his emancipatory theory. The act describes how a subject interacts with the world outside the parameters of the symbolic in such a way that he/she is, traumatically and for a short moment catapulted outside the symbolic, changing their relationship to the symbolic in the process. Lacan's concept of the act, as a gesture that reconstitutes the subject from nothing, is regarded by Žižek as a way of undoing one's link to the symbolic and its constitutive powers. It must be said that Žižek distinguishes clearly between a true or 'political'<sup>6</sup> 'authentic'<sup>7</sup> act and an 'inauthentic act'<sup>8</sup>, one which takes the form of a violent acting out – a *passage à l'acte*. Žižek poses the *passage à l'acte* as the opposite of the authentic

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5 Christopher Hanlon and Slavoj Žižek. 'Psychoanalysis and the Post-Political: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek', *New Literary History* 32, no. 1 (2001) pp.1–21, p.12. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

6 Žižek, 1999a, p.20.

7 *ibid.* p.167.

8 Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso Books, 2000) p.289.

act is a refusal *of* the Other by the subject, resulting in the dissolution and immediate reconstitution of the subject and his/her relationship to the symbolic; the *passage à l'acte* is directed *at* the Other. In a *passage à l'acte* the given symbolic order is not essentially challenged or changed; the subject still operates within its framework, addressing his/her frustration with it through impotent, hysterical violence.

This chapter, on the film *Hunger*, will concentrate on the authentic act and its political possibilities as a tool of analysis. By contrast the following chapter, which looks at *Four Lions*, deals with the *passage à l'acte*, in particular its relationship to the post-political and impossibility of politics, and uses this to elaborate the conception of the true act more fully.

The following passage looks at five particularities of the act.

*What are Žižek's main influences for the concept of the act?*

For Žižek, the 'free' subject is the result of a violent process – an idea he finds in Marxist dialectics (with its historically conditioned insistence on a proletarian revolution) as in Lacanian psychoanalysis (as the end to the psychoanalytic cure).

In the idea of the true act, Žižek brings together two concepts of how man (in the sense of human), or a collective can be free from their given circumstances.

The first concept comes from Lacan. In his *Seminar on the Psychoanalytic Act*, he describes how the subject has the ability to break with his own subjectivisation by refusing to take part in the symbolic order by the performance of an act.<sup>9</sup> As described elsewhere in this thesis, the symbolic is the linguistic structure where subjectivisation occurs, the non-natural universe that people enter at birth which then constitutes their ensuing lives.

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar XV *The Psychoanalytic Act*. Unpublished manuscript.', (1967–68)  
Translated by Cormac Gallagher. <[http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Spring\\_2000-OVERVIEW-OF-THE-PSYCHOANALYTIC-ACT-Translated-by-Cormac-Gallagher.pdf](http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Spring_2000-OVERVIEW-OF-THE-PSYCHOANALYTIC-ACT-Translated-by-Cormac-Gallagher.pdf)> [last access 4 September 2014]

The Lacanian subject is at first without meaning and finds it in its reconstitution in the concept of the symbolic order. For Lacan the subject becomes the subject by subjecting him/herself to the order of language which is what constitutes the symbolic. The symbolic, is, according to Lacan, ‘the pact which links ... subjects together in one action. The human action par excellence is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws and contracts.’<sup>10</sup>

For Žižek, Lacan’s idea of the symbolic can be seen as an attempt to describe the discrepancies between the life promised by the dominant social constructs or culture/society and the materialist realities of everyday life: for example, the contradiction between the capitalist principle of individual freedom and the actual unfreedom it produces in the lack of choices people can actually make. This is interesting, as it is parallel to the idea of the state as the product of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms.

Žižek combines Lacan’s theory of the act with the revolutionary element of Marxism. He draws on Marx’s appeal to the workers, who, for Žižek, are caught in the ‘symbolic order of capitalism’. Marx points to their only way to emancipation – to unite in solidarity and violently smash the symbolic chains that bind them to the capitalist state. As it says in the Communist Manifesto:

The Communists ... openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.<sup>11</sup>

The assumption is that there is a possibility of overcoming the dominant social order. For Marxists it is revolution, for Lacan it is the act – for Žižek they are one and the same.

To recap, for Žižek, the ‘free’ subject is the result of a violent process – in materialist dialectics (revolution) as in Lacanian psychoanalysis (confronting a

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Lacan, Miller, Jacques Alain, J. Forrester, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953–1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p.230.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Vintage Classics, 2010) p.70

trauma). The emancipatory true act means the complete overthrow of given structures. The act is a violent reconstitution of events at a fundamental level; that which was always at the heart of the old symbolic order is irreparably gone.

*What compels us to do the act?*

The paradox is that, although the act is an active deed, it is also impossible to consciously enforce. It is unplanned, the subject cannot subjectivise it, meaning he cannot make it a product of his consciousness. He can neither plan nor internalise it. The act can only be understood by the subject afterwards with hindsight. Žižek describes it thus:

The decision is purely formal, ultimately a decision to decide, without a clear awareness of WHAT the subject decides about; it is non-psychological act, unemotional, with no motives, desires or fears; it is incalculable, not the outcome of strategic argumentation; it is a totally free act, although one couldn't do it otherwise. It is only AFTERWARDS that this pure act is 'subjectivized', translated into a (rather unpleasant) psychological experience.<sup>12</sup>

This paradox of an active, yet unconscious deed, is possible because the act is governed by the 'death drive' – the inherent force that, according to Lacan, compels us to seek out pleasure in unjoyful experiences, or *jouissance*.<sup>13</sup> In the act this pleasure is gained by experiencing the falling apart of one's own subjective world. The breakdown of false symbolic social structures not only means a total annihilation of the self, which was dependent on the symbolic to give it meaning, but also means a glimpse into the realm of the non-false world, the reality beyond reality, or as Lacan calls it – the real.

Žižek's analysis might well give the impression that it is groundless, purely spontaneous, and leading to nowhere in particular. This does not stand

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<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'The Act and its Vicissitudes', *The Symptom 6*. (2005b) <[http://www.lacan.com/symptom6\\_articles/Žižek.html](http://www.lacan.com/symptom6_articles/Žižek.html)> [last access 4 September 2014] emphasis in original.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Lacan, and Jacques-Alain Miller, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2013) p.205.

in contradiction to Žižek's understanding of the act as a means to specific political ends. The agent has the ability to envision the possibility of qualitative changes in society to be able to act on this vision in the first place.

*How long does a true act take and what comes after?*

It is difficult to determine how long an act will take. The way the act is placed between an intact symbolic structure and its dissolution means that it cannot be placed within a time span that relates to the surrounding elements. Žižek (with the help of Laclau) explains, 'the irreducible "unaccountability" of an act attests to the fact that what defines an act is temporality irreducible to space.'<sup>14</sup> What this means is that, because the act cannot be subjectivised by the subject, the time it takes to happen cannot be measured by the world it is happening in. Therefore, an act could take any time from a millisecond to several years. The momentum of the act is only over once the subject has been reconstituted in a new symbolic structure. The subject has completed his transition between 'false' social structures that determine his life with the help of the act. The structures of the new 'false' life bear the possibility of a better life by starting again from nothing.

However, the human constitution needs a social structure to define its self. The agent of the act has to enter a new social order which is just as false as the old one, in that it is constructed around an ideology. As Butler writes, 'This act comes down finally to a choice not whether to enter the symbolic or not but between two alternatives already within the symbolic.'<sup>15</sup>

This does not mean that nothing is gained. By virtue of being able to start from scratch, to reconstitute oneself in a new symbolic order; the chance of creating a world which is more suited to one's needs is the prize (to gain) and the price (to be paid) of conducting a true act.

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<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2001c) p.64.

<sup>15</sup> Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005) p.24.

*Why does Žižek see the agents of the act as heroes?*

As we have seen, the act is only possible as an unplanned event, a point where the unconscious makes the decision for the subject. Žižek says;

The point of Lacan's criticism is thus that an authentic act does not (...) presuppose its agent 'on the level of the act' (with his will purified of all pathological motivations, etc.) – it is not only possible, even inevitable, that the agent is not 'on the level of its act', that he him/herself is unpleasantly surprised by the 'crazy thing' he has just done, and unable fully to come to terms with it. This, incidentally, is the usual structure of heroic acts: somebody who, for a long time, has led an opportunistic life of manoeuvring and compromises, all of a sudden, inexplicably even to him/herself, resolves to stand firm, cost it what may.<sup>16</sup>

The heroism of the act stems from the subject's willingness to annihilate the self contained within the current 'false' or symbolic social order. The hero does not operate within the boundaries of the oppressive social structure but redefines them through the act. This is why suicide cannot be classed as a true act. The performance of suicide tries to appeal to the dominating ideology, through a desperate measure – it still operates within the given social structures rather than abandoning them altogether.

Žižek finds several examples of the act in cinema. Ranging from Keanu Reeves who shoots his partner in the leg instead of firing at the terrorist in the film *Speed* (1994), to Edward Norton who beats himself up in *Fight Club* (1999) and most shocking of all, the character Keyser Söze, played by Kevin Spacey in the film *The Usual Suspects* (1995) who kills his own family rather than giving in to the demands of the criminals who are holding his family hostage. All figures are breaking with the unbearable social construct they have been placed in. They do not engage with their opponents on their own terms but instead redefine the rules of the game itself. These examples of extreme behaviour demonstrate how the fantasy of an act is perfectly at home within the narrative of cinema. In these kind of films we often get the whole

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<sup>16</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.376.

picture, we are shown the agents' own subjectivity through the medium of film, something that is hard to find and recognise in everyday life.

*What is Žižek's purpose for the act?*

One of the focal points of Slavoj Žižek's work is emancipatory politics. His mission is to show the possibilities of leftist politics in the late capitalist, post-modern world. He challenges his readers to abandon ideological fantasies and to confront the structures of their desires, the unconscious drives that can affect their actions without them knowing.

One crucial difference between Žižek and other contemporary leftist writers, such as Ernest Laclau, is that Žižek has abandoned the idea of human emancipation through a course of radical democracy. To him, the inherent contradictions of contemporary capitalist liberal democracy speak against the possibility of a true universalist project of human emancipation.<sup>17</sup> In their book *Žižek and Politics*, Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher argue that Žižek has changed the emphasis of his theory along with his political standpoint. They describe how after 1996 Žižek abandoned the idea of radical democracy completely in favour of a 'revolutionary vanguardist position.'<sup>18</sup> They argue that Žižek's exploration of the romantic philosophy of Gottfried Schelling encouraged him to switch the focus of his project from staying in the symbolic (which would mean changing the system from within through cultural critique) to fully embracing a more radical position of 'leaping into the real' and relying on more than reason to cross the 'bridge between human nature and social freedom.'<sup>19</sup>

In a politics of the true act, Žižek sees a way of achieving real emancipation from the social structures that shape the subject's world. This

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<sup>17</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006b) p.178.

<sup>18</sup> Sharpe and Boucher, 2010, p.14.

<sup>19</sup> Sharpe and Boucher, 2010, p.13–14.



means that a true act happens when an individual or society breaks with given circumstances and /or ruling ideologies.

*The act as a political instrument*

In the last ten years, Žižek's writings have concentrated on his insistence that what is required to reshape the contemporary political landscape is a radical act. He applies Lacan's prescription of a psychoanalytic cure through the act to global capitalism. For him politics and the ideological fantasies that shape it, are to be found in the Lacanian realm of the symbolic and not in the realm real, and can therefore only be disturbed on an elementary level through an act; the complete break with the symbolic, which creates a state of *ex nihilo*, a creation out of nothing.<sup>20</sup> Žižek is clear that he equates the fantasy of the individual with the collective identity of an entire people. His idea is that the radicalness of the act is the only means by which to counter the hegemony that is the stalemate of liberal democracy and its inherent contradictions. This act is by nature without compromise and is therefore always revolutionary. Marc de Kesel writes, 'Any political act disrupts the (evolution of) the symbolic order and is thus revolutionary.'<sup>21</sup>

To illustrate the way in which 'the act' works as a revolutionary event on a political landscape, Žižek uses the example of Lenin's decision to seize the moment of the start of the Russian revolution of 1917. Lenin decided to break 'his' Bolsheviks from the Mensheviks who together made up the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, with the final split happening in 1912. The Bolsheviks believed that the Mensheviks were not radical enough to ensure a true revolution of the proletariat, as the Mensheviks relied too much on legal processes and trade unions to enable a political programme. Still, both sides were shaped by Marxist philosophy. Both sides shared a common understanding of Marx's emphasis on the objective lines of history. Both

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<sup>20</sup> Žižek, 1989a, p.144.

<sup>21</sup> De Kesel, Marc 'Act Without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act', in *Studies in East European Thought*, (2004), 56 (4), pp.299–334. p.299.

parties were in no doubt about Marx's concept that a proletarian revolution can only follow a period of stable democracy.

Lenin, however, fully aware that the revolution which was unfolding would be premature, went ahead and seized the opportunity that was presented to him in the political turmoil of Russia in 1917. Žižek quotes Lenin's exclamation 'History will never forgive us if we miss this opportunity', to emphasise this point of forced decision-making as elemental to the revolutionary act.<sup>22</sup> This moment is what György Lukács called the *Augenblick*. The *Augenblick* – 'the moment when briefly, there is an opening for an act to intervene in a situation – is the art of seizing the right moment, of aggravating the conflict before the system can accommodate itself to our demand.'<sup>23</sup> Žižek embraces Lukács as the 'philosopher of Leninism'. He writes that Lukács' *Augenblick* is close to what Alain Badiou today describes as the Event: 'an intervention that cannot be accounted for in the terms of its pre-existing "objective conditions"'.<sup>24</sup> According to Žižek, historical events happen when a political situation is challenged, not within its own terms, but through acts that defy these very terms. Lenin went against his theoretic and doctrinaire absolutes by using the momentum of 1917 to go ahead with the revolution, but in doing so created and allowed for a situation of *ex nihilo* where a situation of fundamental change had been made possible. A revolutionary act acknowledges the necessity for contingency in the shaping of politics rather than assuming the outcome of political action.

The unease that is created by the uncertainty and unknowability of the outcome of a revolutionary act and, moreover, the readiness to allow for violence and terror in order create a state of *ex nihilo*, have earned Žižek's political position enormous criticism. For example, Laclau is alarmed at Žižek's dismissal of existing liberal democracies and proposes that Žižek's

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<sup>22</sup> Žižek, 2006b, p.106.

<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'György Lukács as the Philosopher of Leninism', György Lukács, John Rees, and Esther Leslie, *In Defense of History and Class Consciousness* (London: Verso Books, 2000b) pp.151–182, p.164.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

political strategies will lead to a repetition of totalitarian structures of old, structures that societies have taken years to overcome.<sup>25</sup> Sharpe and Boucher see the problem of Žižek's 'ultra extremism' in the matter that he tries to equate the concept of true political change with the overthrow of global capitalism itself.<sup>26</sup> They write, 'This is a type of change that can only mean equating politics with violent regime change, and ultimately embracing dictatorial government.'<sup>27</sup> Unimaginable for many, violence is a consequence and a method Žižek openly embraces.<sup>28</sup>

Žižek's counterargument to the accusation of promoting violence, and consequential suffering, is that the post-political environment of contemporary liberal democracies is as violent and intolerant as the maligned totalitarian regimes, it is just that the latter are more honest about their violence. The idea that modern democracy is the result of peaceful development is an illusion. The battles for better working conditions, women's rights and racial equality, and the various liberation struggles of occupied countries throughout the world in the last century, have not been advanced through mutual tolerance and peaceful protests. Moreover, Žižek points out, that within the system of capitalism with the concept of liberal democracy at its centre, 'resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism.'<sup>29</sup> The systemic violence of capitalism is its inherent, tolerated and even promoted material inequality as well as the violence concomitant with imperialist endeavours.

Žižek is well aware of the deficiencies of past revolutions and the resulting horrors which are far more unequivocal than the violence that has been the result of global capitalism. These failures are to be critiqued rather

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<sup>25</sup> Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.289.

<sup>26</sup> Sharpe and Boucher, 2010, p.182

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p.183

<sup>28</sup> Žižek, 2008b, pp.157–210

<sup>29</sup> Žižek, 2008g, p.11

than emulated.<sup>30</sup> However, Žižek defends the revolutionary impulse that allowed for a change to happen in the first place. Žižek criticises the injustices of political violence that were the failures of these revolutions but maintains that 'divine violence' is a welcome disruption of unwanted hegemony and a real representation of the will of the people. (Divine violence is a term Žižek takes from Walter Benjamin and is an idea of violence that is not defined by the signifiers of the ruling ideologies – the rule of the law. Divine violence 'is just a sign of the injustice of the world, of the world being ethically, 'out-of-joint'.<sup>31</sup> And it is often in the form of an act that divine violence is executed.)

*Final comments on the act*

Žižek follows a path of modern Marxism in the way that he seems to ask: 'Why do the people not rebel?' Since the failure of the communist movement in Europe after World War I, Marxists have searched for an answer to why Marxism failed to take hold in the working classes. The philosophers of the Frankfurt School blamed it on the capitalist invention of a culture industry as a social system that kept the working class from discovering the contradictions of capitalism. Žižek seems to come to a similar conclusion about postmodern society. Today's pluralistic discourses give the illusion of freedom in the same way the culture industry does. For Žižek, it is the denial of a real alternative to capitalism that prevents subjects of breaking away from dominant ideology.

For Žižek, only through a true act can we escape the given circumstances. The authority of liberal politics prevents the politics of actual change. By dismantling the other, postmodernism has taken away the space to protest, it has become difficult to oppose authority itself. It is this assumed abandonment of ideology, by aspects of postmodernist distance, that allows ideology to work in the social. Only by recognising that the postmodern post-political age is in itself ideological (through the methods of ideology critique)

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<sup>30</sup> Matthew Sharpe, and Geoff M. Boucher, 2010, p.7.

<sup>31</sup> Žižek, 2008g, p.169

can we find its own negation within – the antithesis that will bring us in touch with the real and from where new forms of desire emerge.

Žižek is clear that there is such a thing as ‘good terror’ – that which as a political act brings about the liberation of the subject. But, as we have seen, for Žižek one terrorism is not like another. The terroristic element of the act is in its true radicalism to completely dispatch the ruling ideology. A terrorist action that does not hazard these consequences is not an act, but a mere gesture, still operating within the symbolic order. The agent of an act also needs a certain readiness in terms of a conscious awareness of his/her dire situation as well as an affinity to fantasise about radical solutions to his problems.

For Žižek film, with its potential to visualise our fantasies, can show the dimension that lies beyond symbolic social structures – the reality beyond reality. Fantasy as expressed through the medium of film, is the most direct way to access the inert potential which may be denied in the symbolic structures in which we live. According to Žižek, cinema can show us the possibilities of the Lacanian real by tapping into our desires and potentials; for Žižek they are often one and the same, as in the case of the true act.

### ***Hunger* and the importance of political status**

*Hunger* is the directing debut of the Turner Prize winning artist Steve McQueen. It is set in 1981 in H.M. Maze prison (also known as Long Kesh or H-Blocks) in Northern Ireland, in which the British government interned paramilitary prisoners under arduous conditions. The film deals with the accounts of the hunger strike conducted by members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The first third of the film focuses on the life on the prisoners inside. The rest of the film converges on the character of the Irish republican Bobby Sands (played by Michael Fassbender) and his decision to lead a hunger strike in protest against the treatment of the prisoners by the British government.

In the film, the character of Bobby Sands makes a comment that addresses the discrepancy between the urgency of the protesters' demands and the needs of the people outside the prison. 'Some woman bringing up three children in West Belfast shouldn't care about civilian clothing or whatever they call these clown outfits,' referring to the prisoners' demands to wear their own clothes instead of prison uniforms. To understand the significance of the protesters demands for political status in the film, it is necessary to have an understanding of the real life political importance of gaining political status for the prisoners at the time.

The blanket and dirty protests were the initial reaction by the paramilitary IRA prisoners of the Maze prison to the announcement by the British government in 1976 that they had been stripped of their status as political prisoners.<sup>32</sup> Instead they were classified as common criminals without any of the rights that were guaranteed to political prisoners. To the prisoners, as well as the IRA members outside, the removal of political status was a clear attempt by the British government to not only mark the prisoners as criminals but also to attempt to criminalise the Republican project in general.

From 1978 onwards, out of protest, the prisoners refused to wear the uniforms given to them which would mark them as felons, instead going naked or making provisional clothes from prison blankets. Due to the violence they experienced at the hands of the guards, the prisoners would refuse to leave their cells. No alternatives were offered to the prisoners and they resorted to demonstrations and protests by refusing to slop out their excrement. Instead they smeared their shit and rotten food onto the walls of their cells. IRA member Pat McGeown described the conditions inside the prison in a 1985 interview,

There were times when you would vomit. There were times when you were so run down that you would lie for days and not do anything with the maggots crawling all over you. The rain would be coming in the

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<sup>32</sup> This right was granted to them four years earlier following a hunger strike led by the Republican Billy McKee.

window and you would be lying there with the maggots all over the place.<sup>33</sup>

The psychological strain of living in these conditions took its toll on the prisoners, and the British government showed no signs of giving in. After two years of dirty protest, the prisoners decided to step up their methods and resorted to hunger strike. After a hunger strike in 1980 failed to secure the prisoners' demands, the prisoners decided on a second strike in March 1981, this one led by Bobby Sands. He was chosen at the end of the 1980s as commanding officer by the imprisoned members of the IRA at the Maze prison. This time they changed their tactics and would start the strike two weeks apart, thus guaranteeing that there was constant pressure on the British government. The hunger strike was called off on 3 October 1981; ten strikers had died by that day.

Having their status as political prisoners taken from them and with it their political legitimisation, the IRA in turn called for an indiscriminate assassination policy for members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) stating 'We are prepared to die for political status. Those who try to take it away from us must be fully prepared to pay the same price.'<sup>34</sup> The IRA were very clear; the criminalisation of the prisoners was also a criminalisation of Republican politics. Only when understood as a group with a political agenda could they fight against the foreign rule of the British Government legitimately, on equal terms, as political enemies on opposite sides.

### **The conceptualisation of *Hunger* and the art of Steve McQueen**

*Hunger* is based on true events that are still in living memory. Matthew Brown writes that films such as *Hunger* and *Omagh* (2004), still maintain an 'awareness' of their political past. They feed on the symbolic meanings evoked by potent images of the struggles. The reproduction and use of these images

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33 Gary McGladdery, *The Provisional IRA in England: The Bombing Campaign 1973–1997* (Ireland: Irish Academic Press, 2006) p.352.

34 *ibid.* p.350.

creates an uncanny sensation. Brown uses Mulvey's theory of *Stillness and the Moving Image*<sup>35</sup> to explain how filmmakers such as McQueen, by using past events as subject matter, can address contemporary notions about political processes, especially in Northern Ireland. He writes, 'In the terms set down by Mulvey, these films are intentionally uncanny, for they mean to disturb the contemporary moment by bringing to life old but familiar memories and to raise a series of larger questions about how these memories are politicised, memorialised, and positioned within contemporary narratives about political 'progress' in Northern Ireland.'<sup>36</sup>

*Hunger* shows a new way of visualising collective memory in order to investigate contemporary attitudes and sensibilities. It is uncanny in the way described by Brown. Apart from its minimalist soundtrack, there are three main areas in which this uncanniness is experienced; in its artistic method, its use of the camera and its unusual structure. The score is often only a single piano note, designed to break a silence that would otherwise become too emphatic, a facsimile of realism, and this is avoided by the introduction of audible reminders of the artificiality of the medium.

*Hunger* does not attempt a politically interpretative, historically revisionist account of the events at the Maze prison unlike, for example, the film *H3* (2001). Instead it shows fragmented visions of violence and defiance, never actively engaging with the past on an interpretative level – it is not interested in historical contextualisation. Yet, the fact that the IRA understood itself as entirely political in its actions is what drives the plot in *Hunger*. In the film, McQueen thematises the identification of the individual with his politics, in the way that the characters are in themselves politics personified. He creates this understanding though his unusual cinematic language.

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35 *Stillness and the Moving Image* stipulates that modern technology, with its properties of freeze framing the image, enables us to view narrative as document and thus produces a possibility to regard the cinematic object through a fetishising lens rather than a voyeuristic one. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24 X A Second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005)

36 Brown, 2010, p.72.



In his art, McQueen relies on the viewers' capacity to appreciate artistic capabilities, their ability to engage with the subject matter on a fundamental level by experiencing his art as a reflection on, not a description of, reality. His films and installations do not tell but show. The *Guardian* wrote about his Paris installation *Pursuit* (a dark room designed to disorient), 'As with *Queen and Country* (his project as official war artist in Iraq: a collection of commemorative stamps featuring soldiers who died in the conflict), he makes us do the work, provokes us into deciding where we stand. It is a complicated business.'<sup>37</sup> This statement expresses not only the frustration of the viewer of applying him/herself (only to have to come up with his own conclusion in the end) but also the liberation felt by many of his admirers, such as the art critic T.J. Demos, of experiencing art that embraces difficult and political subjects in all their cultural dimensions without trying to explain them. For Demos, McQueen's works are a representation of his interpretation of Deleuze's idea of *cinéma vérité*, a cinema 'that has destroyed every model of the true' and has in itself become the creator of truth. Demos writes about McQueen's work: 'The liberating outcome of this disruption of truth, (...), is that the audience is activated on an interpretive level, just as the filmed subject is released from its representational capture.'<sup>38</sup>

In his approach McQueen embodies ideas of representation and identity in which the concept of awareness, rather than change, is the limit. However, by creating an artistic experience of an overwhelming feeling of alienation, McQueen has combined fashionable modes of identity with artistic ingenuity that allows for a more profound insight into the human condition in the post-political. In his narrative films that followed *Hunger, Shame* (2011) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013), the protagonists also experience a world of unreason. In *Shame*, Brandon (Michael Fassbender) cannot connect with other people in a

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<sup>37</sup> Adrian Searle, 'Last post', *The Guardian* (12 March 2007) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/mar/12/iraq.art>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>38</sup> Demos, T.J. 'The Art of Darkness: On Steve McQueen', *October*, no. 114 (Fall 2005) pp.61–89, p.83.

meaningful way. His life is symptomatic of a world in which people find themselves without universal moral absolutes. In *12 Years a Slave*, free African-American Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) is captured and sold into slavery, finding himself in a world that does not recognise his humanity. Speaking in Žižekian terms, McQueen's films are an experience of unreason, constantly being pushed towards the real of their symbolic order.

McQueen developed his strategies in the 1990s with the creation of several films and videos that often played with ideas of representation. For instance *Bear* (1993), a black and white film which shows the artist wrestling with another man, is an unusual montage of closeups and camera moves exploring the two bodies.

The film evokes questions of black identity, violence and homoerotic pleasures. McQueen applies a similar filmic exploration of the body to the depiction of the emaciated body, an artistic scrutiny of the issues literally and metaphorically contained within the body of Bobby Sands in *Hunger*. McQueen relies on an aesthetic complexity to evoke the complications of conflict within society. He demonstrates how the camera frame can be used to show the multifaceted intricacies of the social space and the histories that shaped it and the people who inhabit it. For example, *Carib's Leap* (2002) explores issues around the postcolonial history of the Island of Grenada by contrasting images of a person free-falling next to images of life on the island today. Here McQueen explores the desperation that drove the Caribs to jump to their deaths in 1651, rather than surrendering to the French, and how this history still shapes today's understanding of the place and its inhabitants. Like *Hunger*, *Carib's Leap* is impelled by the question of what drives people to take unbelievably drastic measures in desperate situations, and how these decisions reflect on society today.

McQueen approaches his subjects with a neutrality that opens up the possibility of examining the paradoxes that inhabit his chosen subject and to 'see' within the image the complexities of what constitutes reality. Adrian Searle writes in the *Guardian* that, 'Instead of 'taking you out of yourself' his

films remind you of your own presence, in a particular space, engaging with the particularities of what is happening in the here and now of the cinematic experience.<sup>39</sup> Searle describes how McQueen can be understood more as an artist rather than a traditional Hollywood director, as his films provide an engagement with the character's alienation rather than an identification with it. McQueen's films do not provide an empathic recognition or 'illusionism' as Martin Walsh calls the *self-effacing* means of representation in Hollywood films.<sup>40</sup>

McQueen's video art and narrative films work with the use of the camera frame as a re-imagination of the artistic frame of a painting or photograph, with the difference that in his artistic frame the objects depicted are alive, or non-static. He plays with the camera's ability to break completely with conventional forms of narrative by providing the viewer with unusual frames; for example, by throwing the camera around in his film *Catch* (1997), he literally throws commonly held assumptions to the wind. He thus creates a sensation of a failure of illusion by providing a new way of looking and consequently seeing the subject of his art. His installations convey forms of experience without providing answers as such.

McQueen applies to his films the same principles of showing, seeing and experiencing that he applies to his art installations. *Hunger* is never explicit about its narrative, nor does it attempt to tell the whole story.

For example, the film's second scene opens with a striking picture of hands being washed clean of blood, the knuckles bruised from a beating. They belong to a warden (Stuart Graham) at the Maze prison. This powerful visual metaphor for state violence seems to set the tone for the rest of the film.

However, it is not as easy as that. The warden is representative of the idea of 'Irish prison warden at the time' – a character created as shorthand to

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39 Adrian Searle, 'Into the unknown', *The Guardian* (8 October 2002) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2002/oct/08/artsfeatures.art>> [last access 4 September 2014]

40 Martin Walsh, 'Political Formations in the Cinema of Jean-Marie Straub'. *Jump Cut* 1 (December 1974): pp.12–18. <<http://www.jumpcut.org/>>

visualise the concept of the quotidian ritualised violence. The warden is shown in several small scenes throughout the film; living his life as a Northern Irish Unionist prison warden in 1981, no more no less. These events are shown to us and are thus experienced as witnessing his (the warden's) normal daily routine; from eating breakfast, checking his car for bombs, bantering with his colleagues, visiting his mother in an old people's home. He is eventually shot by the IRA.

Through its observational approach, by showing and experiencing rather than by explaining the situation (either visually or with dialogue) *Hunger* puts its audience in a position where they have to witness and thus in a way experience the problematics of British policy in Northern Ireland at the time. McQueen says, 'In *Hunger* there is no simplistic notion of 'hero' or 'martyr' or 'victim'. My intention is to provoke debate in the audience, to challenge our own morality through film.'<sup>41</sup> McQueen uses the camera to break with the assumptions we have about our social world by breaking our habitual ways of watching film. In turn he presents the viewer with a creatively reinvented form of viewing.

Another way *Hunger* creates a new form of viewing is through the images themselves. The camera rarely moves. The frame has the actions unfold within it, like a painting with added movement. McQueen says: 'When you look at a Velasquez or a Goya painting, the composition of the image holds your gaze – their painting has an attractiveness and questioning. What you are attracted to, you can also be repulsed by.'<sup>42</sup> And, as in painting, we are made to look at the slow paced action for extended amounts of time. This recalls Mulvey's theory of *Stillness and the Moving Image*, as described above by Brown, where the uncanny feeling is created by the still image. In *Hunger* the stillness of the image and the slowness of the camera are experienced not as a 'halt in

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[//www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JCo4folder/Straub.html](http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JCo4folder/Straub.html)> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>41</sup> Interview McQueen, Steve 'Hunger Production Notes', received from maplectures (May 2008).

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

time', as would be in a freeze frame, but the stillness, as Mulvey describes it, imbues the image with an uncanniness, it 'comes to life', 'provi(ded) with a secret, with a hidden past that might or might not find its way to the surface.'<sup>43</sup> Mulvey describes how the still image works just like a 'photograph', in allowing for 'the presence of time to emerge within the image', the stillness thus evokes a sense of time passing.<sup>44</sup> McQueen says about his film, 'It is that whole idea of looking at how big an idea could be.'<sup>45</sup> *Hunger* is shot on 2 perf 35mmd, and has a rather wide aspect ratio of 2:35:1. McQueen says that by 'using this ratio there is always something else in the frame which makes a narrative.'<sup>46</sup> The size of the frame and the slowness of the image makes the image a live painting to be studied through the experience of time passing. One scene shows a prison corridor being cleaned with disinfectant. The camera is static; we see a guard sweeping the concrete corridor, coming closer and closer to the camera. Time moves slowly, the spectator has to endure the pace, imprisoned by the frame. The slow pace and the scraping noises of the brush are inductive to an uncanny sense of a real prison. Great emphasis is placed on the tangibility of the real concrete.

For the film, an identical replica of the prison was built and used as set. This is crucial to the film's cinematography. The camera's position and manoeuvrability is dictated by the space, resulting in a distressing and inescapable nearness to the subjects in the frame. The heavy doors of the prison cells, that convey dread and finality when slammed shut, are the actual doors of the original Maze prison, salvaged by the set designers. McQueen lets the restrictions given by the space dictate the positions of the camera. The dimensions of the prison cell, the walls covered with food and faeces, the unwashed prisoners living in their own filth and the feeling of being locked in are palpable.

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<sup>43</sup> Mulvey, 2005, p.67.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* p.66.

<sup>45</sup> *Hunger* (Pathe, 2009), McQueen, Steve (dir.).

McQueen's filmic sensibilities refuse to deliver a moral or political positioning. Rather, he wants to create with the camera a mirror of contemporary Britain, 'What we did here was a film about reflection, about our choices and our past, how we think of ourselves as a nation and what we have done. So I hope the debate following the viewing of the film will be about who we are.'<sup>47</sup> He believes that, by the virtue of the image (its stillness, its aspect ratio and claustrophobic framing of the film) the observer becomes an extension of the camera. McQueen deliberately refocuses the viewer's gaze onto the details of individual behaviour, rather than the bigger picture of historical complexities, and by doing so addresses the universal principles that are determined by the character's alienation from their immediate material reality and the political systems that determine their meaning.

### **A narrative of three parts**

*Hunger* is segmented into three sequences, roughly 40 minutes, 23 minutes and 22 minutes long. I will term them loosely as:

1. The physical: the prisoners are seen rioting with the guards and by engaging in a dirty protest against the oppressive system. It is a physical confrontation of the self with the outside world.

2. The linguistic: This is a scene between Sands and Father Dominic. The debate between the two men allows us to hear and consider the arguments for and against the dramatic undertaking of a strike. This can be interpreted as an intellectual confrontation with the outside world.

3. The bodily – Sands' actual starving of himself. Different to the physical, here the self has been replaced by the body, and has been by erased from the world leaving an undead corpse. Looking at these in detail reveals

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<sup>46</sup> Interview McQueen, Steve '*Hunger* Production Notes', received from maplectures (May 2008).

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

more clearly the narrative structure and the cinematic composition of McQueen's artistic idea.

### *The physical*

An unsettling feature of *Hunger* is its narrative structure which consists of three segments that, although linear in time, are thematically broken up. The first of these dramatic parts is mostly a graphic enactment of the 'dirty' and 'blanket' protests at the Maze prison as experienced by new arrival Davey Gillen (Brian Milligan). McQueen does not hold back when depicting the life of the inmates inside the cell blocks. The camera shows, without flinching, shit and vomit smeared on the walls, piss flooding the corridor and the brutality of the guards dealing with the prisoners. The camera's framing of the image provides a real sense of claustrophobia and danger. The willingness of the prisoners to go through unbelievable discomfort when participating and living in the 'dirty' protest, or when smuggling information and utensils is shown in frame after frame, yet the protesters themselves are resilient. They are vulnerable but defiant, not doubting their political position. Toward the end of the sequence we witness a routine inspection of the prisoners. The RUC are called in to enforce the inspection. The prisoners are made to run past the officers armed with truncheons, and are using them to bang their shields noisily as well as beat the prisoners. The scenes of the lives of the prisoners are intercut with scenes from the life of the prison warden as described earlier. The first act finishes with the guard being shot in the head whilst visiting his apathetic mother in an old people's home.

### *The linguistic*

The second part is a scene set in 1981 in which Bobby Sands tells a priest, Father Dominic Moran (Liam Cunningham), (whom he calls Dom), of his decision to intensify the campaign against criminalisation through embarking on a Hunger strike, to the death if necessary. In the talk, Sands confesses to

the priest an incident from his youth, which becomes the metaphorical explanation for the act he is about to commit.

This scene consists almost entirely of a single shot of the two men sitting opposite each other in a Maze prison meeting room. The scene is back lit with the faces of the characters largely indecipherable. The content is the conversation, and it is through the conversation that Sand's deeds are contextualised. This scene is again split into three parts. For the first 8 of the 23 minute long scene, the men engage in small talk about Dom's career in the church, how he was passed over for a nice countryside parish in favour of his brother and how he is now stuck in the middle of the struggles in impoverished Belfast. In the second part of the conversation which is 11 minutes long, Sands informs the priest about his plans to commence with another hunger strike on the first of March. Dom asks about what would be different about this strike since the ones before have been fruitless acts of protest Sands makes it very clear: 'The last hunger strike was flawed. It became emotional.' He explained that when people were faced with death they stopped the protest and then were 'conned by the Brits'. Father Dominic then spells out the main argument: 'So what makes this protest different is that you're set to die, Bobby?' He now knows that this protest will be different as the participants are indeed ready to die – yet, as Sands clarifies, they are not killing themselves dramatically in a grand gesture of protest. Instead he has devised a strategy in which, slowly, one by one 'the men will start consecutively, two weeks apart'. This time it will not be about negotiation but making a political stance. Sands declares, 'We could do that (negotiate), Dom, or we could behave like the army we proclaim to be and lay down our lives for our comrades.' By highlighting the reasoning behind Sands' plan, *Hunger* describes how the prisoners do not go on strike in order to communicate with the state, they do not acknowledge the Other in their political plan. Their



decision to do so is the political act involving a 'subjective destitution' and accepting the role of, to use Žižek's fitting words, 'excremental remainder.'<sup>48</sup>

The two men then engage in an argument about the morals of such a deed. Dom is adamant that this endeavour is nothing less than irresponsible murder, arguing that the British Government 'can easily live with the deaths of what they call terrorists.' Sands does not stop at blasphemy to make his argument 'Jesus Christ had a backbone, but see them disciples, every disciple since, you're just jumping in and out of the rhetoric and dead-end semantics. You need the revolutionary, the political soldier, to give life a pulse, direction...' By the end they cannot come to an agreement; Sands cannot convince the priest with his political arguments. The strike is not rational in the political struggle, the act is only meaningful in its own right.

In the last, six-minute sequence of the scene Sands tries to make his point clear through a parable by telling Dom about an event that happened when he was on a cross country run as a 12 year old boy. Here, significantly, is the first time the camera cuts away from the shot of the two men and the rest of the scene is cut between close ups of the hands and faces of the two men especially Bobby Sands, as he is telling the story. This change of distance to the characters follows the change in time and space of events, Sands' political decision is linked to his personal history. He talks about how (during their warm up) his running team came across a dying foal which was in mortal pain.

Whilst the other boys were arguing what was to be done, one of the supervising priests saw the group of boys and believed them, an uncouth group of rough Belfast boys, to be guilty of the foal's misfortune. Sands makes a decision and drowns the foal. He had nothing to lose, as they were considered guilty anyway, and took responsibility for not only ending the animal's suffering but also for his own convictions. The same way he is now clear of his own convictions. He says, 'I'm clear of the reasons, Dom. I'm clear of all the repercussions. I will act and I will not stand by and do nothing.'

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<sup>48</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.161.

Father Dominic has nothing left to say. He now knows that Sands' ambition is genuine. 'I don't think I'm going to see you again, Bobby', doubly meaningful, confirming Sands should not assume that God will await him in paradise.

Sands is now even more certain 'There's no need, Dom.'

Sands had entered this talk with doubts, not about his plans but about his soul. He asks: 'God's going to punish me?' To which Dom replies 'Well, if not just for the suicide, then he'd have to punish you for stupidity.' At the end of the talk his doubt has been abandoned, Dom's attitudes only confirming that his political choice will grant him personal freedom.

Sands says in arguably the most revealing passage in the film: 'My life means everything to me. Freedom means everything. I know you don't mean to mock me, Dom, so I'll just let all that pass. This is one of these times when we've come to a pause. It's a time to keep your beliefs pure. I believe that a united Ireland is right and just. Maybe it's impossible for a man like you to understand, but having a respect for my life, a desire for freedom, an unyielding love for that belief, means I can see past any doubts I may have. Putting my life on the line is not just the only thing I can do, Dom. It's the right thing.' Sands' speech is a good reflection of Žižek's idea of the hero that emerges through the act. He 'resolves to stand firm, cost it what may.'

### *The bodily*

The last sequence of the film focuses on Sands' slow decline by starvation, ending with his death. The scene plays out as a 22 minute long wait for Sands to die. Little is spoken, everything is shown in a montage of scenes. The framing is dictated by Sands' emaciated body.<sup>49</sup> He is covered in sores, too weak to stand or even sit and the camera is delicate, communicating the fragility of its subject.

He looks like a living cadaver, too resigned to his fate to communicate with the world, which in turn is constantly tempting him back into its social

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<sup>49</sup> Actor Michael Fassbender starved himself to a weight of 59 Kilos for the part.

order by placing meals next to his bed. When his death comes, Sands' face is intercut with images of himself as boy running cross country. The conversation with Father Dominic has established this as a formative ideal. The tears he sheds by his dying body are overwhelming in their humanity – his expression is a complex mix of emotion, ranging from sadness and anger to joy. This image seems to confirm that his act was not achieved through his suicide, but that it has happened before, his death was a consequence, a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

The three acts of *Hunger* are paced in a way to allow for a real impact of what is shown. The first part is almost without dialogue. This is where the outside violence happens either by beatings or quiet imprisonment, and this violence is demonstrated visually and audibly in acute clarity. Whereas the first part is a collection of scenes, the second part happens in real time. McQueen compares the conversation between Sands and Father Dominic to the tennis matches between Jimmy Connors and John McEnroe; two personalities who were able to hold the audience's attentions with their sheer determination. The third part is a 'free-fall' – it is a 'letting go' after the areas of the physical and the linguistic have been completely exhausted.<sup>50</sup>

Brown's idea, that *Hunger* is part of a canon of films that aims at creating a new cultural memory of Northern Ireland places the film into a position of wanting to literally review history. This assumption has to be put into the context that McQueen is not interested in showing the greater political framework of the world the characters inhabit. What interests him is how people can go to such extremes using their own physicality. He wants to show how the conditions that people are put in inspire them to such conviction to abuse their own bodies to such a degree that it becomes unliveable. In the film's press release McQueen states 'What I wanted to convey is something you cannot find in books or archives: The ordinary and extraordinary, of life in

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<sup>50</sup> *Hunger* (Pathe, 2009), McQueen, Steve (dir.).

this prison. Yet the film is also an abstraction of what it is to die for a cause.<sup>51</sup> McQueen's political reading may be limited to a mere recontextualising of the life at the Maze prison through a reframing of history. However, the nature of art, especially art as skilled as McQueen's, achieves to transcend an artist's own vision and will reveal a much greater political idea. By showing a true act in *Hunger* McQueen inadvertently embraces the terroristic mindset as the driving force of his character.

### **The act in *Hunger***

It can be argued that finding the fantasy of a true act within the narrative of *Hunger* shows that the film goes beyond a mere reviewing of past events but shows that the film does not see the terroristic mindset as a problem but as a necessity for emancipation in a Žižekian sense.

Intriguingly, at first glance Sands seems to do exactly the opposite of what we associate with Žižek's idea of a true act. In the film, Sands does two things of that Žižek explicitly warns are mere gestures that have nothing to do with a real act. 1. He commits suicide, which according to Žižek is more often than not a demonstrative gesture that by its nature (the wish to appeal) still tries to relate to the symbolic order.<sup>52</sup> And 2. Sands is clear about his project. The hunger strike is a planned and calculated enterprise – it is intentional. Žižek clearly states that the act happens almost by accident, as something that spontaneously arises without having to be consciously thought up. Yet, one is totally accountable for it. 'The paradox of the act thus lies in the fact that although it is not 'intentional' in the usual sense of the term of consciously willing it, it is nevertheless accepted as something for which its agent is fully responsible – 'I cannot do otherwise, yet I am nonetheless fully free in doing

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51 Interview McQueen, Steve 'Hunger Production Notes', received from maplectures (May 2008).

52 Heil, 2010, p.87.

it.<sup>53</sup> If Sands' suicide cannot in itself be regarded as an act, does the act happen at all?

In *Hunger*, the prisoners' protest against the state is by refusal. The refusal to part take in the British government's assaults on the individual person as well as on the Irish nation as a whole. These assaults range from the general oppression imposed by British policies in Northern Ireland, to imprisonment and physical abuse. It is through protest by refusal, that Sands and his fellow prisoners want to bring about the condition for real political change. The three acts in *Hunger* can be seen as three different levels of refusal. The physical – as the refusal to co-operate with the system, the linguistic – as the refusal to compromise, and the bodily – as the refusal of the self to participate in the false reality of the symbolic order.

One would assume that the act would be found in the last part as, as established earlier, it is this refusal to take part in the symbolic order, that constitutes the Žižekian act. However, I would argue that Sands' starvation in *Hunger*, how it is shown to us, is simply a technicality. For 22 minutes we see Sands in the last stages of the *Hunger* strike, but he may as well be dead already. It is his form that is bathed, salved, being talked to – scrutinised not only by the people around him but by the camera, by the spectator. We see food presented to him but he is out of focus – Sands is already out of the picture.

The long, meticulous third act, ending in death, demonstrates that Sands has not been part of the symbolic order for a long time. He is only a shell. However, this opting out of the symbolic order can only be fully appreciated after having witnessed his physical state and how he is framed within his environment for over twenty minutes. Only then can we realise that an act must have happened much earlier. At the beginning of this last part the act has already happened.

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<sup>53</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.376.

Could the act have happened in the second part of the film? In the second part we see a refusal to compromise. When Sands meets Dom he is already set on his plan. The priest uses compelling arguments against – accusing Sands of egotism, seeking some kind of iconic martyr status without any real chance of winning. ‘So, what’s your statement by dying?’, he says, ‘just highlighting British intransigence, so fucking what?’ He accuses him of not being mentally stable enough, after the suffering he has endured so far, to make a decision like this. This does not contradict Žižek’s idea of an act, since as we know the act is not achieved through rational thought. Anyway, Sands has already made his decision:

Sands: ‘The strategy’s in place.’

Dom: ‘Then stop it. Just say stop.’

Sands: ‘You don’t understand a thing.’

[Sands accepts and even seeks his own death, not as an end in itself or an advertisement of his righteousness, but for a constructive purpose.]

Dom: ‘You’re in no shape to make this call.’

Sands: ‘It’s done. It won’t be stopped.’

What becomes clear by the end of their talk is that Sands needs the talk, not because he is unsure about his moral and political impact, but because he needs to spell out that his decision is a personal one, enforced by the unrelenting British government – a decision which he has not been given a choice to make. As in his encounter with the dying foal, he has not been given the chance for a fair solution. The British government will not grant him the political status that he needs for a fight on equal terms. Only by creating a situation of *ex nihilo*, a creation ‘out of nothing’, through an act, can he escape the dire situation he is in. In turn his political situation enabled his act.<sup>54</sup> As Žižek states, ‘The act defines its own conditions.’<sup>55</sup>

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54 *ibid.* p.86

55 Žižek, 1991, p.192

In the second part of the film Sands can already articulate his actions and his positions, he can subjectivise his new position. At this point then, the act has already happened. This leaves only the first part of the film for the act – the physical.

The film starts with a rhythmic banging that is heard over the title sequence. Then we see a close up of a bin lid thumping on asphalt, intercut with a close up of a woman kneeling on the floor in the background more people kneeling and banging lids. They are creating a loud din of cadenced beats. The film gives no clue that the banging of bin lids was a favoured form of nationalist working-class protest during the troubles in Northern Ireland. It is the powerful noise of human determination. Later, when the RUC officers are getting ready to conduct the inspection of the prisoners and are prepared to make them run the gauntlet, they loudly bang their truncheons on their shields to intimidate the prisoners. The noise is an echo of the banging of bin lids by the Republican community in the first scene of the film. This banging drowns out the words and cries of pain and protest within the scene. It is this banging which provides the psychological trigger for Bobby Sands' Žižekian act to happen.

The true Žižekian act happens only when Sands realises that he cannot fight the system on its own terms. He has to opt out of the symbolic order that refuses him any real freedom by refusing him any real choice. Only then – free of the previous symbolic construct – can he be truly emancipated. An argument can be made that McQueen shows this exact moment when the act happens. It is what could be termed the moment of absolute clarity – the moment when Sands sees the falseness of the reality he lives in, the reality beyond reality. Or, to put it in Lacanian terms, the moment when he touches the real.

The act happens at the end of the scene in which the prisoners Gill and Campbell are truncheoned by the RUC during the inspection. At the end of the scene we see how Sands is dropped into his cell, showing that he has also been abused during the inspection. He is dropped on the floor lying on his

front. This is intercut with a quick image of a young RUC officer who we saw had been especially brutal to the prisoners – he is in shock and he is crying. All the time we hear the overwhelming sound of the truncheons banging on the shields. We are left with this image of Sands lying on the floor for several seconds and then Sands turns around to lie on his back and whilst he is turning the act happens. When he is fully lying on his back his expression is peaceful and clear. In his eyes we can see a calm happiness that was not there before. That the act happens in this non-spectacular fashion equates with Žižek's claim that 'the paradox is thus that, in an authentic act, the highest freedom coincides with the utmost passivity, with a reduction to a lifeless automaton who blindly performs its gestures.'<sup>56</sup> Also, his expression entails a sense of relief that he does not seem to comprehend. Just like Žižek's idea that the act is always most surprising to the agent himself. After an authentic act the reaction is always, 'Even I don't know I was able to do that, it just happened [sic].'<sup>57</sup>

The drumming noise that had been thundering in the background all the time, a sound of intimidation and threat, is turned into a reminder of political defiance. In the moment, it impacts on Sands that there is no common ground, no room for compromise. Protests that still address the British on their own terms (in the symbolic order that is shaped by their politics) is no protest at all. And Sands refuses them by refusing himself. His death is only a matter of form, a technicality, as *Hunger* shows in the last part, the bodily.

A salient feature of the act is that it is not mindless but unforeseeable. Sands is clear as to his convictions and his political position. He has an image of what Ireland should be like and he is prepared to die for this idea. He gained his idea of what freedom would feel like when doing cross country running. We understand through the uncanny images of prison life that when Sands committed himself to the Republican cause he did not want to end up

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<sup>56</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.375

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* p.375



dead but free. Only a mindset like this, a truly terroristic mindset in a Žižekian sense, could be ready to find itself in a true act.

### Conclusion

McQueen says, in an interview added as an extra on the DVD of *Hunger*, that he wanted to explore how it became ordinary for men to turn their bodies into sites of protest.<sup>58</sup> The historical facts of Bobby Sands and his impact on Northern Irish nationalism are no part of *Hunger*. In this regard, Brown is right to claim that *Hunger* is not interested in interpreting the complicated political history of the struggles. However, although the film is not about the greater historical political framework of Northern Ireland, it does not mean that it is not about it. On the contrary, through the act, the character Sands performs in *Hunger*, the film accidentally embraces a radical mindset that can be called truly terroristic in a Žižekian sense.

McQueen says, that although the film is embedded in a situation that is completely political ‘in the end personal decisions have to be made.’<sup>59</sup> In a reversal of the 1960s motto of the personal is political, here the political is personal. The political is shown as a personal act of emancipation – as a true Žižekian act.

All art, including film, often has unexpected consequences, and consequences that change with history. These are consequences in the sense that art, in its ability to sublimate individual experiences into, if not a universal, at least a shared experience. The uncanniness of *Hunger*, as created through its outlook and visual and narrative style, shows how political conflict becomes internalised. It is here, at this moment when the internalised political frustration inspires the revolutionary moment, in *Hunger* this coincides with Žižek and the act. Sands lets go of the symbolic order which frustrates his desires (the British government that does not allow for a conflict on equal terms) and creates a space in which he is free from the limitations of

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<sup>58</sup> *Hunger* (Pathe, 2009), McQueen, Steve (dir.).

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

negotiating with this symbolic order (or what Žižek would call the big Other) to plan, organise and eventually conduct a hunger strike for the benefit of a greater cause.

The fantasy of a true act, that is within the cinematic narrative of *Hunger*, is the sublimated shared artistic experience that makes *Hunger* a highly political film. It speaks in a way that is not a nostalgia for an 'understood' Irish history, as desired by Brown, by it is nostalgic for a more general desire for the courage of political conviction.

## Chapter 2.2

### Acting out and the post-political in

#### Chris Morris' film *Four Lions*

##### Introduction

This chapter builds on the concepts of the previous one, which described how the film *Hunger* portrayed a true act as defined by Žižek. This chapter puts forward the idea that the terrorists in the film *Four Lions* are barred from such a true act. Instead, they are trapped in a society in which no real alternative to post-politics is available; the characters in the film act out their frustrations – a path that ends up for one of them in what Žižek identifies as a *passage à l'acte*.

*Four Lions* is the story of a group of young British Muslims who want to become martyrs, styling themselves on the Al Qaida -style terrorism which they follow in a fan-boy fashion. In the film the terrorists are not presented as religious zealots with alien ideologies. Instead they are the opposite – plan-less anti-heroes, looking for coherency and meaning in post-politics Britain. Their motif is arming themselves in the name of the plight of muslims worldwide; their motive however is homegrown. Morris uses the possibilities of fiction to explore the reasons why these terrorists act the way they do. They lack obvious motives such as material destitution or the overt racism of the twentieth century, and have only a symbolic connection to the struggles in the Middle East. This echoes what Hammond writes about the character's real life equivalents, 'In most cases, would be martyrs have little or no first hand experience of oppression or discrimination.'<sup>1</sup>

The film can be seen as a challenge to contemporary ideas of Al Qaida style terrorism as an alien threat and product of a foreign ideology, as described by Imed Labidi who says, '*Four Lions* contests the absurd rhetoric

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<sup>1</sup> Hammond, (2011). p.173

that all terrorists are the product of an imaginary universal Islamic radicalism.<sup>2</sup> Hammond takes this reading further: not only does the film not portray the terrorists as culturally other, but also, neither is their terrorism a political response to oppression. Rather, *Four Lions* suggests that the terrorists are hopelessly muddled and vague in their political motivations, and that such views as they do have fall firmly within the political and cultural mainstream.<sup>3</sup> In this sense the terrorists' actions are framed by the post-political rather than a reaction to it.

Following Hammond's argument, that the terrorists' radicalism does not represent a meaningful political reaction against oppression, this chapter argues that the film goes beyond satire as it is commonly understood, as 'exposing the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn.'<sup>4</sup> The aim of this chapter is to expand the idea of the terrorists' following of 'mainstream' ideas, arguing that *Four Lions* takes Hammond's argument further, by showing the terrorists as individuals trapped within the political dead-end of post-politics, and that their jihad is a way of acting out their subjective sense of frustration, in a manner described indirectly by Žižek, as a *passage à l'acte*.

The comedic effect in *Four Lions* is not achieved through visual jokes. In fact, the only moment of slapstick in the film is a remarkable exception, happening when Omar (Riz Ahmed) intends to fire a rocket launcher at an overflying drone. Because he holds the launcher the wrong way round, his terrorist act literally backfires, killing bin Laden in the process. The film's few sight gags too are not played out but become thematised within film, such as the toy gun Waj (Kayvan Novak) uses for his martyrdom video. The film's comedy arises from the subject matter itself and the way Morris understands

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2 Labidi, Imed. 'Terrorism, Violence, and the Collision of Masculinities in *Four Lions*', *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 9(1).(2011) pp.410–425, p.411.

3 Philip Hammond, 'The War on Terrorism as Comedy', Hammond, P.(ed.) *Screens of Terror* (Bury St Edmunds: arima publishing, 2011) pp.171–184, p.173.

4 Chris Baldick, 'satire', *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford University Press, 2008) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199208272.001.0001/acref-9780199208272-e-1014>> [last access 4 September 2014].

the characters' situation – how it is established in the film and how the viewer relates to the characters cinematically and thematically. *Four Lions* works by subverting expectations of prevailing cultural beliefs. To understand how Morris plays with common assumptions it is necessary to look at his unique style of comedy. To do this, this chapter starts by looking at how *Four Lions* arises out of Chris Morris' body of work, describing how his style of comedy is adjacent to a metaphysical approach to humour.

In order to establish how different variants of the act can be recognised in *Four Lions*, the second part describes the relationship between the act, acting out and the *passage à l'acte*, looking at how Žižek understand the differences between these acts and how he relates them to the idea of the post-political. The next part investigates how *Four Lions* pertains to the post-political, by looking at how the film thematises not only the perceptions of terrorists, but also thematises the post-political and its limitations on subjectivity. The limits of Labidi's reading of the film, as thematising a 'correct Othering' of the characters is scrutinised, and it is posited that the film questions postmodern assumptions of identity altogether.

Continuing from this, this chapter looks into how Morris, in order to create a spectatorial identification with the characters, creates empathy for them by referring to Marc Sageman's 'bunch of guys' theory of terrorism, and by developing a universalist approach of finding a common sphere of ridiculousness. This is followed by a look at how the aesthetics of *Four Lions* creates a sense of participating in the space time of the characters.

The final part describes the character's motives of acting out and their relationship to the post-political. This is followed by looking at the story of Omar, who is compelled (as a result of his failure to create a new identity after the purpose for his acting out has been destroyed) to commit a *passage à l'acte*.

### Chris Morris, satirist

Geoff King writes that the target of satire is always 'social or political'.<sup>5</sup>

This is also true for Morris' style of comedy. However, Morris's comedy works differently from traditionally understood modes of satire such as Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson's description of satire in their article *State of Satire, the Satire of State*. They propose that satire works by revealing an otherwise hidden truth. They claim, 'Satire lessons often enable people to recognise the naked emperor and ... begin to see the realities that have been obscured ... Satire provides a valuable means through which citizens can analyse and interrogate power and the realm of politics rather than remain simple subjects of it.'<sup>6</sup>

Morris, however, does not feel comfortable with the idea of satire as a means of exposing the nexus of obfuscation that hides the true power relations from people. He says,

Satire feels to me to be pre-programmed, polemical and utterly predictable. Preaching to the converted ... I think, that something which is a 90-minute strip of satire will miss a great deal of what's interesting about a subject ... But I think to get at something in a particular way ... For example, take the subject of jihadi terrorism, or radical jihadi action. The easiest thing in the world is to say, "That's bad for this reason." To put them at certain safe distance and parade a conveyor belt of jihadi activities past the viewer, for 90 minutes, and point at each action, saying what's ridiculous about it. But what the heck would that tell you? Since everyone's predisposed to find anything wrong with all of these people and all of these actions all the time – how revealing is that? You got to go against the flow, otherwise you might as well just stop and shut up.<sup>7</sup>

For Morris satire, as it is understood, is not radical in itself. Most political satire is directed at the obvious gaps and inconsistencies in particular

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<sup>5</sup> Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002) p.107.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P.Jones, & Ethan Thompson (2009). The state of satire, the satire of state., Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P.Jones, & Ethan Thompson (Eds). *Satire Television: politics and comedy in the post-network era* (New York & London: New York University Press). p.16–17.

symbolic structures. Today these are often aimed at the inconsistencies of capitalism such as the gap between rich and poor, the hypocrisy of politicians, or the shallowness of celebrity culture.

Morris' particular approach to satire is highlighted by author and biographer Lucian Randall, who writes that, 'For Morris there seemed to be something dismissive in the term satirist, as if it suggested taking the moral high ground over being funny and made him safer through explanation.'<sup>8</sup> For Morris, the principle idea of satire arising out of making fun of those deemed inferior or wrong, in one way or another, feels not only conservative but, because of this, it is in itself not funny. Morris' satire does not prescribe to his own description of satire being 'essentially conservative'.<sup>9</sup> It avoids the pitfalls of conservative comedy by approaching its subjects in a more profound way in that it is concerned with a more metaphysical approach. This metaphysical approach to jokes is analysed by Marcus Pound, who describes that comedy has a transgressive, emancipatory potential, to which, as this chapter argues, Morris' comedy comes close.

Pound, quoting Hokenson, describes how comedy that subscribes to, the Aristotelian superiority theory whereby 'socio-moral values are posited as superior to the butt (of the joke) who comically deviates from them' is to be put on par with the humour of the 'modern critical reaction ... championing instead the "underdog" as the comic hero who transgresses the law.'<sup>10</sup>

Both approaches remain within the confines of the existing social order, 'In the former, one laughs at the comic protagonist, thereby reinforcing superior social values; in the latter one identifies with the comic protagonist,

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7 Interview with Chris Morris, director of *Four Lions*, 14 February 2011, <http://damonwise.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/interview-with-chris-morris-director-of.html>

8 Lucian Randall, *Disgusting Bliss: The Brass Eye of Chris Morris* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010) p.195.

9 *ibid.* p.194.

10 Pound, Marcus, 'Comic Subjectivity: Žižek and Zupančič's Spiritual Work of Art'. *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 4 (4) (2010).: <<http://www.Žižekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/viewfile/305/373>> [last access 4 September 2014] quoting: Hokenson, Jan. *The Idea of Comedy: History, Theory, Critique*. Madison (N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006)

as if to satisfy an “insurgent impulse to alter the social order”.<sup>11</sup> By making the humour of the joke dependent on the butt of the joke, either by laughing at them or laughing with them, this kind of humour often fails to address the butt in its own right, as a subject caught in a world of unreason.

For comedy to be truly transgressive requires ‘a politics of the impossible’: By highlighting this world of unreason, rather than condemning it outright, humour arises from the experience of this world of unreason.<sup>12</sup> For this to happen, in Pound’s understanding, transgressive comedy has to approach its subject not on a material but on metaphysical level; not point out the inconsistencies of concrete claims of truth and expose them to ridicule, but to assume their universalist truth and revel in the contradiction between their idealist form and materialist execution. Referring to the work on comedy by Alenka Zupančič, Pound says, the transgressive comic mode is not found ‘in the usual materialist critique of idealism; but the very point at which the ideal appears directly as the material, and it is this paradox – this incongruity – which generates the truly subversive comic mode of comedy.’<sup>13</sup> In short, comedy has the ability to tap into the subtle questions of the human condition concerned with how it is rather than pointing out the way things are.

Most of Morris’ comedy works in this fashion, in that his satire does not aim at exposing the materialist discrepancies of society, but accepts these incongruities and takes them as the basis to ridicule their very existence – what the audience is alienated from is not the absurdity of concrete claims but the fact that the mundane is also part of this very absurdity. The comedy of Morris does not aim at the obvious targets, such as heads state or individual politicians – he never attacks directly institutions commonly regarded as villainous, such as big business or government. Instead, his comedy alienates from the everyday – questioning assumptions on a metaphysical level (how

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* referring to: Zupančič, Alenka, and Slavoj Žižek, *The Odd One, On Comedy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008)



things are) instead of on a material one (the way things are). It could be said that Morris' satire is aimed at what Hegel describes as *Gewohnheit*, people's habits, their mechanical, unconscious actions that form the basis of their daily lives – what Hegel calls the '*Fürsichsein der Seele*', habit as an unencumbered (by thought) expression of the soul.<sup>14</sup> Žižek writes how the zombie is the perfect habitual creature as all its actions are without conscious reasoning. He concludes that, 'being-a-zombie is a zero-level of humanity, the inhuman/mechanical core of humanity.' He continues, saying that, 'The shock of encountering a zombie is not the shock of encountering a foreign entity, but the shock of being confronted by the disavowed foundation of our own human-ness.'<sup>15</sup> In Morris' comedy the audience is confronted with how they are situated in material and social reality and experience this as a world of unreason, a sensation that is as absurd as it is disturbing. According to Randall, Morris' body of work as a comedian and satirist, 'charges straight through the politeness and respect habitually paid to sensitive subjects which can be enormously destructive when it means that pain and distress are allowed to fester within someone rather than being illuminated and understood.'<sup>16</sup> In other words, he goes straight for the jugular of accepted sensibilities.

Morris' satire is more complicated than the version allowed by traditional notions. Rather than trying to show what is hidden, his comedy alienates from what is in plain sight – the familiar, mainstream ideas that shape the social and political as experienced on an everyday basis. Morris' comedy style sets itself apart because it is on a mission, not to explain the world's power relations, but to connect with what is commonly understood and to question this in the process.

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<sup>14</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie Der Philosophie*, 1st edn (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998) p.183.

<sup>15</sup> Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (London: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2009) p.100.

<sup>16</sup> Randall, 2010, p.255.

The premiere of *Four Lions* took place at the Bradford International Film Festival on 25 March 2010. A minority of press reviews accused the film of delivering flat, stereotypical characters who are merely stupid, and lack depth.<sup>17</sup> This stereotyping could be explained though the idea of comic exaggeration as described by King, where ‘exaggeration serves to establish a level of implausibility that removes the events from the world of harsher dramatic realism, where the consequences of the destruction unleashed might be felt more painfully.’<sup>18</sup> However, it should be argued, that through understanding the characters as complex individuals who share a desperation to define themselves as part of society, the film creates a narrative that centres and is driven by the characters’ motives and motifs. The terrorists’ motives being something, as Durodié points out, that had been impossible to determine for the real life London bombers.<sup>19</sup> By creating extreme characters, rather than simplistic or even exaggerated ones, Morris shows how different individuals act or, more precisely act out, under what they consider a world of unreason. For the characters this unreason is found in the foreclosure of politics in the post-political in which policies of multiculturalism are proposed to manage a politics of cultural identity. What becomes clear over the film is that the characters’ acting out is not their actual bombing of the London marathon but their self-styling as jihadists – they address the Other not by bombing or following jihadist motives, but through their motivation by the post-political to act out the inconsistencies of the post-political.

King writes of film comedy that the ‘enjoyment lies, often, in the gap opened up between expected norm and disruptive ingredient.’<sup>20</sup> That this comic gap can be truly transgressive can be seen in the comedy of Morris. He opens up the metaphysical gap between the idealist assumptions of ideology

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17 Fraser, Nick ‘Four Lions: How satirist Chris Morris fixed his eye on ideology and bombers’ *The Observer*, Sunday 24 January 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/jan/24/chris-morris-four-lions>

18 Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002) p.174.

19 Durodié, 2007, p.427.

20 King, 2002, p.123.

and its materialist execution, he does so by subverting the subconscious habits that allow people to function on a daily basis and are recognisable in others. By confronting people with recognisable habits Morris creates a comedic shock which, as Žižek says, is not the shock of encountering a foreign entity, but the shock of being confronted by the disavowed foundation of our own human-ness.<sup>21</sup> ‘To know the habits of a society is to know the meta-rules of how to apply its explicit norms’, says Žižek, and Morris uses this knowledge in his comedy.<sup>22</sup> The principal, unconscious ways of the everyday workings of society are highlighted in Morris’ comedy. Thus, rather than revealing the incoherencies of the post-political (the metaphysical gap between the idealist assumptions of ideology and its materialist execution), he shows them up. The post-political is humiliated through a process of making the audience identify with the ideology instead of allowing them to laugh at it from an outside position. The laughter is not one of ‘derision and mockery’, which Hegel says comes from ‘complacent insight’ into one’s own ability to recognise ‘the contrasts’ of what is being shown.<sup>23</sup> Instead the laughter stems from the uncomfortable shock of being confronted with what people recognise of themselves in the characters.

For example, the character of Barry (Nigel Lindsay), whose behaviour is as rigorous as it is ridiculous when he shouts, when their car breaks down, ‘Jews invented spark plugs to control global traffic.’ His belligerent behaviour and his need to make up his own logic has little to do with his jihadism or cultural identity, but is recognised by almost everyone else as the trademarks of an unpleasant choleric. In short, *Four Lions* shows the characters in all their absurdity, but it is not the absurdity of cultural belief but it is the absurdity of the post-political itself. The effect – apart from being comic – is that the characters’ vulnerability, as it comes in to contact with their social reality, can

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<sup>21</sup> Gabriel and Žižek, 2009, p.100.

<sup>22</sup> Žižek, 2008g, p.134.

<sup>23</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*(1835–1838) (*Textlog.de*) <<http://www.textlog.de/5863-2.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

be recognised and identified with. Morris exposes the spectator to the metaphysical gap the characters inhabit, their feeling of being out of sync with the world they inhabit. Barry's unreason is not in itself funny, rather it exposes the absurdity of the everyday habits of the post-political one of which is to subscribe to conspiracy theories in one way or another, usually involving some form of new world order theory. In post-politics, Žižek describes, people suffer from 'political frustration ... : they are called to decide, while, at the same time, receiving the message that they are in no position effectively to decide, i.e. to objectively weigh the pros and cons. The recourse to "conspiracy theories" is a desperate way out of this deadlock, an attempt to regain a minimum of what Fred Jameson calls 'cognitive mapping'.<sup>24</sup> Fundamental to conspiratorial belief are the 'unknown knowns', the 'disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves.'<sup>25</sup> What Morris essentially does, is to tap into the spirit of conspiratorial thinking that sustains much of the post-political, by exposing Barry's mode of conspiratorial logic.

### **Who is Chris Morris?**

Morris became widely known for his satirical news show *The Day Today* (1994), the television adaptation of his radio comedy *On the Hour*, in which he and his fellow comedians lampooned the presumptuous conceits of the media. *On The Hour* consisted of twelve episodes and aired from 1991 to 1992. The show's approach to writing was unusually collaborative and improvisational. The goal of the programme was to blindside the audience with news stories that were completely over the top, yet delivered in such a serious manner as to give an illusion of plausibility. The show always begins with Morris delivering sensationalist headlines, such as 'Panic as European average falls below the European average', playing on the ways in which news programmes sensationalise everyday events.

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24 Slavoj Žižek, 'The Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion' *Philosophy Today*; Celina; VOLUME: 43. (1999b) <<http://www.lacan.com/Žižek-matrix.htm>> [last access 4 September 2014]

25 Žižek, 2008a, online version

The TV show *The Day Today* worked on the same principle as the radio show, presenting inane current affairs stories with deadpan gravitas. Morris studied the methods, look and mannerisms of news programmes in order to recreate them ad absurdum. Both *The Day Today* and *On The Hour* question the idea of authorship and the way in which news programmes create hyperbolic narratives to promote themselves with minimal regard for subject matter.

In 2000, Morris created, directed and starred in the television programme *Jam* which was based on his 1999 radio show *Blue Jam*. In the show, concepts that are typically friendly and familiar – doctors, families, general suburban life – were shown as grotesque and defective, playing on people's habits and their unconscious fears of having these habits disturbed. In *Brass Eye* (1997) Morris addressed mainstream sensibilities towards themes such as animal rights, drugs, sex, crime and paedophilia. These programmes targeted those people in the public eye who lend their name to trendy causes without questioning their authenticity.

In his comedy, Morris identifies the fault lines of what is acceptable and, by doing so, manages to push the line further. A good example of this is the *Brass Eye Peadophilia* (2001) special episode, which spoofed the demonisation of paedophiles, and caused a storm of media outrage from broadsheet, liberal newspapers such as the *Guardian*, as much as the tabloids.<sup>26</sup> However, as the *Guardian* itself had to admit, the backlash only proved what was spoofed in the show all along – 'that liberals' arguments, when shorn of their caring finery, often conceal exactly the same atavistic thoughtless fears as the Paulsgrove demonstrators.'<sup>27</sup> The main focus of the satire in *Brass Eye* was the idea that moral outrage is mainly a form of self-indulgence. The causes celebrated by Morris' prank victims were no more than a pretext for snobbish

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26 Ferguson, E. 'Why Chris Morris had to make Brass Eye', *The Observer*, Sunday 5 August 2001, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/aug/05/news.film>> [last access 4 September 2014]

27 *ibid.*

self-promotion. The subject matters themselves were exposed as empty receptacles that could be filled with any random meaning.

The postmodern obsession with surface without meaning became the subject of Morris' project about self-serving media types, *Nathan Barley* (2005) a show reminiscent of his treatment of the media's obsession of form over function in *The Day Today*.<sup>28</sup> Nathan Barley, the main character of the show, describes himself as a 'self-facilitating media node'. The show is a criticism of the self-satisfaction of people who consider themselves radical but are in fact guilelessly promoting mainstream ideologies, a motif that is also found in *Four Lions*. *Nathan Barley* lampoons the postmodern figure that emerged in the late 1990s, more recently termed Hipster. Hipsters are deluded, youthful poseurs that, according to Mark Greif, assume moral superiority by declaring their anti-establishment credentials through elitist consumer behaviour. 'What is meaningful about the hipster moment, 1999 and after, is that it seems to be an effort to live a life that retains the coolness in believing that you belong to a counter-culture, where the substance of the rebellion has become pro-commerce.'<sup>29</sup> Where the wannabe jihadists in *Four Lions* consider themselves opposed to capitalist commercialism, Nathan Barley also sees himself outside the commercial mainstream. Both parties think they are more enlightened than those whom they consider the duped masses.

Before turning his attention to the motives of terrorists, Morris already satirised the 'war on terror' and the nature of the politics that supported it. On Sunday 17 March 2002, Morris and Armando Iannucci published a special section in the *Observer* newspaper titled '*Six Months That Changed a Year*', an '*Absolute Atrocity Special*.' In this pull-out section Morris and Iannucci ambitiously satirised the response to 9/11 only six months after the event. Most of the spoof was a calendar chronicling the events after 9/11, each entry

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<sup>28</sup> In this instance Morris co-wrote and directed the programme without starring in it himself. Morris created the short lived television series with Charlie Brooker, basing Nathan on a character originating in Brooker's spoof website TVGoHome.

an absurd realisation of the real-life aftermath of the ‘war on terror. Their particular interest was to question the ubiquitously portrayed assumption that 9/11 ‘somehow changed everything’,<sup>30</sup> setting out to highlight the hysteria surrounding these attacks and how the government seized this political climate to push draconian agendas that approved of the suspension of personal liberties.

*Four Lions* is Morris’ first full-length feature film. He wrote it with established comedy writers Sam Bain and Jesse Armstrong, the creators of the television comedy *Peep Show* (2003–2013). In *Four Lions*, it is through the careful construction of character that Morris describes the world they inhabit. This chapter reads the film in terms of post-politics and considers this world to be informed by the mindsets and policies of post-political thinking. And it is through post-politics by which people are compelled to identify with the categories made available to them. However, this dilemma affects each character in different ways, and it is revealed through the way they act. By humanising the terrorists, Morris allows for an insight into the motivations of the individual terrorists and this by extension, provides a way of determining their acts as variations of an acting out as identified by Žižek. In order to contextualise *Four Lions* in terms of the post-political, the next part describes the relationship between Žižek’s understanding of the act and its variations, and its relationship to the post-political.

### **Žižek on the act and its variations**

#### *The political act*

As described previously, Žižek considers the revolutionary act as the only authentic deed that can lead to true emancipation. By destroying one’s own relationship to the symbolic, and entering a new relationship from a position

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29 Rayner, Alex. ‘Why do people hate hipsters’, *The Guardian*, (14 October 2010) <<http://m.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/oct/14/hate-hipsters-blogs?cat=lifeandstyle&type=article>

30 Randall, 2010, p.229.

of *ex nihilo*, the subject is able to start negotiations about the conditions of a new symbolic order. The destructive element of the act affects not only the link to the symbolic but also destroys the subject itself because it is a foreign element to both. As Žižek comments in *A Perverts Guide to Cinema* when talking about *Fight Club* (1999): 'I think this is what liberation means: in order to attack the enemy, you first have to *beat the shit out of yourself*, to get rid in yourself [of] that which in yourself attaches you to the leader, to the conditions of slavery and so on...'<sup>31</sup>

An authentic act always leads to the subject's self-erasure. In *Hunger*, even though Sands dies as a result of his act it does not diminish or question the political impact of his deed. His freedom, and with it the political dimension of his act, is not achieved by death but by his extraction from the symbolic, and his own demolition and reconstruction of his subjectivity.

What is important is that, for Žižek, terrorism rarely constitutes a revolutionary act, yet every true act is always terroristic. Most terrorism is to be seen not as a 'true act' but as an inauthentic act, or as acting out.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Acting out and passage à l'acte*

Broadly speaking, Žižek's idea of what constitutes an act remains within Lacan's distinction between the act that leads to a breakthrough in the psychoanalytic treatment of a patient (and what for Žižek would constitute an act of a true political emancipation), and two other forms of reacting towards psychological traumata: acting out and the *passage à l'acte* or 'passage to the act.'

#### *Acting out*

Acting out is the English term for what Freud calls *agieren*, with which he described the patient's recourse to transfer his/her anxiety into an active deed. In Freud's case study Dora (1905) he describes how the patient breaks off her

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<sup>31</sup> The Pervert's Guide To Cinema, [London]: p.Guide, ©2006.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.170.



treatment with him after she feels misunderstood by him. Freud interprets Dora's action as a transferred punishment. Instead of facing the real issue (in this case Freud believes that she has issues confronting her desires for a man called Herr K.) Dora acts out by heedlessly dismissing Freud's treatment. For Freud, if a traumatic memory is not remembered (with the help of the talking cure) the patient is compelled to act out the trauma physically.<sup>33</sup>

Acting out, according to Lacan, can be seen as a form of communication between patient and analyst indicating that something is amiss in the analytic process. The analyst here becomes representative of the Other – the big Other is the symbolic, as a constitutive alterity, as it presents itself for each subject. [In Seminar VIII, Lacan describes acting out as 'this type of action through which at one or other moment of the treatment ... the subject requires a more exact response'.]<sup>34</sup> Acting out does not describe a failure of interaction, rather it is still part of the communication between the analyst and his subject. It is 'essentially something in the behaviour of the subject that shows itself. The demonstrative aspect, the orientation towards the Other of every acting out, is something that ought to be highlighted.'<sup>35</sup>

Acting out is to be understood as the dramatic implementation of the felt anxiety and thus as a method of communication, after the failure of dialogue. Žižek describes Lacan's concept of acting out as:

An attempt to break through a symbolic deadlock (an impossibility of symbolisation, of putting into words) by means of an act, even though this act still functions as the bearer of some ciphered message. Through this act we attempt (in a 'crazy' way, true) to honour a certain debt, to wipe out a certain guilt, to embody a certain reproach to the Other, etc.<sup>36</sup>

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33 Sigmund Freud (1914), 'Remembering Repeating and Working Through', S.E., XII, 1958, pp.145–156, p.150.

34 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VIII, Le transfert* (31.05.61.) <<http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-VIII-Draft-21.pdf>> [last access 4 September 2014]

35 Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Book 10*, 1st edn (London: Polity Press, 2014) p.123.

36 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992) p.85.

For Žižek's adoption of Lacan's concept, acting out entails that the subject in his/her protest addresses the Other, he stays within the realm of the symbolic and his /her act is not directed against the Other but is instead a communication by other means. He says, 'We could say that by acting out we identify ourselves with the symptom ... as a ciphered message addressed to the Other.'<sup>37</sup> Acting out is a method of overcoming a breakdown in communication within the symbolic through the method of acting it out.

The most important aspect in Žižek's description is that a big change happens to the concept of acting out in terms of scale and ideas. The change is from the private to public, from the psychological to the social – the Other is no longer the analyst but the addressed Other is now society and, by association, ideology. This acting out can take the form of terrorist acts. This violent acting out of perceived injustices is to be seen as a response within a still existing dialogue with the Other.

The other inauthentic act Žižek describes is the *passage à l'acte*, or the passage to the act, in which the subject does not address the Other anymore but instead resigns in his attempts to make himself/herself heard.

### *Passage à l'acte*

The *passage à l'acte*, or passage to the act, is what Lacan describes when a subject identifies with the object of his desire, the Kantian sublime object, (Object a) in a self–destructive act. The difference between acting out and the *passage à l'acte* is in the way the subject addresses the Other. Both acts can be regarded as extreme resorts against anxieties, but where acting out directly speaks to the Other, in the *passage à l'acte* the subject takes himself out of this dialogue, he leaves the symbolic network that contains the Other.

The method of taking oneself out of the constraints of the symbolic chimes with the characteristics of what constitutes the authentic act – both

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<sup>37</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: how popular culture can serve as an introduction to Lacan', *New Formations*, Winter (1989b) vol. 9, pp.7–31, p.21.

acts contain a refusal to engage with the Other. However, in the *passage à l'acte* the subject is still identifying with Object a, that what is desired from the Other, but can never be attained. In filmic terms the idea of a McGuffin, the narrative device that has no textual logic but being the goal of the story told, is a Lacanian Object a.

Žižeks himself gives an example for such an Object a in the dragon scroll from the film *Kung Fu Panda* (2008).<sup>38</sup> This legendary scroll is said to contain the secret to limitless power only accessible to the dragon warrior. When the hero of the film, the fat and unlikely warrior panda Po, unravels the scroll, he finds that the scroll is a metal sheet in which he can only see his own reflection: the real secret of the power of Kung Fu is to believe in yourself. There is no secret as such, no actual Object a, just the subject's (Po's) desire for it that sustains its power. Even though the subject knows that his ideology is false he/she nevertheless cannot bring himself to break with it. Instead he arranges himself with the Other, his fantasy of Object a sustains the symbolic.

In a *passage à l'acte* the fantasies that are produced to sustain the symbolic cannot be attained by the subject and he/she resigns to the situation and leaves, bows out altogether. However, their desires are still addressed to the Other and their belief in/ identification with Object a is still there. In contrast, in a true act however, the subject severs all connections to the symbolic. Although the subject refuses to communicate with the Other in both the true act and the *passage à l'acte*, it is in his/her abandonment of belief in the Other where the fundamental difference between both acts lies.

Roberto Harari writes that 'a typical *passage à l'acte* is suicide',<sup>39</sup> an 'exit from the scene, where the subject completely identifies with objet a'<sup>40</sup> rather than staying on the stage and acting out.

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38 Slavoj Žižek, *Hollywood Today: Report from an Ideological Frontline* (2009b) <[http://www.lacan.com/essays/?page\\_id=347](http://www.lacan.com/essays/?page_id=347)> [last access 9 September 2014]

39 Harari, Roberto, and Judith Filc, *Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: An Introduction* (UnNew York: Other Press LLC, 2004) p.61.

40 *ibid.*

Žižek's gives several example of the *passage à l'acte* in his book *The Parallax View*, including Travis Bickle's final outburst in *Taxi Driver* (1976). For Žižek the *passages a l'acte* seen in Hollywood films describe the underlying failure of the American ideology to reconcile the character's fantasies that sustain the American dream with the lived reality. Travis Bickle's dream of ridding the world of 'the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit' is ultimately directed against himself since he strongly identifies with what society constitutes as scum.

### *Criticism*

Critical of Žižek's defence of political terrorism, Geoff Boucher<sup>41</sup> imputes that Žižek, in his 1991 book *Looking Awry*,<sup>42</sup> fails to see the difference between the act and the *passage à l'acte*. Boucher ascribes Žižek's provocative flirtation with unpopular images of red and Jacobean terror to his misunderstanding of the 'psychotic' and 'suicidal' dimensions of the *passage à l'acte* as part of the revolutionary act. It is true that Žižek often is careless in his use of the terminology. Recently he wrote in his book *Living in the End Times*,

Recall the psychoanalytic distinction between acting out and *passage à l'acte*: acting out is a spectacle addressing a figure of big Other, leaving the big Other undisturbed at its place, while *passage à l'acte* is a violent explosion destroying the very symbolic link.<sup>43</sup>

One criticism one could put forward here is that by leaving out the discussion about the true act, readers could misunderstand the different meanings of the act. However, that the two modalities of acting out and the *passage à l'acte*, do not constitute a true act is made clear by Žižek in several writings before the publication of Boucher's article, e.g. in his book *On Belief*

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<sup>41</sup> Geoff Boucher, 'The Law as a Thing: Žižek and the Graph of Desire', Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos and Matt Sharpe (Eds), *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Essays on Slavoj Žižek, with a Reply* (London: Ashgate, 2005) pp.23–44, p.39.

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, 1992, p.139.

<sup>43</sup> Slavoj Žižek, (2010), *Living In The End Times* (London: Verso) p.326.

The act proper is thus to be opposed to other modalities of the act: the hysterical acting out, the psychotic *passage à l'acte*, the symbolic act. In the hysterical acting out, the subject stages, in a kind of theatrical performance, the compromise solution of the trauma she is unable to cope with. In the psychotic *passage à l'acte* the deadlock is so debilitating that the subject cannot even imagine a way out – the only thing he can do is to strike blindly in the real, to release his frustration in the meaningless outburst of destructive energy. The symbolic act is best conceived of as the purely formal, self-referential, gesture of the self-assertion of one's subjective position.<sup>44</sup>

Though Žižek is often unclear, here he is unambiguous about the fundamental differences between the three modes of an act and the special role of a true act. Both acting out and the *passage à l'acte* are displacement acts, that 'can only be properly grasped as reaction to some disavowed trauma that they displace, disavow or repress,'<sup>45</sup> whereas the true act tackles the very conditions that are responsible for a trauma to happen.

### **The act, the post-political, multiculturalism**

The above concepts are important because they are pertinent to a reading of *Four Lions*, in particular its relationship to and portrayal of multiculturalism. According to Žižek, the way the political sphere is arranged today makes the constitution of a revolutionary act – one that would fundamentally change the way society is organised – difficult.<sup>46</sup> The logic of the post-political forecloses the possibilities of a political and societal paradigm shift by renouncing the big ideological causes that previously shaped the understanding of the ruling powers and its antithesis as radical antagonisms. The shift from politics to administrative management brought with it new social movements that have shifted towards forms of identity politics. Post-politics promotes 'the all encompassing nature of the post-

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44 Slavoj Žižek, (2001), *On Belief* (London: Routledge). p.84.

45 Slavoj Žižek, 'The Superego and the Act': A lecture by Slavoj Žižek, Lecture Transcript, (August 1999c) < <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-Žižek/articles/the-superego-and-the-act/> > [last access 4 September 2014]

46 Hanlon, and Žižek, 2001, p.11.

political Concrete Universality which accounts for everybody at the level of symbolic inclusion.<sup>47</sup>

Žižek's analysis of multiculturalism in terms of post-politics requires detailed analyses, as it is the role of identity, the foreclosing of an active subject, that becomes the ideological fantasy in the post-political.

Žižek argues that the multiculturalist vision of unity in difference requires that the Other is not constructed out of the real antagonisms that create the symbolic, but as an elusive construct, defined by the concept of identity, which can never be fully understood but only tolerated. Post-Politics has changed the parameters of possibility for the subject to constitute his/her own subjectivity, through its emphasis on its multiple forms of subjectivity.<sup>48</sup> This does not mean that the contradictions of capitalism are solved, merely displaced.

Žižek refers to Wendy Brown's *States of Injury*, and her argument against identity politics, when he says,

As postmodern politics (post-politics) involves a 'theoretical retreat from the problem of domination within capitalism', it is here, in this silent suspension of class analysis, that we are dealing with an exemplary case of the mechanism of ideological displacement when class antagonism is disavowed, when its key structuring role is suspended, 'other markers of social difference may come to bear an inordinate weight; indeed, they may bear all the weight of the sufferings produced by capitalism in addition to that attributable to the explicitly politicised marking'. In other words, this displacement accounts for the somewhat 'excessive' way the discourse of postmodern identity politics insists on the horrors of sexism, racism, and so on this 'excess' comes from the fact that these other '-isms' have to bear the surplus—investment from the class struggle whose extent is not acknowledged.<sup>49</sup>

The way the subject is constituted through identity is key to a post-political reading of *Four Lions*. In the absence of anything else, the subject identifies with the categories available to them through the postmodern notion of

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<sup>47</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.202.

<sup>48</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.199.

<sup>49</sup> Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.97.

identity politics which are often given form in the idea of multiculturalism. This process gives rise to anxiety as people struggle to define and fulfil the role they have created within their symbolic network. The anxieties evoked by these plights find their expressions in what can be regarded as displacement activities. Here the aforementioned example of the London riots of 2011, helps to illustrate this point, together with Žižek's comments that the rioters' 'only available alternative to enforced democratic consensus is a blind acting out.'<sup>50</sup>

These displacement acts take the form of either an acting out, or they find their expression in the *passage à l'acte*. These inauthentic acts reveal a misunderstood radicalism which is not radical at all, but nihilistic by nature in the way they are an expression of delusion within the symbolic.<sup>51</sup> Both are a venting of powerlessness and an admission of impotence. The point is that they each can be clearly read and understood in *Four Lions*.

### ***Four Lions'* portrayal of a misdirected radicalism**

In *Four Lions*, Morris unpicks contemporary imaginings of Al Qaida style terrorism in Europe and the USA. Rather than locating radicalism 'within imagined strange ideologies in far away lands,'<sup>52</sup> the film questions the idea that the agendas of Islamist terrorist are created outside Western ideas. The film reveals that this terrorism stems from an obsession from within rather than a threat from outside.

Morris started research for the film before the London bombings in 2005, in which four homegrown terrorists detonated bombs at four different locations on the London transport system. This event did not change the way

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<sup>50</sup> Žižek, 2011d

<sup>51</sup> Žižek is referring to Nietzsche, who divides between forms of active and passive nihilism; 'Active nihilism, in the sense of wanting nothing itself, is this active self- destruction which would be precisely the passion of the real – the idea that, in order to live fully and authentically, you must engage in self-destruction. On the other hand, there is passive nihilism, what Nietzsche called 'The last man' – just living a stupid, self-satisfied life without great passions.' A Žižek interview *by* Sabine Reul and Thomas Deichmann 'The one measure of true love is: you can insult the other', *Spiked* 15 November 2001, <<http://www.spiked-online.com/Printable/0000002D2C4.htm>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>52</sup> Labidi, 2011, p.411.

he saw contemporary terrorism, instead the lives of the four bombers affirmed his viewpoint about his interest in the subject of terrorism. Morris says,

It was an attempt to figure it out, to ask, 'What's going on with this?' This [the 'war on terror'] is something that's commanding so much of our lives, shaping so much of our culture, turning this massive political wheel. I was wondering what this new game was all about. But then 7/7 hit that with a fairly large impact, in that we were suddenly seeing all these guys with a Hovis accent. Suddenly you're not dealing with an amorphous Arab world so much as with British people who have been here quite a long time and who make curry and are a part of the landscape. So you've got a double excavation going on.<sup>53</sup>

A desire to assay the terrorists themselves rather than concentrating on the absurdities of the 'war on terror' from a western perspective, as was done on *Team America: World Police* (2004) or in Armando Iannucci's film *In the Loop* (2009), made Morris concentrate on the way terrorist are commonly understood.

Labidi in his essay on *Terrorism, Violence, and the Collision of Masculinities in 'Four Lions'* says, 'In not so subtle ways, the film critiques constructed and invisible sources of fear that haunts Western imagination [sic].'<sup>54</sup> Labidi's conclusion is that this fear of foreign terrorism is the consequence of the failings of the hegemony of 'white masculinity', and that the films show characters' who 'fail to perform' according to 'scripts of masculinity' dominating western ideology, which then leads to their radicalisation.<sup>55</sup>

This reading sees the characters' identities compromised by having their masculinity not recognised in their cultural otherness because of dominant mainstream ideals of 'white masculinity'. Labidi's analysis implies that the film

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53 Brooks, X. *Chris Morris: 'Bin Laden doesn't really do jokes'*, The Guardian, Saturday 1 May 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2010/may/01/chris-morris-four-lions-interview>

54 Labidi, 2011, p.412.

55 Labidi, 2011, p.412, 414.



manages to distinguish between a “correct” othering (recognising the plurality of masculine identities described as ‘alternative masculinities (minorities, underclass males, homosexuals, foreigners, others).’)<sup>56</sup> and an “incorrect othering” (seeing the terrorists as strange, unrecognisable unknowns).

Central to Labidi’s line of argument is that of a “correct” othering, the creating of a plurality of different concepts of cultural identities (in this case masculinity and Asian culture). Labidi’s argument is in line with the preoccupation with identity politics that Žižek sees as instrumental in the working of post-politics, saying ‘today’s capitalism thrives on differences.’<sup>57</sup> Žižek says that, in the post-political, capitalism is not enabled by the ‘traditional fixed patriarchal subject’ but by the very dynamic of compelling ‘subject(s) constantly reinventing himself.’<sup>58</sup> Instead of identifying with a universal goal, the subject of post-politics is seen as a self-regarding investor in their own human capital, constantly encouraged to analyse themselves in regard to how well they are adjusted to society often done through exploring one’s ‘intolerance towards the Other.’<sup>59</sup> The upshot of identity politics and multiculturalism is that what ‘this kind of politically correct struggling for tolerance and so on advocates is basically not only not in conflict with the modern tendencies of global capitalism, but it fits perfectly.’<sup>60</sup> The link between multiculturalism and its instrumentalisation in the post-political is succinctly put together by Malik. Malik makes a clear distinction between multiculturalism as a ‘lived experience of diversity’, and multiculturalism ‘as a

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<sup>56</sup> Labidi, 2011, p.412.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Interview with Slavoj Žižek’, *The Believer*, July 2004, <[http://www.believermag.com/issues/200407/?read=interview\\_Žižek](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200407/?read=interview_Žižek)> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Žižek, 2011b, p.171.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Interview with Slavoj Žižek’, *The Believer*, July 2004, <[http://www.believermag.com/issues/200407/?read=interview\\_Žižek](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200407/?read=interview_Žižek)> [last access 4 September 2014]

political process, the aim of which is to manage that diversity.<sup>61</sup> It is the latter idea, the rise of multiculturalism as a political tool within post-politics, that is to be criticised. Multiculturalism in this sense is a concept not demanded by communities, but largely imposed onto them from without. From the 1980s, he says, fuelled by a collusion between the state and opportunist religious and cultural organisations in minority communities, there was a rise in ethnic identity politics. The multicultural policies brought in by the government, which were designed to deal with race relations and regarded as an appropriate framework for dealing with cultural difference, created a new necessity for immigrants to define themselves through their religion. 'Once the mosques became the voice of the community, then Muslim became the identity stamped upon every individual within that community. People began to accept that identity as their own, because it was the way to relate to the outside world.'<sup>62</sup> What Malik illustrates is how identity becomes determined by politics through the instrumentalisation of mosques and other religious and cultural centres as the point of interaction between the government and British Asians.

When New Labour came to power in 1997 these trends became intensified in a new struggle for identity.<sup>63</sup> Malik writes, 'At the heart of the strategy was a redefinition of racism. Racism now meant not simply the denial of equal rights but the denial of the right to be different. Different peoples should have the right to express their specific identities, explore their own

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61 Kenan Malik 'What Is Wrong With Multiculturalism? [Part 1]' *Pandemonium* 2012 <<http://kenanmalik.wordpress.com/2012/06/04/what-is-wrong-with-multiculturalism-part-1/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

62 Kenan Malik *From Streetfighters to Bookburners*, March 30, 2012, <http://kenanmalik.wordpress.com/2012/03/30/from-streetfighters-to-bookburners/>

63 In comparison, the development of multiculturalist policies in Germany was different to Britain in that the labour shortage in the post-war years was made up, not from immigrants from former colonies as in Britain, but from *Gastsarbeitern* ('Guest-workers') from countries such as Spain, Italy and Turkey, who were not expected to stay in the country. The consequence was, that multiculturalist policies were introduced to guarantee these people their cultural identity, resulting in concepts such as 'double citizenship' and a general failure of integration and real lived multiculturalism. This formal denial of citizenship led many Turkish immigrants of the second and third generations to find refuge in cultural traditions, especially religion, that were not part of the lives of first wave of guest workers.

histories, formulate their own values, pursue their own lifestyles.’<sup>64</sup> What Malik described is how the emancipatory struggle for racial equality was exchanged through government policy to a state managed culture of personal expression of identity, foregoing the universal principles that lie outside identity. The lived experience of many Muslims in Britain was an imposed otherness which became the only ‘valid currency’ around which to shape their identity. The normative framework of multiculturalist policies effectively became an extension of identity politics, in which the subject was defined through the limitations of cultural identity.

Identity politics creates scenarios in which the subject no longer defines itself but is instead defined through a small group of prisms of identity around the categories of sexuality, religion, race and culture. (A categorisation reflected in Labidi’s alternative masculinities (minorities, underclass males, homosexuals, foreigners, others).<sup>65</sup>

This narrow approach to human subjectivity compels people to identify with certain ‘life-scripts’<sup>66</sup> that have been laid out for them. Malik refers to the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah who suggests, ‘Demanding respect for people as blacks and gays can go along with notably rigid strictures as to how one is to be an African American or a person with same-sex desires. There will be ‘proper modes of being black and gay: there will be demands that are made; expectations to be met; battle lines to be drawn’.<sup>67</sup>

*Four Lions* is an astute articulation of this phenomenon. It pitches the real life of the characters against their culturally determined ‘life-scripts’. Their failure to perform according to these ‘life-scripts’ creates much of the humour of the film. For example, when the characters leave for London to blow

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64 Kenan Malik *the failures of multiculturalism*, paper presented to the Engelsberg seminar on 'The Secular State and Society', Avesta, Sweden, 14 – 16 June 2006. [http://www.kenanmalik.com/papers/engelsberg\\_mc.html](http://www.kenanmalik.com/papers/engelsberg_mc.html)

65 Labidi, 2011, p.412.

66 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010) p.198.

67 Kenan Malik, *Strange Fruit: Why Both Sides Are Wrong in the Race Debate* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009) p.176.

themselves up in the London Marathon they are very motivated, starting their journey listening to a patriotic mujahideen song, indicating a common and earnest goal of jihad. They look at one another, bobbing their heads to the music, conscious of the magnitude of the situation. This scene cuts to some time later when they are entering the city. Now they euphorically sing along to the song *Dancing in the Moonlight* by the band Toploader, a song that is associated in British culture with the ‘outpouring(s) of middle-class smug-o-wank surrounding (tv chef Jamie Oliver’s) School Dinners series’, as Morris collaborator Charlie Brooker remarks.<sup>68</sup> The characters’ habits trump their idealism – their *Fürsichsein der Seele*, their unencumbered expression of the soul.<sup>69</sup> This has, on the one hand a heart-warming effect, evoked by an identification with their ‘zero-level of humanity.’<sup>70</sup> On the other hand the spectator is exposed to their own habits of living in a world where he/she<sup>71</sup> can identify with the Toploader song on a habitual level, terrorists and non-terrorists alike. To be confronted with such a commonality is to experience the metaphysical gap of transgressive comedy. The humour arises not from the fact that the characters listen to Toploader but that they listen to Toploader just like us, unbound by cultural determinants – something that is not taken for granted in the post-political and therefore properly transgressive.

Reading *Four Lions* as a film that promotes a politically correct othering, as Labidi suggest, is to deny the film’s transgressive potential. Instead of prompting a correct othering, the film’s satirising of the very idea of othering in fact highlights the absurdities of the failings of pluralism and multiculturalism, as constituted by the post-political.

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68 Charlie Brooker, ‘Charlie Brooker’s screen burn’ *The Guardian*, Saturday 4 August 2007 <<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2007/aug/04/broadcasting.tvandradio>> [last access 4 September 2014]

69 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie Der Philosophie*, 1st edn (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998) p.183.

70 Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (London: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2009) p.100.

71 Mostly those who live in Britain and/or are familiar with the cultural relevance of the song.

The film questions the idea of terrorism as the arcane Other, or the 'unknown unknowns', in the words of Donald Rumsfeld.<sup>72</sup> But instead of describing the failings of an ideology which ignores the pluralist recognition of identity, the film describes how the characters' struggle to overcome the limitations of identity politics leads to their frustration with the symbolic order, and their consequent acting out.

Hammond says, 'In rejecting the conventional view of 'fundamentalist' Islamist terrorism, *Four Lions* recognises that would-be suicide bombers are much closer to the mainstream of British society.'<sup>73</sup> This idea is reflected in a study by forensic psychologist and former CIA. Official Marc Sageman called *Understanding Terror Networks* (2004). Sageman states that 84% of all Al Qaida members joined whilst living in the diaspora, and 87% of these joined when living in western countries.<sup>74</sup> For example, the homegrown terrorists of the London bombings 'were young Britons who had led apparently ordinary lives,' their assumed leader 'a highly Westernised young man.'<sup>75</sup> The official picture of the religiously crazed zealot did not fit the terrorists' profiles.

With the film, Morris addresses the same issue, 'It doesn't conform to type, does it?', he says. 'These (real life terrorists) aren't cold, reptilian killers. They're dicking about with a hat; they're pissing themselves laughing. What's interesting is to look at this footage and think, 'But they still did it.' They acted like this, and then they still went and did it.'<sup>76</sup> Morris seeks the answers for their actions in the society they find themselves in.

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72 DoD News Briefing – Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers, February 12, 2002, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636>

73 Hammond, (2011). p.172.

74 Sageman, Marc, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/89085940/Understanding-Terror-Networks>

75 The Bombers, 7 July Bombings, *BBC News*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/london\\_blasts/investigation/html/bombers.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/london_blasts/investigation/html/bombers.stm)

76 Brooks, Xan, 'Chris Morris: 'Bin Laden doesn't really do jokes' *The Guardian* 1 May 2010 <<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/may/01/chris-morris-four-lions-interview>> [last access 4 September 2014]

In the film, the characters' encounter with non-Muslims is always polite and friendly. From the official side they are even met with a manner that is almost too cautious. In one scene, which takes place around a public discussion about Islam, the MP Malcolm Storge (Alex MacQueen) comes across as slippery and inept, trying desperately not to offend anyone. His behaviour a distillation of the multiculturalist policies that determine today's political landscape.

Morris' focus on the bombers' motives discloses a social and political sphere in which people find themselves unable to formulate their grievances. The characters experience that their potential for subjectivity is foreclosed. One of the revealing moments of *Four Lions* is when the police negotiator (Benedict Cumberbatch) asks, 'Waj, what are your demands?' He replies, 'I don't have any.' Waj is a terrorist by default, his acting out as a jihadi is acting out by expediency. He has no personal agenda against society. He just wants more than what has been offered to him.

Žižek describes how, in the post-political, the inequalities produced by capitalism are displaced by the construction of the subject around the limited scope of identity. The unresolved anxieties of the subject, trapped in the pluralist narratives of the post-political, compel people to find displacement activities, from of acting out to a *passage à l'acte*. The next part analyses how *Four Lions* describes, in the way the characters act out, the displacement of anxieties created by the post-political.

### **Sharing space time with a 'bunch of guys'**

Morris' method of creating readily identifiable characters is achieved by approaching them, not as terrorists but as a 'bunch of guys.' In approaching his characters as a group of normal guys, Morris turned to Sageman's 'the bunch-of-guys theory' of terrorism, which he came across whilst researching when writing the film, which accounts for peer pressure and social forces as

crucial factors in the radicalisation process.<sup>77</sup> Sageman's research showed that over 80% of jihadists joined Al Qaida because of friendship/kinship to a person sympathising with the group. This approach is often regarded as a theoretical breakthrough in understanding the mindset of terrorist martyrs.<sup>78</sup> However, for Morris this approach to human behaviour is only logical, 'You're much more likely to get people hanging together for positive reasons than negative reasons,' Morris says, 'and those reasons have to do with companionship and common views.'<sup>79</sup> He does not understand his protagonists as other, but instead sees the jihadists of his film as: '*The Universal Male!*'<sup>80</sup>

Well, they're a bunch of blokes but they're not just a bunch of blokes. You have to understand something that seems, paradoxically, not to fit into a universal experience until you look at it this way. ... But it's true you're using the universal in something like this – which you find when you go to court trials or you read these anecdotes about terrorist pilots. I had a press card and watched the Bluewater trial and got to hear a lot of MI5 surveillance tapes of the suspects, and you start to realise these people are klutziness [sic] around in a very average way – like men at stag parties or five-a-side football. Everyone reporting on it knew it was like The Keystone Cops. The police thought it was funny and would sometimes surreptitiously play the funniest bits of their material to the journalists. There were loads of surveillance tapes that cruelly exposed very average conversation.<sup>81</sup>

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77 Sageman, Marc, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) p.115. and 'Q&A: Four Lions' *Sundance Film Festival*, Jan 28, 2010 <[http://www.sundance.org/festival/article/qa\\_four\\_lions/](http://www.sundance.org/festival/article/qa_four_lions/)> [last access 4 September 2014]

78 The 7/7 Bombers – A Psychological Investigation, *BBC Horizon*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sn/tvradio/programmes/horizon/bombers.shtml>

79 Sageman, M. (2004). *Understanding terror networks*. Philadelphia, Pa., University of Pennsylvania Press [Bristol: University Presses Marketing]. 101 (105)

80 Official Press release, *Four Lions* © 2010 Channel Four Television Corporation, and Warp Films Limited <[http://www.wildbunch.biz/films/four\\_lions](http://www.wildbunch.biz/films/four_lions)> [last access 4 September 2014]

81 Official Press release, *Four Lions* © 2010 Channel Four Television Corporation, and Warp Films Limited <[http://www.wildbunch.biz/films/four\\_lions](http://www.wildbunch.biz/films/four_lions)> [last access 4 September 2014]

Morris says, 'Terrorist cells have the same group dynamics as stag parties and five a side football teams. There is conflict, friendship, misunderstanding and rivalry. Terrorism is about ideology, but it's also about berks.'<sup>82</sup>

Through finding the universal experience of the guys in their humanity, Morris achieves his comedy by exposing the gap between the characters' humanity and their alienating plan to blow themselves and others up. One of the ways this paradox between identifying with their friendship whilst at the same time being confronted with their acting out is achieved through a cinematography that assumes the position of witness, in the form of a critical witness, rather than passive spectator. The handheld camera frequently frames what is going on in a fashion that puts the spectator in the position of spy or observer. The idea of an 'onlooker' as described by Doane, in that the 'time and space of the image coincide with the time and space of the referent', is being utilised to create an involvement with the 'guys' without sharing their perspective.<sup>83</sup> Here Bordwell's account of the camera as an 'imaginary witness' is realised in a way that presents the spectator with a field of vision that mimics a presence in the space the characters inhabit.<sup>84</sup> The film is shot in a standard 1.85:1 aspect ratio and the image is bright and sharp, yet the picture quality is flat, looking more like a video recording throughout. The characters are often framed through doorways, curtains, beaded curtains, window frames and the like, with a shallow depth of field, with the focus on the characters, and the framing element more or less unsharp. This technique creates the effect of being in the same space-time as the characters but at a degree removed, spatially. The camera / spectator is present as a witness but not as a participant. This framing goes against the common assumption of Hollywood cinema that witnessing events consist of a 'passive' giving oneself up to the

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82 David Moats, 'Chris Morris announces Jihad Film / Needs money' *The Quietus* (13 October 2008) <<http://thequietus.com/articles/00535-new-chris-morris-project>> [last access 4 September 2014]

83 Doane, Mary Ann, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003) p.159

84 Bordwell, 2013, p.9



image that has taken over the field of vision', promoted by the loss of conscious framing through formats like Cinema Scope, as cinematographer Leon Shamroy said, 'with the lack of consciousness of a framework imprisoning the action, you feel as if you were actually witnessing an event, rather than watching a picture of it.'<sup>85</sup>

In *Four Lions* there is, rather than a Hollywood style cathartic witnessing, but a critical witnessing. The witnessing effect of the framing is added to by establishing shots done by the use of creeping zooms, images of surveillance cameras, night vision and the suggested action of consecutive images of still photography. These cinematographic devices suggest that the characters are being watched, although it is never revealed by whom. It is not the police, who are shown as incompetent, repeatedly arresting and shooting innocent people. Rather, this watching of the characters suggests on the one hand a critical distance between the spectator and the terrorists, and on the other hand the critical witnessing of their lives, suggests that their acting out is witnessed as something that is happening to friends.

In locating the characters in the same visual and temporal space as the spectator, the personal habits of the characters in *Four Lions* provide an insight into the atomised society that has led these young people to find their place in a type of Islam that bears no relation to that of their parents, or, indeed, any traditional Islam at all. On the contrary, we can see that their outlook is an incoherent mishmash of conspiracy theories, second-hand 'hurts' against Muslims, and mainstream criticisms of consumerism and moral behaviour.

Looking at the characters' radicalisation and desire to become mujahideen as a form of acting out, shows how the group functions as a nexus of meaning for each character's distinctive situation. In line with Žižek's description of acting out as the method of communication with the Other in a failed dialogue, acting out in *Four Lions* becomes the characters' way of

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<sup>85</sup> As quoted, Eldridge, David, *Hollywood's History Films* (London/NY: I. B. Tauris, 2006) p.66.

creating meaning for their own condition through ‘an attempt to break through a symbolic deadlock (an impossibility of symbolisation, of putting into words) by means of an act.’<sup>86</sup> The group is the place where each character finds coherence for their personal reasons for acting out. The characters’ individual frustrations find a collective home in their different levels of identification with the plight of Muslims globally – each character has a personal interpretation of what jihad is to them. They embrace the elements of Otherness that make sense to them, and take them to their extreme conclusions.

### **Acting out – Motif not motive**

What makes the home-grown jihadists funny, in the eye of Morris, is their ordinariness, their human failings with which they approach their terrorism. Take, for example, the two real life British wannabe jihadists Yusuf Sarwar and Mohammed Ahmed who were arrested in 2014. It was revealed that they bought a copy of *Koran for Dummies* and *Islam for Dummies* on Amazon in preparation to join IS in Syria.<sup>87</sup> It is almost as if life imitated art, as this demonstration in the religious seriousness in jihad is preceded in *Four Lions*. In the film the character Waj has a Teddy bear that helps him with his prayers and he receives his religious education from a children’s book called ‘The camel that went to mosque’.

This understating of religion as ‘motif not motive’, as put by Durodié, is reflected in several studies, including Sageman’s and Scott Atran’s, that describe that most jihadists are not motivated by religion, but rather because they are ‘bored, underemployed, overqualified and underwhelmed by hopes

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<sup>86</sup> Žižek, 1992, p.139.

<sup>87</sup> ‘Yusuf Sarwar and Mohammed Ahmed, who were reported to police by family member, plead guilty to terrorism offences.’ *The Guardian* 8 Jul 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/08/two-british-men-admit-linking-extremist-group-syria>> [last access 4 September 2014]

for the future', and see 'jihad as [sic] an egalitarian, equal-opportunity employer that is thrilling, glorious and cool.'<sup>88</sup>

In *Four Lions*, the characters are formed through specific individual contexts and methods of performance that reflect these recognisable traits of young people around the world today. Omar claims to be the groups' leader, he is disillusioned with the treatment of Muslims around the world, personally outraged on behalf of Muslims in other countries. With him are: his friend Waj who does not have the brainpower to come up with any ideas of his own, trusting Omar's guidance in all matters; Feisal (Adeel Akthar), a shy, quiet character – yet the one who has been gathering bomb-making material for some time; Barry, a monomaniacal British convert to Islam, who competes for leadership with Omar; and Hassan, a rich kid and media student with an enthusiasm for rap music.

In the film Omar and his mates are rather uninterested in Muslim beliefs or practices and continuously mock Feisal's attempts to avoid being filmed by putting a box over his head. Feisal's literal, materialist, translation of the religious ideal that taking a photo of a being with a soul is haram (sinful) is a good example of the comedic gap between idealist imagination and its materialist execution. The humour that seems at first to be directed at the expense of Feisal and his failure to recognise this gap, is subverted by the film's touching portrayal of his character's tragic story. Feisal finds a home in the group away from his mentally ill father who eats newspaper. The idea of martyrdom however is not altogether convincing for him, so he trains explosive laden crows to fly into 'sex shops, a US embassy or some other such slag utility' because he does not want to martyr himself. Whilst carrying the explosives to a different hiding place, Feisal trips and is killed, taking out a sheep that he landed on whilst falling over. His farcical death is a visual shock that sums up Feisal's tragedy – a person who joined a suicide group for companionship and compassion. The idea of friendship, the habitual mundane

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<sup>88</sup> Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values, and What It Means to Be Human* (London: Penguin Books, 2011) p.482.

traits the spectator encounters through the group, becomes perverted and Feisal's death not only confronts the characters with the reality of their situation, but also the spectator is shocked into the realness of their politics.

In contrast to Omar, it his peace-loving brother Ahmed (Wasim Zakir) who is devout Muslim. He dresses head to toe in traditional clothing and, to the annoyance of Omar, finds all solutions to life in Islamic rulings which he has spent all day memorising. The final images of the film underscore the tragic irony of a bias that understands the terrorists' beliefs being motivated by religion in that it is Ahmed, prosecuted by the police, who ends up in an interrogation.

Ahmed is not without faults, as he refuses to be in the same room as his sister-in-law and locks his female relatives away in a small cupboard that used to be a toilet. Morris shows the two brothers as two different sides of the same post-political coin. The imposed limits of their cultural scripts has one brother turn to religion and the other turn to a more western style anti-capitalism in the form of jihad. Omar's acting out against society is a reaction to what his brother represents – a limited idea of the Muslim faith and, moreover, a limited idea of him as a person. His life is far more interesting, complicated and rich than what is provided by a cut-out identity. He rejects the provided frameworks of identity even in the absence of anything else to identify with. Omar's yearning for meaning is met with forms of protest that fall within the accepted frame of the symbolic he inhabits and his protest reveals a mindset that is not dissimilar to very mainstream liberal prejudices. On the rare occasion he expresses his opinion he says that they are 'to bring havoc to this bullshit, consumerist, godless, Paki-bashing, Gordon Ramsay 'Taste the Difference' speciality cheddar, torture-endorsing, massacre-sponsoring, 'Look-at-me-dancing-pissed-with-my-nob-out', Sky1 Uncovered, 'Who-gives-a-fuck-about-dead-Afghanis?' Disneyland.' By letting Omar espouse these pitiful polemics against capitalism, Morris shows up the gap between the idealist dimension and the materialist reality of contemporary anti-consumerism. In the film, Omar knows how to manipulate Waj into doing what Omar wants for

himself – a fulfilled life, the fast track to paradise. For Waj he puts it in terms he understands – the thrilling Rubber Dinghy Rapids ride at the Disneyesque amusement park Alton Towers. Morris undermines Omar's anti-consumerist rant by showing how much the characters enjoy the concepts of Disneyland. Omar identifies himself with Simba the main character from the Disney film *The Lion King*, telling his son about Simba's jihad in which he replaces himself with the cartoon character. As with Waj's equating Rubber Dinghy Rapids with the paradise awaiting him after his martyrdom, in Omar's fantasy, Disney becomes a metaphor for jihad itself. In the film the character's grievances are expressed in the same way as those of the western anti-capitalist movement in the post-political, a campaign directed against the excesses of capitalism that 'emerged in the wake of the Battle of Seattle in 1999', which are regarded, as anti-neoliberalism journalist Semis Milne says, as 'both economically and ecologically unsustainable'.<sup>89</sup> Hammond picks up on how the antipathy of radical Islamists to the West was not the expression of an Other but that they were, drawing on Sageman's study, 'mostly upper middle class', and 'global citizens'. He continues, saying that, 'the Islamists' condemnation of Western decadence is not so much a foreign ideology confronting the West from without ... but rather a violent manifestation of the West's own self-loathing.'<sup>90</sup> In the film, the characters act out through their mundane, rejection of what they regard as the excesses of capitalism. For example, Waj's critique of consumerism (apart for his preference for Chicken Cottage) is 'Fuck Mini Babybels.' One ritual of the post-political is that the idea of consumption, that used to be the outcome of ritual (to be able to consume without the burden of belief), has become inverted says Žižek, 'Instead of enabling free consumption without sacrifice, the modern "total economy" which wants to dispense with this "superfluous" ritualised sacrifice

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89 Jones, Jonny, 'The shock of the new: anti-capitalism and the crisis', *New Left Review*, 134 (2012): 27. <<http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=796>> [last access 4 September 2014] and Milne, Seumas, *The Revenge of History: The Battle for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso Books, 2013) p.xiv.

90 Hammond, 2007, p.146.

generates the paradoxes of thrift – there is NO generous consumption, consumption is allowed only insofar as it functions as the form of appearance of its opposite.<sup>91</sup> The only consumption that is allowed is an expressive non-consumption and the anti-capitalist protests in the post-political can be regarded not as much as an acting out in the post-political but rather as a form of ideological ritual of the post-political. Their off-the-shelf ideology is not the characters' acting out – it is their motif not their motive. What they act out against are the cultural scripts of political multiculturalism they are presented within in the post-political, effectively foreclosing them from assuming a political role outside the narratives of identity.

Similarly media student Hassan (Arsher Ali) acts out in a way that is recognisable by the audience as a common motive. In the film he seeks meaning outside the institutions that treat him like a child, and his acting out is in return a childish one. One scene, in which he prances in the living room, talking to himself, and doing a bad Travis Bickle impression, he reveals his motives, 'Whats that, Mrs. Thistle? No, I don't want to resit my media studies. Stupid Mrs. Thistle, I don't want to retake it. You know why? Cos I've found a new purpose in life. And here it is. Eat that shit! Eat that. Eat that. You fuck ...' Apart from creating a relevant reminder of Žižek's example of *Taxi Driver* for an acting out (before Bickle goes on a rampage), this scene shows Hassan alone for the first time. This is how he sees himself when others are not there. Hassan's acting out is more recognisable as a ritual of the post-political. What Morris confronts the audience with, are the symbolic ideological rituals people perform on an everyday basis. These are, as Žižek says, 'compulsive rituals of sacrifice – in order to disavow their (peoples') *jouissance* in the eyes of the Other.'<sup>92</sup> What he means is that, in order to cover the gaps in the symbolic people have to transfer their *jouissance* onto *ersatz* acts that take on the function of believing in the symbolic for them – much like the 'the ritual of

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91 Slavoj Žižek, 'Death's Merciless Love', *lacan.com* (2004) <<http://www.lacan.com/Žižek-love.htm>> [last access 4 September 2014]

92 *ibid.*

Santa Claus', where parents assume their belief, and children pretend to believe so as not to disappoint their parents.<sup>93</sup> These substitute actions are ideologically sanctioned, in the post-political, as Žižek says, the 'performance of the ritual destined to keep illicit temptation at bay becomes the source of libidinal satisfaction.'<sup>94</sup> Hassan's acting out therefore is better understood in terms of a juvenile rebellion. For Hassan joining the group is nothing more than a cool thing to do. Here he can demonstrate his anger with the world within the frame of reference that he thinks is regarded as Other by the institutions that he makes responsible for not recognising his talents. His insincere and faddish commitment to the cause make him the only one to bottle out in the end. Morris presents Hassan's acting out as resulting from the paradoxes of post-politics where the symbolic institutions foreclose the antagonisms necessary for politics. In the film, Morris manages to address the gap between the idealist concept of multiculturalism and its practical translation as a politics of foreclosure, where Hassan becomes a point of identification.

Hassan's acting out, in the manner of a typical teen rebellion, is as ridiculous as it is tragic. When he approaches the police officer with his pleas of trying to give himself up his upside-down-clown-costume emphasises his dilemma; in the costume he is literally 'talking out of his arse' – the police officer finds it hard to believe him until the moment Barry blows him up. Even in death he is not taken seriously.

Hassan's behaviour can be recognised to be a juvenile acting out fuelled by an adolescent attitude of rebellion. His rap, in which he compares himself to the late singer Tupac Shakur, is reminiscent of how, as Bakari Kitwana describes, black culture has been appropriated by middle class white kids looking for a rebellious thrill.<sup>95</sup> Even though Hassan is Asian he is from a

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93 Slavoj Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso Books, 1997). p.107.

94 Slavoj Žižek, 'You May!', *LRB* Vol. 21 No. 6 (18 March 1999d) pp.3–6. <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n06/slavoj-Žižek/you-may>> [last access 4 September 2014]

95 Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005)

middle class background performing the ideologically sanctioned libidinal rituals of youth.

### **Omar's passage a l'acte**

At the end of the film Omar's circumstances change in ways that directly affect the nature of his acting out. These changes are only recognisable by understanding how his desire, his belief in his jihadi ideology which sustains him in the symbolic order, has been made unrelatable for him. Omar sees his purpose as becoming a martyr who 'dies smiling', restoring his own equilibrium with the world – an inherently satisfying experience he also wishes for Waj. Omar is supported in his redeeming version of jihad by his son and his wife, who tells him when he is forlorn after having left the group: 'You were much more fun when you were gonna blow yourself up, love.' It is their shared version of jihad which is the foundation of his family unit. In a tender moment this is expressed in his appropriation of the story of Simba the lion. Omar's belief in his version of jihad is what compels him to act the way he does. To not become a martyr would be devastating to Omar as it is the object of his desire – Object a. The belief that sustains him as a subject in the symbolic order.

Near the climax of the film, the 'Four Lions' are strapped up with bombs, ready to blow up the London Marathon. With the title Four Lions Omar includes the members of the group in his version of noble jihad. When Waj shows doubts about the rightness of what they are about to do, Omar performs his usual procedure with Waj – he tells him what to think. And Waj is happy to proceed. At this point Omar is still convinced by his mission. But soon afterward Barry blows up Hassan who is trying to give himself up.

The ensuing row between Omar and Barry brings Omar to the realisation that he has misled Waj into a mission that was not his but Omar's. Unlike Omar, Waj is not able to make a choice about this.

Waj, who is holed up in a Kebab shop with the server as hostage, is confused about his friend suddenly changing his mind about their long time



goal. Omar tries to talk Waj out of martyring himself, but because he does not employ his usual method of making Waj follow his example (since Omar still intends to go through with it) he only confuses Waj. Omar then hears over the phone that Waj's bomb has gone off – he is dead.

The dynamic of Omar's act changes. Instead of carrying out his jihadi plan, Omar realises that he has killed his friend. His dream of jihad was not the universal panacea that he could bestow upon others, especially not his best friend who trusted him to have his best interests in mind. Disillusioned, Omar kills himself in a pharmacy, a scenario that assumes the look of an acting out but the film shows that this deed is in fact a tragic *passage à l'acte*.

In the film, Omar's profound change in the way he acts is evident in his face. After the call to Waj on the phone he borrowed from his colleague Matt (Craig Parkinson), he is distraught but this is closely followed by a sobering realisation of what is going on. Omar tells Matt that he should say that he, Omar, was smiling when asked by the police, he then tries to smile for Matt but fails. On the way into the pharmacy he is definitely not smiling.

The dialogue between Matt and Omar is framed in a tight close-up where the handheld camera is shakier than in the rest of the film. What happens in this sequence is a change in focal length in the framing of Omar. It starts by showing his face, intercut with shots of encroaching policemen from his p.o.v. Then Omar walks away from Matt, who is in the background shouting 'where are you going?', the camera is still with Omar. Then the p.o.v. is that of Matt who watches Omar from the back in a long shot walk towards the pharmacy, the intimacy of the conversation has finished, and so has the spectatorial identification with Omar. After cutting back to a close up of Matt, the long shot from his p.o.v. is back on the pharmacy into which Omar just entered. Now the image is again framed by the mise-en-scene, in this case green street posts. The witnessing effect of the camera in this scene ultimately positions the spectator with Matt, Omar's friend, including the spectator within the friendship circle of the Four Lions – creating the visual conditions to create the tragedy of Omar's only way for him to escape the world of unreason.

Omar's jihad is his petit a, and like the Kung Fu warrior Po in *Kung Fu Panda*, Omar discovers that his object a, his dream of finding universal equilibrium as a soldier for god, is only a construct that sustains his ideology. The tragedy of the *passage à l'acte* for Omar lies in the matter that he still identifies with what sustains this dream (as described by Žižek, in the *passage à l'acte* the subject identifies with his object of desire in a destructive act.) – his role within his family as a father who defined himself through his belief in a noble jihad.

By telling Matt that he should say that he was smiling, Omar saved his son from knowing that did not give up, because, as he told him 'Simba would never give up.' But he is no longer the old Simba who bravely fights for a just cause, instead he has nothing else that would sustain his identity as a father, as a friend, as a Muslim and as a human being.

This double bind between a life with an identity based on a belief that has been tainted or a life of no identity whatsoever compels Omar to embark on a *passage à l'acte*. He takes himself out of the dialogue with the symbolic order by going into the pharmacy where he blows himself up. That he chooses a pharmacy, a target he earlier in the film deemed unworthy for a true jihadi, confirms that he has seen through the inconsistencies of his belief.

Omar's *passage à l'acte* is the tragic realisation of his misguided acting out. He realises that his idea of jihad was an illusion however he still has to go through with it. The only way to do this is to find the last bit of meaning in his action – his death.

The limitations imposed on Omar's subjectivity in the post-political landscape find their expression in his *passage à l'acte*. Despite realising that his jihadi dream is his own subjective fantasy the absence of a possibility to change his circumstances in a meaningful way, compels him to act according to his ideology.

## Conclusion

In *Four Lions*, the character's acting out happens in their jihadi group – an idea that would commonly be assumed to be alien to most people. Yet *Four Lions* presents the terrorists as universal characters because their situation is borne out of an environment that is recognisable. For each character's acting out to make sense, Morris understands them to be part of a common universe and a common social environment. He understands them as a 'group of blokes.'

Morris tackles the accepted framework around which contemporary morality is debated and shaped. Using Žižek's understanding of excessive pleasure pain, one could say that Morris as an artist of pure *jouissance*, who makes it his mission to dig his finger into the wounds, the symptoms, of society. In turn, the symptoms exposed by Morris reflect Žižek's vision of the post-political – the political and societal limitations of the subject and his frustration that lead to different kinds of acting out.

By creating a universal experience Morris manages not only to make the audience sympathise with his protagonists, but also he makes a case for a more general universalism that lays claims to a universal humanity. Coming back to the words of Chris Morris, talking about *Four Lions* reveals an approach to humanity as a universal ideal, 'They're a bunch of blokes but they're not just a bunch of blokes. You have to understand something that seems, paradoxically, not to fit into a universal experience until you look at it this way.'<sup>96</sup>

With *Four Lions*, Morris creates empathy for what should be alienating – jihadi-style terrorism. Morris humanises that which should not be humanised, while maintaining the methods of his other comedy – alienation, absurdity and a desire to find the extreme beneath the surface of things.

In this method he sees a way to access some truth behind the moral panic and media sensationalism around the subject. He says,

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<sup>96</sup> Official Press release, *Four Lions*

It's making them seem like you or me, I suppose. ... That goes back to the observation I picked up time and again that these people are abundantly, goofily frail. It doesn't alter the fact that they're terrorists. But I think it improves your understanding of what's going on. Or it at least gives you the opportunity to do that.<sup>97</sup>

Morris humanises them by looking at them as fellow subjects from the same social universe as himself where a *passage à l'acte* is a consequence in a world of unreason. He makes it possible to experience a *passage à l'acte* of a kind especially loaded with meaning in contemporary ideology: ideological frustration and the inability to become subject taken to its illogical bitter conclusion.

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<sup>97</sup> Lim, D. The Gang That Couldn't Bomb Straight, *NY Times*, October 22, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/movies/24lions.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/movies/24lions.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all)

## Part 3

### Germany: the RAF mythos in post-political German cinema

This part of the thesis analyses how, in Germany the cinematic narrativisation of the post-political is expressed through the concept of the RAF mythos. The German organisation RAF (Rote Arme Fraktion), established itself in 1970, saw itself as an anti-imperialist urban guerrilla group, opposing what they saw as the West German state apparatus harbouring fascistic tendencies. And it is through the history of the RAF that radicalism is frequently contextualised in Germany. By appropriating the RAF for the post-political, contemporary preoccupations with national identity and loss of political parameters are given cinematic form.

The two major ways in which the RAF has shaped German history are, on the one hand their criminal deeds and their consequences and, on the other hand, the mythology that has been created around the RAF and which still informs much of the nation's relationship to radical politics. The RAF indirectly helped change the relationship between the German state and its citizens. The German terror's main historical legacy was a change in politics that provoked changes of un-freedom in a manner of the *Überwachungsstaat*, the surveillance state, and loss of civil liberties in the form of the controversial Radikalerlass in 1972. These decrees included vast powers of investigation for the state such as the Rasterfahndung, the dragnet investigation whereby huge databases of all citizens are created, and can be checked against specific data of a wanted person or persons.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 1976 an addition was made to Paragraph (article) §129 of the StGB<sub>1</sub> that dealt with the membership of a criminal organisation. This paragraph deals with the criminalisation of groups that belong to a terrorist organisation in order to clearly differentiate and criminalise crimes that were motivated by political goals. The new paragraph makes it illegal to found or be a member of a terrorist organisation, and it became the centre of German state security laws. Bundesministerium der Justiz ([http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/stgb/\\_\\_\\_129.html](http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/stgb/___129.html)) [last access Wednesday 17 February 2010]

Also, the RAF became a prominent and defining subject in German culture, contextualised in the so called 'RAF mythos'. In one sense, the RAF mythos can be understood, as Chris Homewood does, as the RAF as codified in the sum of images and narratives of 'cultural memory', as described by Jan Assman.<sup>2</sup> While the concept of 'cultural memory' is problematic, resting as it does on the concept of a definable and discrete culture, and locating the proceeds of memory outside human agency, it nevertheless points in the direction of a necessary frame of reference. The term cultural landscape will be used as it describes the concept of accumulated cultural products in a way better suited to this study. The RAF mythos is a specifically German construct, interwoven in the context of German history and various interpretations of the RAF. The way it is constructed and contested will be analysed in detail in the next chapter on the *Baader Meinhof Complex*.

A few notes to the concept of myth have to be made in order to contextualise the notion of myth not only within the following chapter, but also for the chapter on *Die Kommenden Tage* in which the RAF myth is also a fundamental idea.

In the German language, the word mythos expresses several ideas.<sup>3</sup> In English two words exist; mythos, meaning a body of myths, and the word myth itself.<sup>4</sup> The word myth in English is more closely associated with the idea of a lie, whereas the concept of mythos is considered more in terms of traditional narrative or mythology. That this distinction is not made in German has to be considered when looking at research on the concept of RAF myth/mythos, not only by German but also English investigators. The meaning of the RAF mythos is thus not only subtle, in the sense of being a

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2 Christopher James Homewood, 'From Baader to Prada The Representation of Urban Terrorism in German-Language Film' [electronic resource] (University of Leeds, 2008) <<http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/665>> [last access 4 September 2014] p.74.

3 A good analysis of the concept of mythos and its *Bedeutungsfacetten* (nuances of meaning) is by Peter Tepe, referring to over 70, in this study alone. Peter Tepe, *Mythos & Literatur: Aufbau Einer Literaturwissenschaftlichen Mythosforschung* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann Verlag, 2001)

4 Jennifer Speake and Mark LaFlaur, 'mythos', *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Foreign Terms in English* (Oxford University Press, 1999) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199891573.001.0001/acref-9780199891573-e-4590>> [last access 4 September 2014]

founding myth while at the same time implying that it is a lie, but also pliable, in the sense of 'whose myth?' and 'what constitutes this myth?' What is thematised, in the part exploring the RAF mythos, is how the concept of mythos works out ideologically in the post-political and how this is expressed on the cinema screen. The central thesis is that there is a preoccupation in the post-political with the concept of mythologisation as way of explaining contemporary phenomena.

In the following chapter on *The Baader Meinhof Complex* the meaning of the RAF mythos will be explored as part of the overall argument around the greater concept of the post-political. This chapter approaches the concept of myth through the filters of Barthes and Žižek. The chapter on *Die Kommenden Tage* will contextualise the role of the RAF mythos as it assumes the form of images of a politics of fear which according to Žižek, is a mode of function of the post-political.

## Chapter 3.1

### Filling in the gaps of history:

### the RAF mythos and *The Baader Meinhof Complex*

#### Introduction

The RAF disbanded in 1998. In their final letter they state that their existence is futile in a world where ‘the threat to peoples’ lives’ arises from the new hegemony of the ‘neoliberal world order’<sup>1</sup>. It is no accident that the end of the RAF, group that saw itself as fighting for an internationalist emancipatory cause, came about not long after the emergence of post-politics. With the foreclosure of radical change per se, the RAF’s own concept of protest had lost its ideological foundation also.

However, in a sense the RAF has not disappeared, but remains ubiquitous in German culture, in art, film and lifestyle products,<sup>2</sup> as well as in politics in the form of a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a specific term to describe the processes of coming to terms with the past, in particular the Holocaust. The idea of a RAF mythos is often present in discourse around the RAF. The RAF mythos is the idea of a constitutive lie that has shaped the imagining of the RAF in Germany. The role that the concept RAF mythos plays in the construction of an ideological fantasy is a foundational idea for this chapter.

According to Thomas Elsaesser, the RAF is a zombie, dead and yet alive in its presence in German culture.<sup>3</sup> This raises the questions of why the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘RAF-Auflösungserklärung’, *Rafinfo.de* (Hrsg.) <<http://www.rafinfo.de/archiv/raf/raf-20-4-98.php>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>2</sup> Such as clothes inspired by the RAF e.g. by the label Maegde&Knechte, or t-shirts carrying their portraits. e.g. ElternHaus <[http://www.elternhaus.com/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=121](http://www.elternhaus.com/product_info.php?products_id=121)> [last access 4 September 2014], bags with Meinhof quotes e.g. Roter Shop <<http://www.roter-shop.de/taschen/tragetaschen/2354/tragetasche-ulrike-meinhof>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *German Cinema – Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2013) p.22.



spectre of the RAF is haunting present day Germany? And what are the mechanisms of this bringing the past into the present? Elsaesser writes that,

... cinema especially plays an ambivalent role in this (retelling the RAF's past for the present) because it is here where reality turns into affect, and that what was is constantly made present again. Authenticity and mythos become one on a new chronological level in the moving image, they have a special relationship to history and memory... .<sup>4</sup>

The reconstruction of the past in cinema, Elsaesser says in as many words, is in itself an act of myth making, through cinematic affect. By the blending of fact and belief through the cinema mill, history becomes part of a mythos that reproduces itself.

This chapter investigates the ways in which *The Baader Meinhof Complex* is an example of how the merging of authenticity and mythos in a cinematic image, creates a new understanding, in this case of the RAF. The central line of the analysis is that the film does so by using a film-form that enables a cinematic post-political experience of the RAF.

The cinematic realisation of *The Baader Meinhof Complex* can be seen as a demonstration of the need of the postmodern to 'fill in the gaps', in a way described by Žižek. The gaps in this sense are the missing pieces of information in a narrative that one fills with one's own understanding and desires. The gaps are subjective spaces that the subject fills with meaning, the gaps that suture the subject to the narrative. When stories are told in the postmodern, these gaps in the narrative are filled by the narrator. Žižek writes, 'an archetypal post-modern procedure it is this: that is to say, it is filling in the gaps of some classical work, rewriting it, sequel, prequels, retelling the story from a different perspective<sup>5</sup> ... .'

This chapter describes how *The Baader Meinhof Complex* creates a filling of the gaps between authenticity and myth – between historical facts and the RAF mythos – with a visual interpretation that reflects content of the post-

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p.17.

political as evidenced in contemporary Germany. This content is the desire to 'demythify', in the sense of Barthes; demythify, as in re-mythologise with a more enlightened myth, 'not to reveal the (latent) meaning of a statement, of a feature, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning; not to change or to purify symbols, but to contest the symbolic itself.'<sup>6</sup> *The Baader Meinhof Complex* represents an attempt to demythify what is considered to be an ideological problem. The problem that people identify with, and by extension tacitly endorse the radicalism associated with the RAF.

The first part of this chapter considers Žižek's understanding of myth and how the idea of demystifying myth plays a major part in his concept of filling in the gaps. This is followed by an investigation of the concept of the RAF mythos and its relation to, and its role in, the notion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Germany. The next part will look at the filmmaker's vision for *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, and describe it in context of other RAF films, as well as the criticism it received.

The final part will look at how *The Baader Meinhof Complex* fills in the gaps of the RAF and its mythologisation. This is done through an examination of how the film portrays three founding myths of the RAF.

### Žižek and myth

In order to conceptualise the cultural necessity in Germany of demystifying the past, it is helpful to understand how the concept of de-mythologising is situated in the post-political. By first looking at how the role of myth is seen in the postmodern in the writings of Roland Barthes, this chapter then describes how Žižek relates the concept of myth in the postmodern to the practice of filling in the gaps.

The concept of myth is frequently associated with the idea of a constitutional lie, often in terms of collective belief. For example, myth is seen

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<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'The Body Politic', *Lacanian ink* 16 – Spring (The Drawing Center, April, 2000a) <<http://www.lacan.com/issue16.php>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes and Richard Howard, *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1987). p.66

as a pathway to the ‘collective unconscious’ in the psychoanalysis of Carl Jung,<sup>7</sup> or considered as a constitutive language by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>8</sup> The imprecise nature of myth as either a narrated history, a collective story, or even a constitutive collective story, has made the concept of myth an ideological matter for structuralist thinkers such as Roland Barthes.

Myth, according to Barthes, is an ideological apparatus, much in the same way that Althusser presents ideology, which deforms reality in compliance with the ruling ideology. Myth, for Barthes, is inherently problematic, due to its tendency to do away with historical conditions, and with them the political and social agendas that shaped the myth in the first place. For Barthes, myth is the carrier of bourgeois ideology, and the goal is to ‘demystify’ and ‘account *in detail* for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature.’<sup>9</sup>

However, Barthes insists that demystification does not work in a straight forward way, but must be done by an ‘estranged’ ‘myth-reader’ or ‘mythologist’.<sup>10</sup> These are (supposedly) the critical thinkers, who ‘decipher(s) the myth, [...] [and] understand(s) a distortion.’<sup>11</sup> Rather than explaining myth, Barthes says, ‘the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth?’<sup>12</sup> The plan is to reveal myth by displacing ideas that have been taken for granted and retelling them in a new light. De-mythologising becomes a sort of re-mythologising of the old myth but with a more ‘responsible idea of

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7 Carl Jung, G., Gerhard Adler, and R. F. C. Hull, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung: V. 9, Pt. 1: Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 2nd edn (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981) p.5.

8 Lévi-Strauss, Claude. ‘The structural study of myth’, *Journal of American folklore* (1955) pp.428–444.

9 Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies* (New York City: Hill & Wang, 1972) p.8.

10 *ibid.* p.158, p.11, p.129.

11 *ibid.* p.127.

12 *ibid.* p.134.

language'<sup>13</sup>. Myths, according to this logic, can only be demythified by retelling them in a more 'responsible' way, in that it ensures a different narrative which considers the voice of 'the oppressed.'<sup>14</sup> For Barthes, 'left-wing myth is always an artificial myth, a reconstituted myth,'<sup>15</sup> but that is a myth of the left. This notion of re-constituting myth to fit with what are felt to be more acceptable sensibilities is a constituting factor in the making of *The Baader Meinhof Complex*.

Whereas Barthes laments the inherent properties of myth as obfuscating the workings of the dominant bourgeois ideology, Žižek sees postmodernism's rewriting of myth as problematic. For Žižek, unlike Barthes, the mythological form is not a beginning, but the end of a convoluted process of transposing old meanings and condensing complex correlations. 'Myth', says Žižek, 'by definition, emerges as a memory, as the retroactive reconstitution of something, which, when it 'actually took place', was simply a common vulgar play of passions?''<sup>16</sup>

What Barthes sees as the problem of myth, that there is no demystifying myth in terms of an absolute truth of the thing-itself – Žižek finds helpful. In the hands of 'modernist' (as opposed to post-modern) thinking myth becomes, 'the interpretative frame of reference for its contemporary narrative', by asserting 'the metaphysical potential of the most common and vulgar bits of our daily experience.'<sup>17</sup> The modernist mindset, Žižek describes, shaped by the principles of the Enlightenment, 'always already 'contaminates' the mythical naive immediacy. Enlightenment itself is mythical, i.e. its own grounding gesture repeats the mythical operation.'<sup>18</sup> What Žižek means by this is that the modernist subject (working on universal principles), although enlightened and

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p.80.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p.148.

<sup>15</sup> p.149.

<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?: Four Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London: Verso Books, 2002) p.36.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p.30, p.29.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p.39.

aware of the function of myth and their own subjectivisation, can still use it as a useful device to help describe areas outside subjectivity, where pure reason may fail to do so.

Barthes insists that myth obfuscates ideology and must be undone through creating a new mythology, as myth cannot be understood in terms of absolute truth outside subjectivity. Žižek understands myth as a tool, created by self aware subjects, through which subjects can access a greater truth outside subjectivity.

Žižek suggests that the desire to demythify through more acceptable myths stems from the limits placed on subjectivity by postmodernism. He says, 'Postmodernism directly rewrites myth itself by filling in the gaps.'<sup>19</sup> It is a gap that addresses a universal concept that lies outside the restrictions of the symbolic order that is, outside the limitations of the realm of structured society of politics and culture. However this realm can be accessed by everyone as individual subjects.

The postmodern condition is that, instead of leaving a possibility for a void, for a 'not being there' of answers, postmodernism fills the gaps with privileged terms or texts that are held to be unassailable such as race, gender or pathology. In Žižek's understanding, the gaps are gaps in the narrative of the symbolic itself, tears in the fabric of ideology. People can either fill those gaps with convenient narratives, or ideological fantasies, or they can leave them open and experience the void – not knowing in what way this will change them. The experiencing of gaps, as provided by myth are, for Žižek, full of potential.

Considering Žižek's understanding that demythification (or re-mythification with privileged ideas) is the default mode of the postmodern mindset, which finds its political form in post-politics,<sup>20</sup> *The Baader Meinhof Complex* can be understood as a contextualisation of the RAF myth in terms of the post-political. The next part will look closer at the conceptualisation of the

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p.30.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.198.

myths that constitute the RAF mythos, its relation to German history and its relation to *The Baader Meinhof Complex*.

### **What is the RAF Mythos?**

#### **The RAF in the context of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung***

The 'RAF mythos' is what is known in German as a *Schlagwort*; a buzzword or catchphrase, an emotionally charged term often with propagandistic undertones. In a linguistic study on the origins of the term 'RAF mythos', Silke Reinecke describes how since the late 80s the RAF has been associated with the term mythos, or myth.<sup>21</sup> To explain the complex idea of the meaning of RAF mythos, not only in its own terms but also as a concept of the post-political, is the aim of this section.

Wolfgang Kraushaar, in his work on the RAF mythology, describes how the RAF mythos has been perpetuated from the moment the RAF existed.<sup>22</sup> He differentiates five different sources and outputs that he holds responsible for the emergence of the RAF mythos:

1) The way the RAF produced its own myth of heroism.

(This self-mythologising of the RAF is divided into three main myths perpetuated by the RAF; a) the myth of 'armed struggle'. Kraushaar describes that the RAF employed this term too late in their terror spree to mean anything but a retroactive persuasion for sympathisers. b) the myth of isolation torture, claims of the damaging psychological effects suffered from being kept imprisoned from others. According to Kraushaar this was a tactic employed by

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21 Silke Reinecke, 'Mythos und Gnade: Schlagwörter, Topoi und weitere diskurslinguistische Phänomene im RAF-Diskurs in der Wochenzeitung *Die Zeit*' (MA in German, 2009) <[https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/handle/10012/4700/Reinecke\\_Silke.pdf?sequence=1](https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/handle/10012/4700/Reinecke_Silke.pdf?sequence=1)> [last access 4 September 201 p.52.

22 Wolfgang Kraushaar, 'Mythos RAF. Im Spannungsfeld von terroristischer Herausforderung und populistischer Bedrohungsphantasie', Wolfgang Kraushaar (ed.) *Die RAF und der linke Terrorismus* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2006) pp.1186 – 1209, p.1188.

the RAF to attract sympathisers. And, c) the myth that the first generation RAF were murdered in prison by the state.)

2) The way the state helped to produce the RAF myth by demonising the terrorists.

3) The way the mass media produced a dramatisation of events.

4) How the audience of the mediated events were victims of an atmosphere of fear generated by either the terrorists or the state.

5) The discourse around the RAF; How it became a projection space for others to voice their own agendas, interpretations and understandings of the RAF.<sup>23</sup>

Kraushaar's categorisation of the RAF myth describes it as a meshing of different myth producers and myth distributors, all profiting from the RAF; the media, the state, the audience and most of all the RAF itself.

Thomas Elsaesser also sees the RAF mythos as a product of an interplay between different parties. For him, these were the providers of the images of 'terror made in Germany'; the RAF itself, the yellow press and television.<sup>24</sup> This pool of images and narratives then created 'a forest of symbols, a landscape of ideographs, text fragments and rebuses' that could be read like a looped, never ending film strip.<sup>25</sup>

Reinicke's study concludes that the idea of a RAF mythos has, over the years, developed a life of its own and 'it has become a slogan more and more devoid of self explanation.'<sup>26</sup> The study shows that, most of all since the controversial art exhibition *Mythos* RAF in Berlin in 2005, today the idea of mythologising the RAF has replaced the character of 'sympathiser' of the RAF,

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<sup>23</sup> Kraushaar, 2006, p.1186 – 1209.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Terror Und Trauma: Zur Gewalt Des Vergangenen in Der BRD* (Berlin, Kadmos, 2007) p.31.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Reineke, 2009, p.63, p.61.

‘Whomever one accuses to hero worship, to mythify, to romanticise the RAF, one also accuses of not facing ‘the facts.’<sup>27</sup>

The idea of ‘RAF mythos’ has become shorthand for a myth that obfuscates the reality of the RAF. However, what this reality is, is itself problematic. The suggestion is that the concept of RAF mythos has been propagated by the post-political elite, incorporating the RAF’s failures, human and political, in order to discredit radical politics in general. According to Reinicke, being called a propagator of the RAF mythos – the RAF mythologist – has turned into a political stigmatisation of people ‘who are associated with any kind of leftist ideology.’<sup>28</sup> The RAF mythos has on the one hand become a polemic with which to defame a political opponent, even though this opponent does not have to belong to a particular political group (it includes writers, artists, filmmakers etc.). On the other hand those who use the word mythos, even in a negative way, perpetuate the concept of a RAF myth and assume the existence of such a mythos in the first place.<sup>29</sup>

The tendency to assume that there is a mythology around the RAF is what drives the interest in contemporary depictions of the RAF, including *The Baader Meinhof Complex*. And the desire to demythify the RAF through a re-telling of the RAF story in more acceptable terms, can be understood as an expression of a specifically German form of post-politics.

In order to understand why the RAF myth and its unravelling play such a big role in German cinema and German history altogether it is important to understand the context of *The Baader Meinhof Complex* in terms of the RAF film and the idea of the RAF as collective trauma in German history.

The desire for a demythification of the past can be seen as an integral part of German identity, a circumstance that has its roots in the cultural concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – not as the name would suggest a mere coming to terms with the past, but a method of constant critical

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<sup>27</sup> ibid

<sup>28</sup> ibid. p.64

<sup>29</sup> ibid. p.84



evaluation of the past through the lens of the present. Torben Fischer, and Matthias N. Lorenz describe in their *Dictionary of Vergangenheitsbewältigung* the term as the composite of the ‘multifaceted debates and discourses of National-socialism after 1945.’<sup>30</sup>

Reinicke’s self-set goal for her study was to investigate if the idea of RAF myth has become a linguistic *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The idea of the RAF myth as a collective trauma, that defines aspects of the German psyche, is also what Elsaesser describes when he talks about how today’s Germany finds its identity in the collective coming together around the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. He writes, ‘dealing with past has become the German way of life.’<sup>31</sup>

The roots for this desire to deal with the past lie in the idea of a political pedagogy, promoted by the concept of critical theory of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Adorno writes in the *Negative Dialectic* that,

‘Hitler has imposed a new categorical imperative on human beings in their state of unfreedom: to arrange their thoughts and actions in such a way that Auschwitz should never be repeated, that nothing of the sort should ever happen again. This imperative is as resistant to explanation as was the given nature of Kant’s imperative in its day.’<sup>32</sup>

Adorno describes that Germany must follow new guidelines of behaviour based on a constant self-awareness and self-analysis. The horrors of the 3rd Reich led to a new German intellectual mindset that saw in the ongoing critical examination of the past (through terms and sensibilities of the present) a guarantee to avoid a resurgence of fascism. Moreover, this constant self-analysis would become the defining feature of German identity from then on.

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<sup>30</sup> Torben Fischer and Matthias N Lorenz, (ed.) *Lexikon Der ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ in Deutschland: Debatten – Und Diskursgeschichte Des Nationalsozialismus Nach 1945* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007) p.13

<sup>31</sup> Elsaesser, 2007, p.35 – 36.

<sup>32</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften in 20 Bänden: Bd. 6: Negative Dialektik. Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (Frankfurt a. M., 1997) p.358.

Martin Leudke describes in *Die Zeit* Clemens Albrecht's thesis of the 'intellectual founding of the BRD' on the basis of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: 'The *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has played a major role in re-nationalising Germany after the war. It became the legitimisation, a new consensus what it meant to be German – the task of dealing with the country's fascist past.'<sup>33</sup> The success of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as political strategy was again adopted to form a consensus around what it meant to be German after 1989. After German reunification, the legacy of the GDR and its impact on the German psyche has become known, controversially, as the *Doppelte* (the double) *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* of Germany.<sup>34</sup>

The adoption of psychological terminology (seeing the past as something to be dealt with) is picked up by Elsaesser in his concept of how the representations of the RAF are dealing with a historical trauma in a uniquely German way, what he calls *Wiederholungszwang*, a compulsion to repeat and retell these traumas in a cyclical time frame.<sup>35</sup> The trauma of the nation is to be treated through a general identification of past events on an individual basis. By making each German responsible for the nations *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* the state legitimises its own existence as an institution that is dedicated to enable all citizens to partake in the nation's self-therapy and thus prevent a new rise of fascism/communism through radical politics.

The German notion of a collective identity based on seeing the past as a traumatic event that needs to be addressed/confronted, is perpetuated by the uncertainties of the post-political. Post-politics calls for a legitimisation of the state that is 'beyond ideology'. In the case of Germany the function of the state is to enable a collective identification with the past. The cultural

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33 Martin Luedke, 'Wie die Kritische Theorie in die Schulen kam: Ein Beitrag zur intellektuellen Geschichte der Bundesrepublik', *Die Zeit* (September 1999 ) <[http://www.zeit.de/1999/38/Aeusserste\\_Vorsicht](http://www.zeit.de/1999/38/Aeusserste_Vorsicht)>[www.zeit.de/1999/38/Aeusserste\\_Vorsicht/site](http://www.zeit.de/1999/38/Aeusserste_Vorsicht/site) – 1

34 Fischer and Lorenz, 2007, p.275.

35 Elsaesser 2007 p.19

expressions of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* become what Žižek calls the 'spontaneous ideological supplement to the post-political administration, as its 'pseudo-concretisation,' its translation into a form that can appeal to the individuals' immediate experience.'<sup>36</sup> Here the post-political fantasy is translated into a form that appeals to the 'individuals' immediate experience.'<sup>37</sup> This is where the technocratic character of the post-political succumbs to 'a supplementary "populist" level of self-legitimation.'<sup>38</sup> The concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* should thus be understood as ideological, an essential fantasy of post-political Germany.

### **The History of the RAF film in Germany and *The Baader Meinhof Complex* in this context**

*The Baader Meinhof Complex* is part of a strand of German cinema that could be termed the RAF film. The RAF has been thematised in various ways over thirty years, from film and theatre to literature and art. The filmic treatment of the subject started with Volker Schlöndorff's interpretation of Heinrich Böll's novel *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* (1975) and the cinematic reaction to the events of the 'German Autumn' in the collective film project *Germany in Autumn* (1978).

The story of the RAF has to some extent become interchangeable with the story of radical politics itself, its beginnings and its failure. The failure of the RAF has been interpreted according to the relevant readings of the time: from a critical perspective of the German state in the 1970s and 1980s, over a re-evaluation of leftist politics after the fall of the Berlin Wall, to a nostalgic re-imagining of a de-politicised RAF in terms of cool, anti-authoritarian chic, and then a return to history in the 2000s.

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<sup>36</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Against the Populist Temptation' *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. Spring (2006c) <<http://www.lacan.com/zizpopulism.htm>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, (2006c).

Rachel Palfreyman describes how German films about the RAF are shaped by the changing history of the country. Her argument is that the reunification of Germany in 1989 no longer required an examination of the legitimacy of the state, a task that was the main occupation of what she labelled the ‘first generation’ of RAF films (a name with which she echoes the way the actual RAF was divided into generations of members and their aims and methods).<sup>39</sup> She describes how films about the RAF that were made after the German reunification can be seen as a new form of RAF film. After the reunification, the goal for filmmakers was no longer to examine the state’s relationship with competing ideologies, but, following the end of traditional politics, to create visions of how the old ‘Bonn Republic can be understood in the climate of the new Berlin Republic.’<sup>40</sup>

The historical changes went hand in hand with changes in the aesthetics of cinematic imaginings of the RAF. Whereas the RAF films of the ‘first generation’, as Palfreyman describes, imbued with the cinematic aesthetics of the New German Cinema starting with *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* and *Germany in Autumn* (1978) and ending with the film *Stammheim* (1986), ‘appear sober and analytical as if deliberately confronting the potential criticism of the mythologising power of the cinema’,<sup>41</sup> the RAF films made in the 2000s, possess a deliberate ‘subordination of historical material in favour of a good story and [their] lack of defamiliarising aesthetics would seem precisely to invite the charge of ‘excessive seductiveness’ and mythologising tendencies.’<sup>42</sup>

From 1998 onward the treatment of the RAF on screen shows how film form changed dramatically with the new political landscape. In times when radical left politics were still accessible (at least on paper), filmmakers

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39 Rachel J. Palfreyman, ‘The fourth generation: legacies of violence as quest for identity in post-unification terrorism films’, *German cinema since unification*, (ed.) by D. Clarke, (London: Continuum, 2006) pp.11–42, p.39.

40 *ibid.*

41 *ibid.*

42 *ibid.*

described the discrepancies between the state, politics and the meaning of the RAF as a means of addressing the German state. After the German reunification, the subtext of films dealing with the RAF was no longer a critical examination of the state but the RAF itself. Films like *The State I Am In* (2000) and *The Legend of Rita* (2000) use the RAF to describe a 'crisis of identity' that followed after the reunification and loss of grand narratives. In *Die Terroristen* (1992) a terrorist group disbands itself, recognising their anachronism in a world that did away with radical politics, whereas films like *Baader* (2002) and *Starbuck* (2002) concentrate on the star personas of Andreas Baader and Holger Meins. Both these films coincided with the reemergence in German pop culture of Meinhof, Ensslin and Baader as cyphers of radical/terrorist chic. Homewood speaks of a 'commodification of the RAF at the hands of consumer pop culture.'<sup>43</sup> The terrorists' portraits, logos and slogans, the iconic images that were already part of German cultural memory, were glamourised e.g. in theatre plays (e.g. *Ulrike Maria Stuart* 2006), comedy shows (e.g. *Terrorprogramm* 2007)<sup>44</sup> and fashion lines featured in then new and hip lifestyle magazines *Tussi Deluxe* and *Max*.<sup>45</sup>

The loss of political immediacy after 1989 also brought with it a change in film form, designed to give shape to newly emerging interpretations of the RAF. Similar to Palfreyman, Sabine Hake describes how in contrast to the 'austere treatments of the subject by directors of the New German Cinema, the younger film-makers used linear narratives and strong character identification, the seductive lure of set and costume design, and the self-reflexive play with the respective decade's musical sounds to work through the myths and

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43 Homewood, 2008, p.131.

44 Roland Böhm, 'Deutscher Theater-Herbst im Zeichen von RAF und Terror', *Monsters and Critics* (16 September 2007) <[http://www.monstersandcritics.de/artikel/200737/article\\_29057.php/Deutscher-Theater-Herbst-im-Zeichen-von-RAF-und-Terror#sthash.si6E7GMf.dpuf](http://www.monstersandcritics.de/artikel/200737/article_29057.php/Deutscher-Theater-Herbst-im-Zeichen-von-RAF-und-Terror#sthash.si6E7GMf.dpuf)> [last access 4 September 2014]

45 Wiebke Brauer, 'Pop-Kultur: Tanz den Baader-Meinhof!', *Der Spiegel* (5 March 2001) <<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/pop-kultur-tanz-den-baader-meinhof-a-120905.html>> [last access 4 September 2014] and Reinhard Mohr, 'Die Prada-Meinhof-Bande', *Der Spiegel* (25 February 2002) <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-21543172.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

mythification of the New Left.<sup>46</sup> Another cinematic style that features heavily in the post-unification RAF films is the docudrama, including films like *Todesspiel – Teil 1 & 2* (1996-97), *Black Box BRD* (2001), *Baader* (2002), *Mogadishu* (2008) and *Tödliche Schokolade* (2010). The hyperreality, the drive to produce ‘an effect that is more real than the real thing being copied’, created by the juxtaposing of re-contextualised footage, original drama, re-appropriated mise-en-scène and historically specific music speaks of a desire to give verisimilitude to an interpretation of the RAF.<sup>47</sup> It is a method that creates drama and generates relevant content without running the risk of ‘taking sides’ as the filmmakers of the first generation of RAF films clearly did. This method however, as Homewood describes the film *Black Box BRD*, ‘rather than offer any new perspectives it merely went over old ground, deriving a thriller potential from the Schleyer kidnapping and consolidating the state perspective.’<sup>48</sup>

When *Baader Meinhof Complex* came out in 2008, it looked as if it was part of the same canon of films.

1. Its narrative structure is a spectacular succession of pivotal events which the book pinpoints as defining moments of the RAF. These are combined with images that have come to define the canon of the RAF in Germany’s cultural landscape. The film reenacts these events, combining some scenes with news footage of the time, in a form which utilises the dramatic methods of docudrama.

2. The film shows the terrorists in an interesting, sexy, and action packed way through its fast cutting, a vintage look colouring, tight framing and use of German stars such as Moritz Bleibtreu, as Andreas Baader and Johanna Wokalek, as Gudrun Ensslin. The aesthetic of *The Baader Meinhof Complex*

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46 Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2001) p.211.

47 Buchanan, Ian. "hyperreality." *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Oxford Reference. 2010. Date Accessed 14 Aug. 2014 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-334>> [last access 4 September 2014]

48 Homewood, 2008, p.15.

gave rise to criticism arguing that the film, by evoking images of terrorist chic, glamourises the RAF's deeds. For example: 'The Baader Meinhof Complex stylised Baader, Ensslin und Meinhof into a glamour-trio of violent excesses' said the Deutschlandradio.<sup>49</sup> As Clive James writes, the glamourising effect of modern day terrorist films, 'Almost always (...) will replace the event with a glamorous fiction, because there just isn't room in the frame for the people who don't matter.'<sup>50</sup>

From a film theoretical perspective, the effect of the film's dramaturgy has been interpreted in terms of its failure to process the past, as well as the mythologisation of the RAF.

In Lothar Mikos' assessment, the film's aesthetic alienates by not interpreting history. For those not familiar with the history of the RAF, the films provide no access to the story, for it assumes a 'prefigurative' knowledge of the audience. 'The Baader Meinhof Complex is stuck in its self-imposed contradiction between fictionalised production in its action sequences and its historical accuracies in its dialogues, set design and images.'<sup>51</sup> This criticism sees the film as a semiotic nightmare in which Roger Odin's cognitive pragmatic film theory, of 'reading' a film as either fiction or documentary and creating an appropriate distance or involvement to the subject matter, is overthrown.<sup>52</sup>

Chris Homewood follows *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's* commentator Frank Schirmacher's conclusion that *The Baader Meinhof Complex* is

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49 Interview, 'Einen Blick ins Ursachengestrüpp werfen', Historiker Wolfgang Kraushaar zum RAF-Film "Wer wenn nicht wir". Wolfgang Kraushaar im Gespräch mit Karin Fischer, (9 March 2011) *Deutschlandradio* <[http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/einen-blick-ins-ursachengestruepp-werfen.691.de.html?dram:article\\_id=55292](http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/einen-blick-ins-ursachengestruepp-werfen.691.de.html?dram:article_id=55292)> [last access 4 September 2014]

50 Clive James, 'Terror Chic', Essay. – A Point of View, (BBC, 28 November 2008) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7755255.stm>> [last access 4 September 2014]

51 Lothar Mikos, 'Amphibischer Film versus transmediale Erzählung', Schick, Thomas, and Tobias Ebbrecht, ed., *Kino in Bewegung: Perspektiven Des Deutschen Gegenwartsfilms*, 1st edn (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011) pp.137–154, p.151.

52 Roger Odin, 'Dokumentarischer Film – dokumentarisierende Lektüre', Eva Hohenberger (ed.) *Bilder des Wirklichen. Texte zur Theorie des Dokumentarfilms* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8 1998) pp.286–303.

‘neither a documentary nor a history film ... but has something of a parallel universe about it’<sup>53</sup> and it is this new thing which has become a ‘second order reality’, a second order memory system as described by Robert Burgoyne,<sup>54</sup> that is ‘closer in tone to the parallel universe of the RAF offered across the pages of *Tussi Deluxe*’, but that, ‘more comprehensive filmic reckonings with the legacy of the RAF are to be found elsewhere. Whether the perspectives they provide can be heard over the mainstream might of Edel’s and Eichinger’s text, however, is another question.’<sup>55</sup>

This critique is more or less congruent with Fredric Jameson’s argument that the ‘postmodern nostalgia film’ represents the commodification of history. Postmodernism, he asserts, ‘the cultural dominant’ of late capitalism, is a culture of pastiche. ‘Nostalgia film, consistent with postmodernist tendencies generally, seeks to generate images and simulacra of the past, thereby – in a social situation in which genuine historicity or class traditions have become enfeebled – producing something like a pseudo-past for consumption as a compensation and a substitute for, but also a displacement of, that different kind of past which (along with active visions of the future) has been a necessary component for groups of people in other situations in the projection of their praxis and the energising of their collective project.’<sup>56</sup>

Jameson emphasises that nostalgia films do not attempt to recapture or represent the ‘real’ past but are structured around certain myths and stereotypes about the past that are purely there for consumption and commodification. In this way *The Baader Meinhof Complex*’s treatment of the past is the only way the past can be understood in the postmodern age; through a commodification of historicity for the mass market of cinema

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53 Frank Schirrmacher, ‘Diese Frau brauchte mich ganz’ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14.09.2008, <<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kino/der-baader-meinhof-komplex-diese-frau-brauchte-mich-ganz-199463.html>>

54 Robert Burgoyne, ‘Memory, History, and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film’, *Memory and Popular Film*, (ed.) Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) pp.220 – 236, p.225.

55 Kraushaar, 2008, p.1467.

56 Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 2007). p.189



blockbusters. This understanding would explain the film's emphasis on violence and action elements which are usually found in blockbuster action films.

However, Lutz Koepnick makes a claim that 'heritage filmmaking in post-wall Germany cannot be understood simply as a symptom of the postmodern. It is inextricably linked to the specificities of German national history in the twentieth century.'<sup>57</sup> From this point of view heritage films are part of Eric Rentschler's concept of a dominant cinema of consensus, in that 'by reviewing the national past, they solicit a new kind of German consensus for the emerging Berlin republic.' Rentschler's<sup>58</sup> criticisms of post-wall, Post-reunification cinema was that these films failed to address the political and historical matters of the time, and instead there was a cultural dominance of 'a formula-bound profusion of romantic comedies, crude farces, road movies, action films, and literary adaptations'<sup>59</sup>

But as Jamie Fisher and Brad Prager point out, there has been a resurgence of political and historical film since 2000 with films such as *Sophie Scholl – The Final Days*, *Head-On* (2004), *The Lives of Others*, *Downfall*, and especially the collective film project *Germany 09* (2009) which they point out is a direct quote of Germany in Autumn and its desire to address the 'state of the nation.'<sup>60</sup> Fisher and Prager talk about these new political films as a renaissance of critical German filmmaking that stands in direct heritage to New German cinema.<sup>61</sup> In what they call a Third Wave of German cinema or

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<sup>57</sup> Lutz Koepnick, 'Reframing the Past: Heritage Cinema and Holocaust in the 1990s', *New German Critique*, No. 87, Special Issue on Postwall Cinema (Autumn, 2002) pp.47 – 82, p.51

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Erich Rentschler, 'From New German Cinema to the post – wall cinema of consensus', Mette Hjort, Scott Mackenzie and Scott Mackenzie, eds., *Cinema And Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000) pp.260 – 77, p.264.

<sup>60</sup> Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager, *The Collapse of the Conventional: German Film and Its Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2010) p.17.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* p 2.

post-millennial German cinema, they claim one can make out a cinema 'that is substantially different from the era of consensus that precede it.'<sup>62</sup>

The new found that the urge to tackle Germany's past is driven by a desire to demythify and lay bare what has been occupied by ideology. This is done in post-millennial German cinema by employing forms of realism to appeal to a subjective reading that postulates a pluralistic worldview. In this spirit, *The Baader Meinhof Complex* deals with German heritage through a desire to create transparency through the murkiness of the RAF mythos.

The 'Eichinger method' (after producer Bernd Eichinger) of a representational cinema as a way to approach defining moments in history (the talk was of a 'vereichingern', an Eichingerisation, of German history)<sup>63</sup> was welcomed by the influential weekly news magazine *Spiegel*, the journalistic home of Aust. Chris Homewood describes how the magazine's writer Dirk Kurbjuweit heralded the film as a revelation; 'According to Kurbjuweit, the film's relevance and status as a corrective to Mythos RAF was rooted in a representational strategy which in recent years has come to define the impact of Germany's most successful producer and writer, Bernd Eichinger.'<sup>64</sup> Kurbjuweit in the *Spiegel* proclaimed the films would destroy the RAF myth. A claim so significant it made the title page which also included a quotation of the last line of dialogue. However, as Homewood points out, the great majority of Germany's press was not of the *Spiegel's* opinion. 'Far from seeing *The Baader Meinhof Complex* as a corrective to entrenched cultural myths, in most quarters of the print media the film was considered to serve the inverse on the intended function.'<sup>65</sup> (Homewood refers in particular to Eckhard Fuh's comment in *Die Welt* and Daniel Koltenschulte's article in the

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62 *ibid.* p.33.

63 Andreas Borcholte, 'Eichingers "Baader-Meinhof-Komplex": Die Terror-Illustrierte', *Der Spiegel* (September 2008) <<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/eichingers-baader-meinhof-komplex-die-terror-illustrierte-a-578786.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

64 Chris Homewood, 'From Baader to Prada: Memory and Myth in Uli Edel's *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (2008)', in Paul Cooke and Chris Homewood (eds.), *New Directions in German Cinema* (London/NY: I. B. Tauris, 2011) p.133.

65 *ibid.* p.136.

*Frankfurter Rundschau*, both emphasising the way *The Baader Meinhof Complex* perpetuates the RAF myth). What was also criticised by the press is the film's refusal to critically engage with the past in a cinematic fashion that would engage the audience through a traditional narrative where the burden of creating meaning lies with the authors of the film.

Instead we get 'complete disorientation', writes Jan Schulz-Ojala in the *Tagesspiegel*, 'No idea, anywhere. No serious attempt of interpretation or analysis of the times.... Everything has to go into the *Bilderverwurstungs-maschine*, (the image-sausage-grinder that makes an incomprehensible whole out of individual events.)'<sup>66</sup>

In short, the film is regarded as having failed as a meaningful exploration not only of the RAF itself but also as a thorough demythification of the RAF mythos, an earnest cinematic showing of their political failures as well as their failure as human beings. Instead it regarded as a sort of RAF-myth-sploitation film that commodifies German history in favour of entertainment and saleability. Considering the importance of the RAF mythos in terms of its political role as a concept of rallying behind an unspoken consensus of German ideology, the vitriolic reviews of critics are not surprising.

What is remarkable here is that the film has been almost universally received as a failing to deliver a critical analysis of the RAF and its mythos, and that it is this failure that is the main concern of the journalistic as well as the academic reviews. This preoccupation with the film's insufficient portrayal of, what is perceived to be the correct presentation of the RAF mythos as a false friend seems to suggest that the need to demythify is at the forefront of dialogue around *The Baader Meinhof Complex*. The general complaint is that the film showed the RAF in a style that was in itself not a desirable way of approaching history in Germany, that is through a style that pandered to commercial interests instead of providing, if not a clear condemnation of the RAF, at least a more nuanced historical perspective. Elsaesser's criticism of the

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<sup>66</sup> Jan Schulz-Ojala, 'Extrem laut und unglaublich fern', *Der Tagesspiegel* (18 September 2008) p.29.

film sums up the general dissatisfaction with the Baader Meinhof Complex, 'But perhaps the main issue to raise with *The Baader Meinhof Complex* is that it so clearly subscribes to a dramaturgy of heroes and anti-heroes, and treats the cycle of returns and the thirtieth anniversary as an obligation to "demystify the myths", which not only end up doing the opposite, but brutally simplifies the multi-layered fabric of the myth.'<sup>67</sup> In short, it was felt that the re-mythologisation of the RAF in *The Baader Meinhof Complex* had not been done correctly.

**The Baader Meinhof Complex:  
the past as reflective nostalgia**

*The Baader Meinhof Complex* is best described as an illustrated history of the RAF. Covering ten years of history in 143 minutes, it starts in 1967 by showing journalist Ulrike Meinhof, her husband Klaus Rainer Röhl and her two daughters holidaying in the bucolic landscape of the island Sylt in the North Sea; the playground for the well-off middle class from nearby Hamburg. The film jumps between Meinhof reading her article on the Shah of Iran's visit to Berlin, and the protest around the event itself, culminating in the shooting of student Benno Ohnesorg by the police.

Events follow rapidly. The radicalisation of Gudrun Ensslin and Meinhof, the student protest of 1968, the assassination attempt of Rudi Dutschke and the protesters' attempt to 'Stop Springer', an arson attack on a department-store, the freeing of Andreas Baader, guerrilla training in Jordan, bank robberies, bomb attacks. The main characters are arrested, Holger Mains dies, Ulrike Meinhof has a break down and hangs herself.

It is then 1977: Brigitte Mohnhaupt is freed from prison and meets Peter Boock, the second generation reorganise the RAF. The depiction of the Stammheim trials is intercut with scenes showing the blackmail campaigns by the second generation RAF to free the inmates: This is followed by images of

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *German Cinema – Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2013) p.143.

the murders of Siegfried Buback and Jürgen Ponto, the kidnapping of Hanns-Martin Schleyer and the highjacking of the Landshut. At the end of the film there are four bodies. Baader, Ensslin and Raspe are dead in their cells. In the final scene, Schleyer is shot. The murderer remains unidentified.

The film is based on the journalistic accounts of the RAF by Stefan Aust. Aust published the first edition of his book *The Baader Meinhof Complex* in 1985 and it became the standard text of the history of the RAF. The book uses interviews with witnesses, terrorists and their families, police and judicial documents, materials by the RAF and Aust's own experiences to present one of the defining texts on the Baader Meinhof group. According to *Die Welt*, it 'has dominated the image of the RAF in Germany for the past 20 years'.<sup>68</sup>

The book documents the events, and is also as a personality profile of both the terrorists and the agents of the German state. One of the reasons the book has become so influential is because Aust emerged from the same scene as Meinhof. Their relationship is also re-created in the film. The largely favourable reception of the book is grounded in Aust's journalistic abilities and his credibility derived from the first hand experience of the political milieu he emerged from.

Aust met Meinhof in the 1960s during his work as an editor at the magazine *Konkret*. In 1985 he published *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, in which he described the story of the RAF from its beginnings in the student movement of the late sixties to the events of the German Autumn in 1977. The German Autumn or *Deutscher Herbst* is the term for the events at the end of 1977 which comprise the kidnapping of the German industry representative Hanns-Martin Schleyer, the kidnapping of the German Lufthansa flight Landshut by the Palestinian terror unit Martyr Halimeh to the suicide of

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68 Sven Felix Kellerhoff, 'Der Baader – Meinhof – Wahn', *Die Welt Online* (September 2007) <[http://www.welt.de/welt\\_print/article1167659/Der\\_Baader\\_Meinhof\\_Wahn.html](http://www.welt.de/welt_print/article1167659/Der_Baader_Meinhof_Wahn.html)> [last accessed Monday, 12 September 2011]

Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Carl Raspe at Stammheim prison and the protests that followed these events.

The book's status as a unique journalistic document of the time, and the persons involved, provides not only a coherent narrative of the complexities and different historical connections between events but also a history of the RAF which positions it in the cultural landscape of post-war Germany. When discussing his filmic adaptation of the book with Aust, the film's writer and producer Bernd Eichinger insisted on making a feature film instead of a historic docudrama on the grounds that '*The Baader Meinhof Complex* is the story of the Täter (the perpetrators).

In a documentary you can show the effects and consequences of the terrorists' deeds but you cannot show how they are doing them [sic].'<sup>69</sup> Eichinger emphasised that he is not interested in the why but the how of the RAF, allowing the deeds to speak for themselves and allowing a multiplicity of readings. Eichinger describes his adaptation of the book as 'Fetzendramaturgie'. The film's dramaturgy is a collection of shreds, of scenes and images that have to be 'puzzled together'.<sup>70</sup> This strategy, he says, was to avoid any kind of moral interpretation on the side of the film makers. The same goes for Eichinger's decision to forgo any dramaturgy that would allow identification with any of the characters. His aim was create a film that is 'full of questions but no answers', 'after all', he says, 'it is called *The Baader Meinhof Complex* not the Baader Meinhof Simplex.'<sup>71</sup>

Eichinger aims to create an engaging film without reliance on a traditional narrative form or a character driven plot. But neither is it a docudrama, as it avoids drawing attention to its artifice and verification by witnesses. Instead, *The Baader Meinhof Complex* is a cinematic dramatisation of events influenced by the cinematic style of films such as, '*Black Hawk Down* (2000),

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69 Katja Eichinger, *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex: Das Buch Zum Film* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2008) p.12.

70 *ibid.* p.24.

71 *ibid.*

*Syriana* (2005) and *Children of Men* (2007), films he says, that were driven by a great dramaturgic tension, films that did not follow 'the rules' (of traditional Hollywood) and where the narrative was advanced by using 'the aesthetic of a documentary style realism.'<sup>72</sup>

In order to communicate exposition that diverges from the viewpoint of the terrorists, Eichinger creates fictionalised scenes in which the president of the Federal Criminal Police Office at the time, Horst Herold, talks about the terrorists' deeds, often with the invented figure of an assistant, Dietrich Koch. The use of the figures of Herold and Koch to give opportunity for more authorial voice ties together several events in the 'Fetzendramartugie' that would otherwise have had less coherence in the film's narrative. The use of fictional signposts, however, does not destroy the film's claims to verisimilitude. Eichinger states that his aim was a film propelled by the 'speed of the events' which become a 'tidal wave' that would 'sweep the audience along over the cliff where a violent ending is to be expected'.<sup>73</sup> It would start idyllically on the beach of Sylt and end in a 'Bloodbath'.<sup>74</sup> The narrative 'pressure' needed to create such an atmosphere of urgency in his film, Eichinger describes, could not be created by editing alone. The set, characters and camera had to be constantly 'hyped', never relaxed or complacent: 'the creative heat' was to be translated onto the screen.<sup>75</sup> The score also adds to the rush of the films' narrative through ten years, scurrying strings provide escalating anxiety, propulsive tribal drums that relentlessly manipulate the heartbeat.

Eichinger chose Reiner Klausmann as director of photography, having already worked with him on *Downfall*, for his visual style of sober yet immersive verisimilitude. Klausmann himself agrees that this style is an appropriate way to visualise German history and argues that one 'has a

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<sup>72</sup> *ibid.* p.33.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.* p.25.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*

responsibility towards history' that demands 'honesty' of the images toward the subject matter.<sup>76</sup>

Archive footage is often introduced into the film, blurring the lines between story and history. The film often shows the characters watching footage on TV – they are witnessing not only the events but their own mediatization. In this way the film thematises what Elsaesser and Krausshaar see as a major part of the RAF mythos: the way the media perpetuated the images of the RAF and the way the RAF themselves began to identify with their own mediatized mages. Klausmann says. 'The colour matching of the film was influenced by what we used, because our movie had to fit with the real stuff; we avoided strong reds, blues or greens and we desaturated the image in the DI (digital intermediate). Otherwise, it would have looked like two different movies, and that's not good.'<sup>77</sup>

The film's director, Uli Edel, states that Klausmann's camerawork was informed by a news-gathering style in order to 'complement the spontaneous energy of the archival material. The idea was to make the whole film in this documentary style so it matched the original footage,'. 'It was very important that we could really follow the action; we did not want to create the action through cuts. That's why there were so many steadicam and handheld shots.'<sup>78</sup>

Edel was chosen by Eichinger to direct the film. They went to film school together and worked together on the films *Christiane F.* (1982) and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1989). In his vision of *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, Edel emphasises the desire to create something 'authentic', mirroring Eichinger's notion of creating a realistic representation of the terrorist's deeds:

'Authenticity was key. As in *Christiane F.* we followed the laws

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid* p.44.

<sup>77</sup> Mark Hope-Jones, 'The Baader Meinhof Complex, shot by Rainer Klausmann, BVK, details the rise and fall of a German terrorist group', *American Cinematographer*, September 2009 <[http://www.theasc.com/ac\\_magazine/September2009/TheBaaderMeinhofComplex/page1.php](http://www.theasc.com/ac_magazine/September2009/TheBaaderMeinhofComplex/page1.php)> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>78</sup> *ibid*.



of *cinéma vérité* and not those of the fiction film.<sup>79</sup> Whereas the run and gun style camera technique in *Zero Dark Thirty* ultimately draws attention to itself, in *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, the technique is used to merge history with story. The effect produced is simultaneously of the past and of today, and can be understood with the idea of reflective nostalgia as described by Svetlana Boym. Boym says that people ‘engage in the anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to nationalist symbols and myths.’<sup>80</sup> The cinematic affect of the *The Baader Meinhof Complex* is one of nostalgia, a longing for the past through the lens of the present.

Edel insists that the reason *The Baader Meinhof Complex* has to be told as a chain of events is found, not in the self-intellectualisation of the RAF but in the Faustian question ‘Ist es der Sinn, der alles wirkt und schafft?’ (is it reason that makes all things happen?).<sup>81</sup> He says, ‘*The Baader Meinhof Complex* provides a clear answer to this question. You cannot separate word from deed and ultimately it is the deed that makes the man.’<sup>82</sup>

In striving for verisimilitude through cinematic techniques of realism (natural light and muted filters, handheld camera, real locations, letting the actors act unencumbered by the cinematic process) the film relies on the intensity of the events depicted to involve its spectators.

The narrative method of concentrating on representation as a way of circumnavigating the interpretation of history, rather than confronting myth, can be understood as a strategy of the post-political, as Žižek understands it. Žižek’s understanding is that the post-political is not to be understood literally but as a ‘predominant form of cynicism.’<sup>83</sup> What Žižek points to is that in the post-political ideas and findings, or the official narrative, are not open for debate but have become indisputable truth.

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79 Eichinger, 2008, p.43.

80 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Boston, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2008) p.41.

81 Eichinger. p.36.

82 *ibid.*

83 Žižek, 2008b, p.269.

In *The Baader Meinhof Complex* the ‘obvious truth’, the uncontested content, is the one provided by official accounts of the RAF mythos: Narrativisation of history has been downplayed in favour of the images and myths that shape the understanding of the RAF. Or as the *Spiegel* writes: ‘Until now there have been many words about the RAF but not the pictures. These are the pictures of the deeds. Bernd Eichinger follows this when he says ‘it is not why they do it but that they do it’.<sup>84</sup> In *The Baader Meinhof Complex* cinematic action is the method of choice to portray the RAF mythos.

### **Filling in the gaps in *The Baader Meinhof Complex***

The form of *The Baader Meinhof Complex* is, very deliberately, a combination of verisimilitudinous film techniques and the dramaturgy of a fast-paced thriller – resulting in a run and gun visual technique not unlike the one used in *The Bourne Ultimatum* as discussed by Bordwell.<sup>85</sup> The filmmakers take great pains over historical accuracy in the mise-en-scène (in their desire for ‘authenticity’). Not only are the material details correct – from shooting on original locations to meticulously researched props, from Baader’s leather jacket to the twenty-seven records in his prison cell – but so too are the immaterial ones. The significant moments associated with the RAF are chosen carefully. For the purpose of his Fetzendramaturgie, Eichinger picks pieces from the German cultural landscape – pictures, concepts and suppositions that are an integral part of RAF history and RAF mythology. The effect is one of a subjective experience of several events and an identification with the terrorists’ motives of the first generation RAF in the first half of the film. However, in the second half of the film a reversal of the spectatorial alignment takes place, which prompts an understanding of second generation RAF as alien and unidentifiable.

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84 Dirk Kurbjuweit, ‘Bilder der Barbarei,’ *Der Spiegel* (8 September 2008) pp.42–48, online version <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-59889957.html>>

85 Bordwell, 2007.

This chapter will examine three scenes in *The Baader Meinhof Complex* that show how the film fills in the gaps between the *Fetzen*/fragments using a cinematic language that engenders an understanding of the RAF in terms of the post-political. These scenes depict three pivotal moments in the history of the RAF, which represent 1. the birth of the RAF mythos, 2. the birth of the RAF as a group and 3. the formation of the Second Generation RAF:

1) The Shah's visit to Berlin in 1967 and the death of Benno Ohnesorg.

During a protest rally on the 2 June 1967 in Berlin, the student Benno Ohnesorg was shot by a policeman. Ohnesorg's death became seen as the rallying point for the further radicalisation of the student movement as well as the trigger that led to the formation of the RAF and other extremist groups. Aust describes how the events of the 2 June led to the fragmentation of the student movement. One of the directions it took was terrorism, in form of militant groups such as the first generation of the RAF and the *Bewegung 2 Juni*, a militant group who named themselves after the event.<sup>86</sup> It is not surprising that, in its momentous impact, the death of Ohnesorg has become the point of origin for the RAF mythology – the 'igniting moment' that turned rational protestors into irrational terrorists.

2) Ulrike Meinhof's 'jump into illegality' on the 14 May 1970 during the so-called 'Baader Befreiung', the freeing of Andreas Baader.

This is the moment when Meinhof decides not only to support the group but to join them, leaving behind her old life and becoming the official mouthpiece and main ideologist of the RAF. This event is often regarded as the 'birth' of the RAF,<sup>87</sup> because it was then that the three leaders of the RAF (Meinhof, Ensslin and Baader) carried out their first campaign together. Even though the group was not yet the RAF at this point, and was referred to only as

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<sup>86</sup> Stefan Aust, *Der Baader – Meinhof – Komplex*, 1st edn (München: Goldmann, 2010) p.59.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.* p.33.

the Baader Meinhof gang by the police, the actual jump from the window has come to symbolise the metaphorical birth of the RAF.

3) The release of Brigitte Mohnhaupt (Nadja Uhl) from Stammheim prison on the 8 February 1977.

With instructions from the Stammheim inmates on how to proceed with the RAF's attempts to extort the German state to free Baader, Ensslin and Raspe, Mohnhaupt took over the leadership of the second generation RAF and organised the Offensive 77 the events that started with the murder of Siegfried Buback on the 7 April 1977 and ended with the murder of Hanns Martin Schleyer on 18 October 1977.

### **Filling in the Gaps of the 2 June 1967**

#### **with a subjectivised experience**

Aust posits (in *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*) that the murder of Ohnesorg was one of the turning points in Germany's post war history.<sup>88</sup> On the 2 June 1967, the German student organisation APO (external parliamentary opposition) organised a demonstration against the visit to Berlin of Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Persia. During these protests the student Benno Ohnesorg was shot in the back of the head by the plain-clothes policeman Karl-Heinz Kurras. The resulting slogan 'Der Staat hat auf uns alle geschossen' (the state shot at all of us) was widely heard in the student movement, and for many of them the idea (described by Adorno in *The Authoritarian Personality*) that the authoritative state has inherent potential for violence was proved. According to Aust's book it was the events of the 2 June which brought to the surface Ensslin's frustration with the state and her potential for violence. The book describes how, on the evening of the 2 June 1967, young Berliners met at the headquarters of the Sozialistischen Deutschen Studentenbundes (SDS) to discuss the events of the day. Among these youngsters was the 26 year old

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid.* p.82.

Ensslin. It was then that she was supposed to have uttered her subsequently famous and often quoted speech, 'Dieser faschistische Staat ist darauf aus, uns alle zu töten. Wir müssen Widerstand organisieren. Gewalt kann nur mit Gewalt beantwortet werden. Dies ist die Generation von Auschwitz – mit denen kann man nicht argumentieren.'<sup>89</sup> (This fascist state means to kill us all. We must organise resistance. Violence can only be met with violence. This is the Auschwitz generation– you cannot argue with them.)

The key fragment of the day is an image. It is Jürgen Henschel's photograph of Benno Ohnesorg's death that has come to be representative of the events. Henschel captures the moment when the woman assisting Ohnesorg, Friederike Dollinger, turns to the crowd with an expression of utter despair. It is a *Historienbild*, a history painting, which depicts a moment in the particular narrative of the German student movement.<sup>90</sup>

This is the historical background of the acts depicted at the start of the film. The process of fictionalisation, mediatization and narration of the events constitutes a 'filling in of the gaps.' The contemporary representation of the events – photographic images, historical accounts are necessarily contextualised by subsequent narrativisation. But any narrativisation is purpose motivated; the missing context between the established cultural signifiers, the gap, cannot be filled in a neutral manner. In this case, the motive for providing context is drawn by the impulse to demystify, but the gap can only be filled by a new myth. Moreover, the interstitial, contextual matter – the interpretation – is shot for a nostalgia for the source material. However, rather than considering the nostalgia of the first two examples as expressions of a 'nostalgia film' and a commodification of history, these scenes should be understood in terms of reflective nostalgia as described by Boym. The nostalgia in the first example can be described as an expression of a yearning for the political clarity of the 68 movement, in the sense of that it was a brief

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<sup>89</sup> *ibid.* p.83.

<sup>90</sup> Eike Michael Frenzel, *Zugaenge Zum Verfassungsrecht: Ein Studienbuch* (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) p.65.

moment in time that seriously considered the possibility of the impossible. These events are seen through a nostalgic prism and a subjective perspective that frees these events of their historical specificity.

The section of the film starts with Meinhof reading out loud her open letter to Farah Diba in the new edition of *Konkret*. The film cuts to the protests in front of the Berlin Opera with Meinhof's speech continuing as a voiceover, describing the injustices of the Shah's regime, creating an ideological link between Meinhof and the protests.

When showing the protestors, the film does not recreate any specific contemporary imagery. Instead, the film plays out its reenactment through a combination of point of view and over the shoulder shots in a way that puts the viewer into the scene.

With the arrival of the Persian agents the protest escalates. The filmic point of view is that of the protesters. The spectator is immersed into the action through a fast paced montage of close ups and point of view shots – at one point we are looking directly into the muzzle of the firing water cannon – and a soundtrack of fast drums that creates an effect of urgency but also wildness. (This musical motif is heard in all the scenes that depict one of the constitutive RAF myths that are analysed in this chapter.) By compressing events that originally took several hours into approximately four minutes, the film presents the whole event as a personal, felt experience, in that it subjectivises space and time. As Jenny Chamarette observed, this kind of subjective 'phenomenal experience of time is thus radically different to time itself'.<sup>91</sup> Events are experienced through an ahistoric temporality that presents itself as a more real version of the day, as if the most urgent subjective accounts of the day have been compressed into one subjective experience, mediatized through the film itself. The subjective experience expressed by the film becomes a new general mythologisation. Apart from creating a subjectivity through a new temporality of events, the film creates an

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<sup>91</sup> Jenny Chamarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity Beyond French Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). p.26.

involvement through camera effects that evoke a subjectively experienced verisimilitude of the events.

The effect of the scene as subjective experience is most evident in the film's depiction of the death of Ohnesorg. In the tumult he flees from the police and is pushed to the ground by policemen. As he gets up a shot is heard. Here the *cinéma vérité* effects of the handheld camera, the natural light and the use of the location of the real Ohnesorg's death, in the courtyard of Krumme Strasse 66, create an experience of witnessing his death as a subjective encounter of a real event. The camera angle is in line with a viewpoint from someone ducking a possible attack, in this case from the police. The sum total is a filmic experience of the constitutive myth of the RAF mythos; that is, Ohnesorg being shot, becomes a re/demystification of the event as subjective experience, and as before adding to the canon of RAF mythos as an ahistorical subjective experience.

In a medium shot, the lifeless body of Ohnesorg is lifted up by a woman, then the action cuts and reveals that this scene is being photographed. It is the photographer Henschel creating the famous picture of Ohnesorg. The film does not recreate the picture itself, rather the photograph being taken. Here the point of view unifies the subjective understanding of the scene of the protestors, the onlookers and Henschel into the spectatorial viewpoint. The RAF mythos is being re-created and normalised into a witnessing of history. The film turns the moment the photograph is taken into a narrative in which the audience is part of the ongoing event. The scene ends with an emphasised flash gun going off, signalling the mediatized moment that came to stand for the events of the 2 June.

The subjectivised experiences of the events of 2 June 1967 produced by the filmmakers, effectively fill the gaps of the fragmented historical facts and its old mythologised version. It is necessary to compare this with the logic demanded by *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The film, instead of engaging critically with the question of guilt of Kurras, a verdict that was only finalised in 2012, delivers an experiencing of the moment as an adrenaline pumping

thrill. The death of Ohnesorg is not demystified in the way a “responsible”, intellectual *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* would demand. Instead the gaps are filled with a subjective experience of the RAF mythos itself, they are filled with a nostalgic understanding that denies the historical responsibility of the 68 movement.

However, both approaches of the filling of the gaps, either with a nostalgic, subjectivised experience as done in the film, as well as the idea that these gaps must be filled with a critical distance that promotes *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* of the RAF mythos, should be firmly placed in the post-political. Both are ‘compulsions’, as Žižek says, ‘to understand, to ‘normalise’, and, in this way, to avoid the void that is subjectivity.’<sup>92</sup> Moreover, the criticism, that the film did not fill the gaps with the correct narrative, and instead promotes a commercial exploitation and a lost opportunity for *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, is an even more direct translation of the post-political than the subjectivised experience of history as delivered by the film. Whereas the film firmly positions the narrative in a subjective, personal experience of history, demands for a representation that reflect a consensus of the right politics are a direct ideological imperative that consequently brings about a greater unfreedom.

### **Filling in the gaps of Ulrike Meinhof’s ‘jump into illegality’ with the fantasy of an act**

Andreas Baader was captured by the police on the 4 April 1970. Immediately, plans were made by the group that had collected around Baader and Ensslin to break him free. The plan was to get Ensslin’s acquaintance, Ulrike Meinhof, to request a meeting with Baader in the archives of the Dahlem Institute of Social Sciences, claiming to require his help with research for a sociological book on teenagers.

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<sup>92</sup> Slavoj Žižek, (2001), *The fright of real tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between theory and post – theory* (London: BFI Publishing) p.148.



Meinhof agreed and, after careful planning, on 14 May 1977, four members of the group attacked the institute, shooting one employee, whilst storming the reading room where Meinhof, Baader and two guards were sitting. In the confusion, tear gas was fired by the attackers, and in the chaos of the brawl and overall disorientation all the perpetrators, together with Baader and Meinhof, were able to escape through the window of the institute's reading room. In his carefully researched account of the event, Aust writes that it was Baader who was first to jump out of the window, followed by Meinhof, 'the others fired a couple more tear gas bullets and then followed suit.'<sup>93</sup>

No one knows if Meinhof had planned from the outset to use the liberation of Baader to go underground and join the group, or if it was an impulse decision. The transition from journalist to outlaw, became manifest with her leaving the scene of the crime, thus declaring her status as part of the anti-government group.

Meinhof's decision to flee with the others through an open window is a factual circumstance, which prompted a mythologised reading of the event. The image of a jump through an open window into a new life is hard to resist as a metaphor. But this would be to read history with hindsight. The concept of 'a jump into illegality' by Meinhof was already mentioned by *Die Zeit* in 1972,<sup>94</sup> and Aust writes in his book that 'with a leap out of the window of the Institute for Social Studies, Ulrike Meinhof ended her career as a journalist and went underground'.<sup>95</sup> The 'jump into illegality' has thus established itself as an image of the RAF mythos, with the figure of Meinhof herself becoming mythologised as a new Antigone.

Meinhof has become associated with the figure of Antigone as a central idea of the RAF mythos, most of all evident in Schlöndorff's film segment 'Die

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<sup>93</sup> Stefan Aust, 2010, p.27.

<sup>94</sup> Karl-Heinz Janssen, 'Kein Zurück ins Reihenhaus', Ulrike Meinhofs Weg vom Schreibtisch in den Untergrund', *Die Zeit* (23 June 1972) <<http://www.zeit.de/1972/25/kein-zurueck-ins-reihenhaus/seite-2>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>95</sup> Stefan Aust, 2010, p.168.

verschobene Antigone' in *Germany in Autumn* (1978). An intelligent, critical person, who gives up her children to join the underground struggle, Meinhof's behaviour has been equated with Antigone. Both women declare that they know the law (the laws of the symbolic order, the law of the state/Creon's law) but choose to break from the symbolic through an act, thus expounding upon the superiority of 'divine law', their beliefs, to that made by man. This reading of Meinhof's decision in terms of a break with the symbolic is described by Olga Taxidou, 'In testing the limits of liberalism and the possibilities of Utopia within the same gesture, Antigone acts as an appropriate precursor/model for Ulrike Meinhof.'<sup>96</sup> Elsaesser even calls *Antigone* 'the master-mythology of 1977' – a mythologised act that has become the foundation mythos of the RAF.<sup>97</sup>

Žižek has frequently interpreted Antigone's decision to bury her brother as an authentic act, the moment according to Lacan when a person is effectively 'free'. The fact that Meinhof explicitly rejects leaving the social order she detests for the sake of her children makes her decision to join the group in their illegality all the more poignant. The scene is played out in a way that shows Meinhof making an impulse decision, arising out of the moment. Or to put it in Žižek's terms, when she confronts the real that has come about facing the violence of the attack. As Žižek writes:

The paradox of the act thus lies in the fact that although it is not 'intentional' in the usual sense of the term of consciously willing it, it is nevertheless accepted as something for which its agent is fully responsible – 'I cannot do otherwise, yet I am none the less fully free in doing it.'<sup>98</sup>

In the film, Meinhof's jump is played out as Žižekian act similar to that in *Hunger*, as a moment where the subject is willing to annihilate the self – a self

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<sup>96</sup> Olga Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) p.18.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Antigone Agonistes: Urban Guerilla or Guerilla Urbanism? The Red Army Faction, *Germany In Autumn* and *Death Game*', in eds. Joan Copjec and Michael Sorkin *Giving Ground: The Politics of Propinquity*, (London: Verso, 1999) p.273.

<sup>98</sup> Žižek, 1999a, p.376.

that is contained within the current false or symbolic social order. She not only gives up her life in society as a respected columnist but also knows that she gives up her children. To illustrate the moment of Meinhof's act, the film again uses an array of point of view shots, creating a spectatorial alignment with Meinhof; her decision to act is subjectivised, created as an experience of the moment of an act for the spectator. In a 'subjective realist style of narration' which, as Matthew Campor describes, 'depicts the imagination of a character from a subjective point of view,' Meinhof's act (the RAF mythos) fills the gaps of subjectivity by being turned into a subjective experience itself.<sup>99</sup>

The scene starts with a carefully researched recreation of the sequence of events. Baader is first to jump out of the window whilst the others are still trying to subdue the guards. He calls out for Ensslin who first hesitates, then returns to help her three comrades. They manage to overwhelm the policemen and all jump out of the window, Ensslin being the last.

Meanwhile, the camera shows Meinhof, visibly shocked by the brutality she is witnessing, pressed against the wall. Her expression when confronted with the reality of the brute force shows that the situation clearly overwhelms her expectation. Ensslin's jump is shown from a point of view shot from Meinhof's perspective, she looks haphazard when the camera cuts back to her. Then another point of view shot from Meinhof's perspective, seeing first the guard on the floor, then the camera pans to the left – Meinhof is taking in the second guard lying unconscious on the other side of the room. The camera now cuts to Meinhof, looking past the camera to the open window. The next cut shows the window from Meinhof's point of view, the still camera frame makes the window frames appear peaceful in contrast to the chaotic room. The film cuts to show that, slowly people in the institute become aware of what is going on.

The camera cuts to Meinhof's face, excited but aware. This is a key image, in that it reflects the concept of Žižek's conception of the act as

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<sup>99</sup> Matthew Campora, *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014). p.53.

simultaneously an instinctual and a rational decision. Then she moves and, what was Meinhof's point of view, becomes the viewpoint of the audience, who see Meinhof taking off from her previous position, witnessing her jump out of the window. The camera stays on this image of the open window for a few moments after Meinhof has jumped and disappeared. This creates the effect of a questioning of the spectator, asking: Is this not inviting? What would you like to do? The film effectually posits the spectator into the space time of Meinhof, re-creating her subjective act for the audience as a felt experience.

The gap to be filled in this scene is Meinhof's motive, by showing her 'jump into illegality' as an act that describes how her jump was neither planned from the outset nor a headless decision. In short the Meinhof/Antigone mythos is re-mythologised as a subjective experience. However, the filmmakers pose Meinhof's dilemma as human rather than political. The film's depiction of her decision to turn her back on not only civil society but also her own children inadvertently shows her decision process as a potentially Žižekian act. However, whereas in *Hunger* the act is a political one, Sands's decision is a break with the symbolic order as such, in *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, Meinhof's forced choice becomes depoliticised in that her aim is to stay in direct dialogue with the Other – her act becomes a false one. Determining a false act from a genuine one is always done in hindsight, as Butler points out, it is 'only in retrospect that objective reasons for the act exist, after the revolution has organised and stabilised itself.'<sup>100</sup>

The fantasy of Meinhof's decision as an act, a choice forced onto her by the logic of the symbolic order, imbues the actions of the real life Meinhof with relatable motive. Because Meinhof's act turned out to be a false one, the re-mythologisation of the real life Meinhof in the cultural landscape through the film, by default understands all acts as political, even false ones. In the post-political all acts are seen as political, even though they are not.

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<sup>100</sup> Glossary, Žižek, 2006b, p.352.

### **Brigitte Mohnhaupt's release and reorganisation of the RAF, filled with a gendered content**

In the third example the idea of reflective nostalgia changes into something more akin to the nostalgia film, in that here the female terrorist Brigitte Mohnhaupt is presented as a non-relatable, uncanny creature. The gaps to be filled are less the motives of the terrorists, but rather their motifs, their institution of the RAF mythos of the Stammheim suicides and the brutality of their deeds. What fills the gaps is a gendered underrating of the concept of female terrorist.

The gaps in question relate to the complexity of the reorganisation of the RAF. How much was purposeful and how much expedient? In his book Aust describes how, whilst imprisoned together in Stammheim, Ensslin grooms Mohnhaupt to become her successor as the leader of the RAF. To stay in contact with Mohnhaupt, once she was released from prison and the RAF outside, Ensslin creates a secret code using the novel *Moby Dick* to pass messages between the prisoners and their lawyers. Out of prison, Mohnhaupt's 'task was to organise all individuals already living in illegality to start attacks that would bring the German government to its knees.'<sup>101</sup> She was also instructed to organise the smuggling of weapons into the prison, so that in case the attempts to extort the prisoners' freedom failed, they could take their own lives. The plan was to make it look like they were killed by the state, thus demonstrating once and for all that the state is a continuation of the fascist regime (one of the methods used by Ensslin to implant this idea was that she hinted to the prison vicars that she is afraid that something will happen to her).<sup>102</sup> Peter Boock, with whom Mohnhaupt started an affair soon after her release, describes how Mohnhaupt told him, that the creation of the state-

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<sup>101</sup> Sontheimer, Michael, 'Terrorzelle Stammheim' (RAF-Serie Teil V: Die zweite Generation). in *Der Spiegel*, 08.10.2007 <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-53203450.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>102</sup> Stefan Aust, 2010, p.814.

murder-myth was planned from the start; ‘Whatever happens; the story is, it was murder’ and ‘you are not to tell the others.’<sup>103</sup>

The filmmakers of *The Baader Meinhof Complex* compress the events of Mohnhaupt’s instruction by Ensslin, her release and hooking up with Boock as one whole and, by doing so, fill in the gaps that make up the complexity of the reorganisation of the RAF. It is filled with an exploration of one of the RAF myth’s most intriguing aspects; the idea that political radicalism takes feminism too far, turning women into, as Barbara Creed would say, figurative monsters’, ‘non-human animals’ without morals or conscience.<sup>104</sup>

Still in the 1980s the *Spiegel* writes, ‘the most popular explanation for the strong position of female terrorists is feminism.’<sup>105</sup> And even though attitudes towards feminism have changed over the years, the obsession with the combination of terrorism and femininity is still apparent. In 2007 the *Spiegel* again wrote about the Offensive 77, the name of the actions committed by the RAF in 1977 under the leadership of Mohnhaupt and other ‘female protagonists’, and titled their article ‘Das grausame Feminat’ (The cruel female power-base). The article confirms a commonly held view of Mohnhaupt as ‘the worst’ (worse than men) in terms of righteous cruelty.<sup>106</sup> The combination of cruel femininity, empowered by weapons and not afraid to use them and the good looks of the young women fed into the public imagination of the RAF mythos.

*The Baader Meinhof Complex* shows Mohnhaupt’s grooming and taking over the RAF, planting the seeds for the biggest moment in RAF self-mythologising, as one coherent unit of scenes, and in doing so creates a visual connection between historical facts (details of her time of release, clothes

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103 *ibid.* p.582.

104 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.1

105 Marion Schreiber, ‘Wir fühlten uns einfach stärker’, *Der Spiegel* (1 May 1981) <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14330096.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

106 Michael Sontheimer, ‘Das grausame Feminat’ (RAF-Serie Teil VI: „Offensive 77“) *Der Spiegel* (15 October 2007) <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-53278199.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

Mohnhaupt wore etc.) and reported situations (Mohnhaupt being instructed by Ensslin about reorganising the RAF, having an affair with Boock, telling him about the inmates' wish to commit suicide). The film creates a narrative around single elements, which have different sources of origin and verification, that are put together through the means of Eichinger's *Fetzendramaturgie* in a new way – time and RAF myths are compressed into a fluid storyline that assumes verisimilitude by the virtue of telling a visual truth rather than a factual one.

With the image of Mohnhaupt's release, the musical theme of tribal drums begins and the image shows an imposed headline: 'Spring 1977', indicating to the audience that this is a new chapter in the story – the beginning of the next generation RAF under the leadership of Mohnhaupt in 1977, the year of the German Autumn. The next scene sees her travelling by train to an undisclosed destination. The camera shows her as she would have been seen by her fellow travellers, sitting opposite her or seeing her from outside the carriage. Mohnhaupt is portrayed as a calm and focused young woman.<sup>107</sup>

The train stops in a rural setting and Mohnhaupt is greeted by her old boyfriend Rolf Heißler. Whilst in Heißler's arms Mohnhaupt looks over his shoulders to eye up Peter Boock. The camera frames this scene in a way that looks over Boock's shoulder, making the spectator the object of Mohnhaupt's sexually charged gaze.

Žižek describes how the gaze is always on the side of the, in this case, filmic object (it is the 'eye viewing the object (that) is on the side of the subject'). 'When I look at an object, the object is always already gazing at me, and from a point at which I cannot see it.'<sup>108</sup> Because the object the spectator is looking at is not shown from its point of view (the spectator is only allowed to look at it from their subjective experience), it creates feeling of anxiety, in

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<sup>107</sup> In contrast to the accounts of her peers who claimed the real life Mohnhaupt was extremely paranoid and hyper and 'would not stop talking' when she got out of prison. in: Sontheimer, 2007.

<sup>108</sup> Žižek, 1992, p.68.

the form of Freud's uncanny.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, Mohnhaupt's gaze into the camera addresses the spectator directly, asking them the Žižekian constitutive question the subject asks of the symbolic, 'What do you want from me?'<sup>110</sup> Žižek describes how there is an idea of Woman as an 'agency of power which is pre-symbolic, unbridled by the Law of castration.'<sup>111</sup> Woman, in this case is an ideological fantasy of an oppressed other, imbued with the imagined ability to resist the symbolic, by filling out 'the vicious cycle of the symbolic order, the void of its origins: what the notion of Woman (...) provides is the mythical starting point of unbridled fullness whose "primordial repression" constitutes the symbolic order.'<sup>112</sup> The figure of Mohnhaupt is presented as possessing the hysterical attributes, in a psychoanalytical sense, of Woman to resist the law, not as a person in her own right but as the mythologised creature of female terrorist.

Mohnhaupt then insists on talking to Boock alone. They walk along the tracks while Mohnhaupt tells him the instructions for the group from the Stammheim inmates, in whose authority she speaks. They stop, and the pair are shown in a long shot standing between the tracks. Boock symbolically welcomes her back into life in the underground by giving her a gun. The film then cuts to Boock and Mohnhaupt having sex. The quick edits imply a short but desperate sexual act. This is emphasised by the next scene in which both smoke a post-coital cigarette. In the book *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, the real Boock describes that the dialogue in which Mohnhaupt told him about the inmates' plans to commit suicide happened before they slept together.<sup>113</sup> The reversal of priorities in the film shows that Mohnhaupt's sexual prowess is vital in her role as leader of the RAF and the events result from her base

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<sup>109</sup> *ibid.* p.74.

<sup>110</sup> Žižek, 1993, p.236.

<sup>111</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Woman is One of the Names-of-the-Father, or How Not To Misread Lacan's Formulas of Sexuation', *Lacanian Ink*, No. 10 (1995) <<http://www.lacan.com/zizwoman.htm>> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Stefan Aust, 2010, p.582.



behaviour. By showing Mohnhaupt as a sexual predator, all the time emotionless and calculating, the film fills the gaps of the complex history of the RAF with the myth of the femme-fatale – ‘she who ruins the lives of men and is at the same time victim of her own lust for enjoyment’, as Žižek describes her, ‘What bestows on her an aura of mystery is precisely the way she cannot be clearly located in the opposition between master and slave. At the moment she seems permeated with intense pleasure, it suddenly becomes apparent that she suffers immensely; when she seems to be the victim of some horrible and unspeakable violence, it suddenly becomes clear that she enjoys it. We can never be quite sure if she enjoys or suffers, if she manipulates or is herself the victim of manipulation.’<sup>114</sup>

Mohnhaupt’s politics, as questionable as they were, are replaced by a view that woman’s radical politics are politics gone wrong – worse still, they are seen as a metaphorical castration of men. Žižek writes: ‘In short, it is OK for a woman to protest the public state power on behalf of the rights of family and kinship; but woe to a society in which women endeavour directly to influence decisions concerning the affairs of state, manipulating their weak male partners, effectively emasculating them.’<sup>115</sup>

The gap is filled with gendered content. The certified authentic moments in Mohnhaupt’s life are combined with a visual language that aims at showing how the second generation RAF generated the powers that led to German Autumn. The film’s portrayal of Mohnhaupt suggests that the fascination with woman terrorists today is an expression of how the understanding of their ability for violence is based around the question of gender rather than an exploration of their political motives. As described earlier, Žižek describes that postmodernism ‘fills the gaps’ with privileged terms or texts that are held to be

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<sup>114</sup> Žižek, 1992, pp.42–43.

<sup>115</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘Mao Zedong: The Marxist Lord of Misrule’, in Zedong, Mao, and Slavoj Žižek, *On Practice and Contradiction* (London: Verso Books, 2007) pp.1–29, p.3.

unassailable such as race, gender or pathology.<sup>116</sup> *The Baader Meinhof Complex* fails to recognise the political dimension of Mohnhaupt's motives, and can only convey the reasons for her behaviour through the prism of a crass idea of femininity.

### Conclusion

This need to demythify the past and come to terms with it is played out clearly in *The Baader Meinhof Complex*. In the film, the final sentence spoken by Brigitte Mohnhaupt, the transitional figure between the first and the second generation RAF, conveniently and unequivocally describes a fascinating attempt to deconstruct the RAF mythos through the RAF's own words: 'Hört auf sie so zu sehen, wie sie nicht waren' (Stop seeing them as they never were).

The scene is a cinematic translation of a true event, described in the revised edition of the book *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, in which Brigitte Mohnhaupt tells the members of the second generation RAF that the remaining leaders of the first generation – Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe – committed suicide in prison through free choice, and were not murdered by the state. It is important that this scene is only to be found in the revised edition of the book. This version included material that Aust got from interviews with former members of the RAF who had gone into hiding in the GDR, and who were subsequently exposed by the fall of the Berlin Wall. After the reunification, the former members (who were all keen to leave their past behind) cooperated fully with the police and used every opportunity to recount their view of events. Aust managed to interview Peter-Jürgen Boock of the second generation RAF who described the scene with Brigitte Mohnhaupt on which the end of the film is based. With the (still unverified by others) interview, an important change had happened: A leading member of the RAF demystifies one of the main myths surrounding the RAF.

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<sup>116</sup> Where the filling in of the gaps of subjectivity was a 'return of the repressed', before, in post-politics these gaps are filled with the 'new issues' of what is considered repressed in the postmodern, including 'liberal multiculturalism.' Žižek, 1999a, p.198.

Here the demystification is a truly postmodern one in Žižekian terms ; by admitting that at the time they deliberately promoted the murder story, Boock fills that gap of ideological fantasy that sustained the RAF sympathisers, and following official imperative to demystify the RAF mythos. Whether Boock was telling the truth is impossible to prove and is irrelevant here.

The story originally perpetuated by the RAF and their followers was, thirty years later, destroyed through letting the RAF expose their own myth-making. The method of the book, as well as the film *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, is to tell the story through the means of a documentary-style succession of events, in order to achieve the same effect – an unravelling of the RAF's own account of itself.

If RAF mythos was the main reason for the RAF to attract sympathisers, why not demythify it once and for all by showing how the Stammheim prisoners killed themselves in very historical detail? The main reason why this did not happen has as much to do with the film's dramaturgy as well as the intention of the film to demythify the RAF. The decision to reveal the RAF myth was not centred around Baader, Ensslin and Raspe but on the self-unravelling of the RAF through its own members. This was done in the final scene through Mohnhaupt's revealing (and historically documented) words. If the filmmakers had shown the suicides, the main aspect, which was that the RAF perpetuated this myth themselves as an ideological strategy, would have been less clear – Showing the suicides would not have demystified the RAF in as a profound way than unveiling these suicides by the RAF itself did.

*The Baader Meinhof Complex* is a visual recreation and remythologisation of the RAF mythos as laid out by Aust. By turning the RAF mythos into a subjective, felt experience of the first generation RAF, the filmmakers addressed a nostalgia, in the form of reflective nostalgia, for the fight against authoritarianism of the late 60s. This nostalgic recreation however, speaks less of return to the political radicalism of the past, but for a revival of the political energy felt at the time.

Žižek describes that in today's hegemony of third way post-politics the aims of the '68 movement have been incorporated, 'The establishment succeeded in undoing all threatening consequences of 1968 by way of incorporating the so-called 'spirit of '68 and thereby turning it against the real core of the revolt. The demands for new rights (which would have meant a true redistribution of power) were granted, but merely in the guise of 'permissions' – the 'permissive society' being precisely one which broadens the scope of what subjects are allowed to do without actually giving them any additional power.'<sup>117</sup>

In *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, the filmmakers only lament the loss of possibility for radicalism as felt by individuals in the post-political, by evoking the subjective feeling of the spirit of '68 as a safe nostalgic ride. They stay away from embracing the reality of terrorism as such by creating an experience of the radicalism of the second generation RAF as an *entartete* version, a deformed version of the protests of the late 60s. By doing so the film fills the gaps of a subjective reading of the RAF mythos with the accepted texts of the post-political hegemony of third way politics where, in tune with the cultural imperative *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, all opposition to the system that favours any more radical notions is equated with the terroristic narcissism of the RAF.

The film still has to be regarded as a cultural product of its time, an expression of the post-political need to demythify the past, rather than a mere commodification of German history. The filmmakers' approach to the demythification of the RAF is less intellectual than the film's critics expected or wished for. Instead of delivering a story that demystified the RAF in a critical act of ideological deconstruction, the filmmakers produced a nostalgic appropriation of the dynamic of the RAF in Boym's terms. However, both approaches understand that the RAF mythos is a really existing thing that has been created to obfuscate the historical RAF. The idea of a deconstruction of

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<sup>117</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* (London: Verso Books, 2009a) p.59.

the RAF mythos pre-supposes the existence of a RAF mythos as an entity that is without historical context. What is important is to recognise how the conceptualisation of the RAF mythos is an ideological construct in and of itself.

## Chapter 3.2

### Die Kommenden Tage

#### (The Coming Days)

##### **Introduction**

Die Schwarzen Stürme is the terrorist group in Lars Kraume's film *Die Kommenden Tage* /The Coming Days. They are a fictional creation designed specifically to parallel the Baader-Meinhof group, put in place to fulfil a role in a fictional narrative while capitalising on the rich possibilities of the RAF mythos. The relationship between the fictional group, the RAF mythos and the RAF in reality is complex. The film is built around a particular narrative mechanism, mythos as truth, that needs investigation and is the object of scrutiny in this chapter.

In one sense, to experience *Die Kommenden Tage* is to experience the politics of fear. It is a sci-fi film that processes contemporary fears of unknowables, delivering an experience of the politics of fear by treating it as truth. It does this in two ways; firstly, by narrativising the fictional group die Schwarzen Stürme in terms of RAF Mythos, secondly, by cementing fears of ecological catastrophe into its images.

It is worth restating the special definition of mythos in this sense. Mythos is not a lie, it is meaning-making that has gained enough traction to become a thing in itself and effect material reality. At the same time, the specific untruths within mythos can still be recognised without damaging its function as a focus of ideological coherence. Žižek suggests that with the abandonment of a universalist framework of reference, the social function of mythos has changed. It has become a form of self-evident truism or an 'ordinary

occurrence', a statement that is taken as read, not questioned in its own terms, because it has only itself as its frame of reference.<sup>1</sup>

Žižek considers the normalisation of mythos into reality to be an expression of the postmodern condition that sustains the post-political. *Die Kommenden Tage* carries this out in the introduction into its narrative of two myths. The myths are the RAF mythos, the mythologised history of the Red Army Faction, and the mythos of impending social collapse.

The previous chapter on *The Baader Meinhof Complex* described how the idea of the RAF mythos has become intellectual property of the post-political in Germany, coupled with a desire that the RAF mythos should either be demystified, under the compulsion of the societal imperative of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or, as the film does, re-mythologised as a subjective experience.

This chapter analyses how *Die Kommenden Tage* reinvents the RAF mythos for the post-political era. In contrast to *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, the film is a symptom of a particular shade of German post-politics in the way that it plays on a political narrative built around fear.

It is again useful to look at how Žižek describes post-politics, in that it 'takes the form of the politics of FEAR – fear of losing one's particular identity, of being overwhelmed.'<sup>2</sup> When it comes to engaging with its citizens, post-politics plays on the natural anxieties of people through the fear of unknowables such as terrorism, or economic and ecological catastrophes.

The film *Die Kommenden Tage* translates these fears more or less directly on to the screen, and in doing so normalises the mythos of the end times in the form of a collapse of the particular form of the German state. By extension, it accepts and normalises the RAF mythos, in the form of a thinly veiled fictional substitute *Die Schwarzen Stürme*, as the counterposition to the authority of the state.

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?: Four Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London: Verso Books, 2002a) p.35.

<sup>2</sup> Žižek, 2008a, online version.

The first part of this chapter looks into the role and function of mythos in the post-political, and expands on the ideas in the previous chapter on how the post-political narratives fill in the gaps of subjectivity. *Die Kommenden Tage* relies on mythos and its normalisation, and it is therefore necessary to investigate this process.

The second part of this chapter illustrates how the film takes elements of the RAF mythos and fictionalises them, using them as the basis for the actions of an imagined band of future terrorists, by appropriating different aspects of it, including ideas of *Aktionismus*, the 'Ohnesorg effect', counterculture and images of protest.

The third part is concerned with the politics of fear and how *Die Kommenden Tage* embodies a culturally specific expression of a greater post-political phenomenon. It describes the film's relationship with the politics of fear as embodied in ideas of apocalyptic thinking, and how this relates to a particularly German form of the politics of fear, German Angst.

The final part is an analysis of the postmodern narrativisation of mythos through the genres of contemporary dystopian science fiction. To illustrate how the film's logic depends on post-political thinking, *Die Kommenden Tage* is compared with the film *Children of Men* (2006), a film that also shows a dystopian future centred on the collapse of the old structures of the world economy. This comparison highlights how, unlike *Children of Men*, *Die Kommenden Tage* is truly postmodern, in the Žižekian sense, in that it does away with the fantastic element of fiction.

### ***Die Kommenden Tage***

*Die Kommenden Tage* is a cinematic rarity: a German science fiction film. It is written and directed by Lars Kraume, whose most successful cinema film to date is the Dogme style *Keine Lieder über Liebe* (2005), a relationship drama.

*Die Kommenden Tage's* cinematic release coincided with the re-showing of several television dramas in early 2011 (e.g. *Aufstand der Alten* (2007) and *Aufstand der Jungen* (2009)) that also depicted a dystopian future. These



visions of the near future were thematically similar, representing the decline of the particular form of the German state at the hands of an ever-more-ruthless capitalist system. In these dramas, depictions of growing injustices and extremes of poverty are shown accompanied by outbursts of new radicalism, often in the form of organised terrorism. These themes find their fullest expression in *Die Kommenden Tage*.

The plot concerns a well-off middle-class family, the Kupers, on their journey from today to eight years in the future. During this time the demand for the world's last resources plunges it into the fourth Gulf War. This in turn generates an influx of migrants onto the streets of Germany. The fight for ecological resources turns into a demise of economic resources for the World's citizens.

The three adult children of the family follow different paths, discontent with the political situation that their parents and parents' generation have created. The family father is a high-standing lawyer, whose company enables the destructive exploitation of the final resources by big companies. Eldest daughter Cecilia (Johanna Wokalek), is influenced by her radical boyfriend Konstantin (August Diehl) to join the terrorist organisation Die Schwarzen Stürme. The youngest child Philip joins the Bundeswehr (the German army), and middle child Laura (Bernadette Heerwagen) dreams of a peaceful family life and sees procreation as the only meaningful option.

It is worth sketching briefly a comparison between *Die Kommenden Tage* and Thomas Mann's archetypal German family saga *Die Buddenbrooks*, which detailed the radical changes in German society in the nineteenth century. *Die Kommenden Tage* also connects economic and societal changes with the private disfunctionalities and decadence of a bourgeois family. And, like Mann, director Lars Kraume sees the bourgeois lifestyle as doomed. However, where Mann lamented a decline in the value of artistic intellectualism, Kraume sees the decline of the decadent family as symbolic of the decline of the decadent state. In Kraume's film, the economic and

ecological excesses of global capitalism are incompatible with the traditional state and lead to its eventual collapse.

In *Die Kommenden Tage*, social change is not a slow decline but the violent collapse of old certainties and the German political guarantees of liberalism, the Grundrechte, (constitutional rights), paired with devastating manmade ecological catastrophes. These changes are met with more violence in the form of Die Schwarzen Stürme.

One important aspect of the film for this analysis is its relationship with RAF mythos. The film deliberately uses the RAF mythos as a constitutive element in its formation, and the relationship and process need unpicking.

### **Mythos as everyday occurrence in the post-political**

As diverse as the theorists of mythos such as Jung, Lévi -Strauss, Barthes or Žižek are, their common interest lies in the analysis of where mythos becomes more than a story. When and how, for example, does it become manifest in literature, religion, tradition, and eventually gain traction to become an operating truth? Žižek considers truth as something that comes from outside the subject; it is a truth because a collective has decided that it is truth, in partisan judgement. His example for how truth is established is Lenin's quote, 'The theory of Marx is all-powerful, because it is true'. Žižek explains,

'Lenin's wager ... is that universal truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive, but condition each other: in a concrete situation, its *universal* truth can only be articulated from a thoroughly *partisan* position – truth is by definition one-sided.'<sup>3</sup>

Truth is thus never subjective, neither can there be pluralist narratives that all have to be accepted as 'different' truths. The transfer of myth into truth for Žižek, is thus an action done by a collective who have come to an agreement of what this truth is.

Because *Die Kommenden Tage* relies on the process of turning mythos into truth, it is helpful to investigate this process, starting with an exploration

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<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 2011b, p.177.

of Žižek's idea of mythos and its ability to become accepted at face value, as a truth. Whereas Barthes laments the properties of mythos as problematic, in that it has the potential to be exploited by the elite,<sup>4</sup> Žižek sees postmodernism doing away with mythos as metaphor and reframing it as fact. *Die Kommenden Tage*, does not coincide with Barthes' reading of mythos, with its call for an unmasking and retelling of it through new parameters. Rather, it relies on the necessity of taking mythos as beyond contestation.

For Barthes, mythos is the carrier of bourgeois ideology, and the goal is to demystify, or unmask it and in doing so, to expose the bourgeois character behind it. Mythos, for Barthes, is inherently problematic, due to its tendency to do away with historical conditions, and with them the political and social agendas that shaped the mythos. His plan is to reveal mythos by displacing ideas that have been taken for granted and retelling them in a new light.

Žižek describes how, 'postmodernism directly rewrites myth itself by filling in the gaps' ... 'the move to fill in the gaps thus obeys the compulsion to understand, to 'normalise', and, in this way, to avoid the void that is subjectivity.'<sup>5</sup> This void however is necessary, it is where the subject experiences the real, that which is outside the symbolic. This for Žižek is at the heart of subjectivity, the radical negativity of what the real represents is the negation to the symbolic, and in this dialect the subject emerges. Filling in the gaps forecloses this possibility. Myth needs to be myth – meaning it needs the fantastic element, something that is outside symbolisation, something that is not considered truth as established by ideology, in that it is unquestionable – to function as an experience of subjectivity.

Postmodernism, for Žižek, is the rejection of universality, the collapse of authority within the symbolic order and the expression of this collapse in

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4 (In the previous chapter on *The Baader Meinhof Komplex* I have written a more detailed analysis of Barthes' understanding of mythos and his subsequent call for demythosification as intended by the makers of *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*).

5 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001b) p.148.

culture. From this standpoint, the rewriting of myths has an interesting ‘truth effect’ when it comes to narrative:

The opposition between modernism and postmodernism would be via the tension between myth and the ‘narrative of the real story’. The paradigmatic modernist gesture is to stage a common everyday event in such a way that some mythical narrative resonates in it (...) The postmodernist gesture would be the exact opposite: to stage the mythical narrative itself as an ordinary occurrence. So – either one recognises beneath what purports to be a straight realist narrative, the contours of a mythical frame (...), or one reads myth itself as a ‘real story.’<sup>6</sup>

The events in fiction are built around established, fundamental myths – they are reinterpretations, not of myths themselves but the universal claim that constitutes the myths. For example *Pygmalion*, in which the sculptor Pygmalion falls in love with the statue he creates, resonates in films that play on this myth, such as *My Fair Lady* (1964) and *She’s All That* (1999), but also less directly in films in which a woman is shaped by the fantasy of a man, such as *Vertigo* (1958).

However in the postmodern, myth is played out as normality, replayed without the subjective gaps that make it universal. It is staged as an ordinary occurrence, without a fantastic element. That which is told through mythical metaphor is made explicit in the postmodern narrative, and by this process remodelled into a new myth, read as a new truth. Old myth becomes new through the process of filling in the gaps with whichever preoccupations are broadly recognised as truth, or beyond contestation. By presenting myth directly – not as metaphor, not as a particular that stands in for the universal – the subjective gaps of the myth are filled by the unassailable truths of the particular ideology, the collective truths agreed by society. In the post-political these truths are often concerned with the body (biopolitics) and or/identity.

For example, the film adaptation of *Dorian Gray* (2009) shows how the young Dorian is repeatedly mistreated by his miserable grandfather leaving

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<sup>6</sup> Slavoj Žižek (2002) p.35.

him covered with scars. However, in Wilde's original book *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian himself describes his grandfather merely as 'stern' and 'hateful'. The film's filling in of Dorian's backstory, of showing his physical abuse as a child, now provides Gray with a psychological motive for his future deeds. The new film provides an interpretation for Dorian's evil behaviour derived from an external source, the narrative of childhood trauma. By interpreting Dorian Gray's cruelty as psychologically induced, the film creates a mythos about the book itself.

Where Barthes sees myth as a linguistic prop for the powerful, Žižek recognises the problem with mythos as a product of the postmodern. He criticises the postmodern for trying to turn myth into truth and proposes a return to the transcendental possibilities provided by mythos. He finds support for his interpretation from Clayton Crockett in their book *Hegel & the Infinite*. Crockett also sees the mythical as an asset which is rejected in the postmodern: 'In our age of the world-picture (Heidegger's postmodern ontology of the world as a picture, instead of understanding a picture of the world), the mythological conditioning of our experience hides itself behind the mythology of demythologisation. The world seems to be fully disenchanted; we have bypassed traditional societies by giving up values based on authority, etc.'<sup>7</sup> What Crockett describes as the disenchanted world is a world in which myth is regarded as truth because there is no one authority against which myth can be held accountable against.

What both Žižek and Crockett identify is that, with the advent of postmodernism, the ability to abstract myth from the circumstances which helped create it is often neglected, overlooked and in itself not desired. *Die Kommenden Tage* reflects this normalisation of myth into reality that Žižek describes, forgoing the need to question the inconsistencies of the myth itself. One instance of this concerns the RAF mythos, in particular, the strands of anti-authoritarianism that help constitute it as a body of ideas.

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<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett and Creston Davis, *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2011) p.18.

### RAF mythos as normalised reality

For its central conceit to function, *Die Kommenden Tage* assumes as uncontested the tropes of the RAF mythos that are connected with the '68 movement, especially the formal aspects of its anti-authoritarianism. The Student movement in Germany was influenced by the works of Horkheimer and Adorno and their concepts of the authoritarian personality and the authoritarian state. The members of the Frankfurt school used the concept of authoritarianism to explain how the Third Reich was possible. Their conclusion was that the power structures were already ingrained in the culture of the German state apparatus, in its education system and structure of family and social life.<sup>8</sup> The political ambition of the student movement was to get rid of these institutional vestiges. With *Aktionen*, political actionism, the followers of the student movement set out to provoke the German state so it would 'reveal' its authoritarian, and thus fascistic, nature.<sup>9</sup>

In order to evoke the subversive, the film creates an image of terrorism that appropriates the mythos but not the content of the past. This is intertwined with mythologised manifestations of the 68 movement, such as *Aktionismus*, the 'Ohnesorg effect', ideas of counterculture and images of protest.

The positioning of die Schwarzen Stürme In *Die Kommenden Tage* as a new version of the RAF is entirely deliberate. The RAF mythos is relied upon to describe how the terrorism ought to be understood. Much of this mythologised imagery are *Bilder* (images), actual pictures but also the associated imagery that encapsulate the cultural understanding of the protest movements of the 60s and 70s. The film uses as a foundation recurring elements of the RAF mythos, such as the murder of Benno Ohnesorg, the

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8 comp. Max Horkheimer, *Studien Über Autorität Und Familie: Forschungsberichte Aus D. Inst. Für Sozialforschung*, 21936th edn (Lüneburg: Zu Klampen, 1987)

9 Wolfgang R Krabbe, *Kritische Anhänger – Unbequeme Störer: Studien Zur Politisierung Deutscher Jugendlicher Im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, BWV, Berliner Wiss.-Verl, 2010) p.196.

antiauthoritarian ideal, the personalities of Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin. These will be examined in detail in turn.

Lars Kraume says that the terrorism portrayed in *Die Kommenden Tage* is 'designed in the same way as would be a fourth generation RAF.'<sup>10</sup> The participants, he says, 'are again coming from a middle class milieu, an intellectual circle. People that come together who are of the opinion that the civilisation, the way our society is developing today, and all that is done in the name of our civilisation to the planet, sooner or later will lead to a collapse, and that this is why we have to destroy civilisation before it can destroy the world.'<sup>11</sup>

Kraume implies that the fundamental message of the RAF is 'destroy what is killing you'. Kraume picks up directly on a quote from Ulrike Meinhof, herself paraphrasing the anarchist slogan of the sixties 'Macht kaputt, was Euch kaputt macht' (Break what breaks you).<sup>12</sup> This slogan was one of the favourite sayings of the counterculture movement, especially in the punk and anarchist scene. However, whereas the original slogan was aimed at the constraints imposed upon the human potential and individual freedom by the chains of capitalism, its reuse in the context of the film gives it a different resonance.

Kraume states that there will be no repetition of the original (first generation) RAF 'because the utopian ideas of the past are not valid anymore'.<sup>13</sup> What becomes embodied in *Die Schwarzen Stürme* is the mythos of the call for action. This creates a new mythos; filling in the outer shell of *Die Schwarzen Stürme*'s terrorist action with the bias of the *Aktionismus* of the RAF mythos creates a new myth about the original myth itself. It becomes the myth that German terrorism is defined by a desire for action coming from the yearning to act out.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview Lars Kraume, *Die Kommenden Tage*, DVD, Universal-Pictures, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> RAF »Das Konzept Stadtguerilla«, April 1971, ID-Verlag (Hrsg.) Rote Armee Fraktion: Texte und Materialien zur Geschichte der RAF, S. 27–48, p 38.





### *Aktionismus*

The tagline of *Die Kommenden Tage* is 'Die Zukunft gehört denen die um sie kämpfen.' (The future belongs to those who fight for it.) The film's theme is global ecological and sociological breakdown, and it also positions itself as agitation, as sending a message – that out of a difficulty something new can arise, if we make the effort.

'Fight for the future', was also a defining ideal of the 60s German protest. The student movement saw in the Leninist method of Agitprop a useful instrument of protest.<sup>14</sup> But where for Lenin the final emphasis was on the longer propaganda process, the protesters of the 60s usually limited themselves to the short-term goal of agitation. The Aktion, the act itself, became the goal. Although there were many discussions about the 'right kind' of action to take, the urge 'to do something' more often than not became its own justification.

The deeds of the members of the Kommune 1, the politically-motivated commune in Berlin, active in its original form 1967–1969, have become examples of the spirit of *Aktionismus*. *Aktionismus* means doing things for the sake of doing things, and for this reason has a negative connotation – it deliberately avoids continuity, working toward a goal. The *Aktionismus* was therefore often associated with a mindless acting out of frustration in a childish manner; its participants were called out as 'naive and pseudo political anarchists.'<sup>15</sup>

However, the urge to 'do something', is seen as the driving factor of change in the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Jürgen Habermas wrote in his commemorative article in *Die Zeit* about the death of the most well known spokesperson of the student movement, Rudi Dutschke; 'it always came back to one word: active, activism, action. And one slogan

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<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 'What Is To Be Done', Lenin's *Collected Works*, (1961) (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow) Volume 5, pp. 347–530.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Strassner, *Sozialrevolutionärer Terrorismus: Theorie, Ideologie, Fallbeispiele, Zukunftsszenarien*, 1st edn (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008) p.241.

took my breath away: No *Aufklärung* (education/enlightening) without action. Dutschke even said *Aufklärung* and direct action in one breath.”<sup>16</sup>

In recent years the *Aktionismus* has been associated with the terrorism of the 70s.<sup>17</sup> A direct link is made about how the *Aktionismus* turned more and more violent, ultimately resulting in terrorist acts.

The film embeds the *Aktionismus* in the radicalisation of Cecilia and Konstantin, their protest initially relatively harmless and playful, turns ruthless and violent when their demands are not met and they find purpose in the ideology of the Schwarzen Stürme. Here the crypto-fascist name Schwarzen Stürme comes into play. The notion of Black Storms has an audible ‘Nazi’ quality to it; abbreviated it stands as SS, reminiscent of the SS (Schutzstaffel) the Nazi paramilitary organisation, and the word storm is reminiscent of SA (Sturmabteilung) another Nazi paramilitary organisation. This play on words can be no accident, and evokes the contemporary, historicised understanding of the radicalism of the 68 movement in Germany and will be looked in greater detail in the section on German Angst. An understanding that was first formulated by Habermas’s exclamation that the politics of the APO were nothing but ‘utopian socialism’ and, ultimately, ‘Linksfaschismus’ (left fascism), a conclusion many saw verified by the terrorism of the RAF and others.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of *Aktionismus* is recreated most directly in the film in its translation of the events of 2 June 67 – the way the film utilises these events for its narrative are looked at thorough the concepts of ‘Images of protest’ and ‘The Ohnesorg effect’.

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<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Habermas, ‘Er verband die Kraft zum Visionären mit dem Sinn fürs Konkrete’, *Die Zeit* (4 January 1980) <<http://www.zeit.de/1980/02/ein-wahrhafter-soziali>

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Gerd Koenen, *Das Rote Jahrzehnt: Unsere Kleine Deutsche Kulturrevolution, 1967 – 1977* (Frankfurt am Ma, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002). pp.174–82. or Alexander Strassner, *Sozialrevolutionärer Terrorismus: Theorie, Ideologie, Fallbeispiele, Zukunftsszenarien*, 1st edn (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008) p.22.

<sup>18</sup> Jürgen Habermas quoted, Thomas Hecken, *Avantgarde Und Terrorismus: Rhetorik Der Intensität Und Programme Der Revolte Von Den Futuristen Bis Zur RAF* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2006). p.82

## Images of Protest

On 2 June 1967, the student organisation APO (external parliamentary opposition) organised a demonstration against the visit of Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Persia. They accused him and the German state of collaborating, in order to legitimise the Shah's holding on to power in Iran. The Shah and his wife were expected to visit the Berlin Opera. So-called *Jubelperser* (cheering Persians) in essence provocateurs, some of them members of the Iranian secret service, were planted in front of the Opera where the Shah was expected to attend. They soon started beating up the anti-Shah protesters with the wooden planks that held the sloganeering placards. The German police, instead of protecting the protesters from the attack, stormed towards the protesting students and started to truncheon them in order to disperse the protesters with the *Leberwursttaktik* – a concept devised by Berlin's then police commander Erich Duensing, that envisages to brutally 'poke into the middle so that it breaks at either end'.

The images of this memorable day have become famous through the tv documentary *Der Polizeistaatsbesuch – Beobachtungen unter deutschen Gastgebern* (1967). More recently, this famous event was dramatically recreated in *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, and discussed in the previous chapter.

The first political protest in *Die Kommenden Tage* is a flash mob action, among them Cecilia and Konstantin; protesters provocatively clap at the Saudi commercial attaché, who is guilty of selling his country's oil reserves to the West. The protest, planned as an act of intimidation, soon turns violent. The protesters chase the dignitary down the street, and they are then beaten up by the police and brought into custody.

The playful protests against the Shah in the late 60s, as well as the one against the Saudi dignitary in *Die Kommenden Tage*, start out as open protests that soon turn violent. In *Die Kommenden Tage* the playful protest is brutally dispersed by the police, evoking memories of the *Leberwursttaktik*. Also, the

dignitary's bodyguards, who are beating the protesters (together with the police), look and act similar to the real life Jubelperser.

These images are reminiscent of the political demonstration of 1967 as depicted in *Der Polizeistaatsbesuch*. In both scenarios the students are protesting against western imperialist politics. The dignitary in *Die Kommenden Tage* could be seen as a quasi Reza Pahlavi, an Arab who sells his country to the West. Kraume says about the activism in *Die Kommenden Tage*: 'In the beginning it is a bit more playful with its Mantra 'We have to get rid of civilisation', and is done in sympathetic and playful actions.'<sup>19</sup> In 1967, several students were seen wearing paper-bags on their heads. On the bags were caricature of the faces of either the Shah of Persia or his wife, the glamorous Farah Diba. This image of a playful protest was recreated in *The Baader Meinhof Complex*.

In *Die Kommenden Tage*, the 'playful protest' comes in form of a flashmob where the protesters who start out clapping at the Arab dignitary, chase him down the street and continue by collectively throwing him in the air. The playfulness is underlined by the score, a high spirited violin concerto that, once the protesters have reached the dignitary, seamlessly blends into the dialectic sounds of the oncoming police sirens.

By recreating the playful energy of the actionism of the 60s as a possibility for political action today, the film understands that it is the action itself, without greater ideology, that will evoke change.

### **The 'Ohnesorg effect'**

On 2 June 1967 in Berlin, the student Benno Ohnesorg was shot by policeman Karl-Heinz Kurras during a protest. As described in the previous chapter, a specific image of the death of Ohnesorg has, within the German cultural landscape, become seen as a point of origin of RAF mythology. The wider

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<sup>19</sup> Interview Lars Kraume, *Die Kommenden Tage*, DVD, Universal-Pictures, 2011.

consequences of his death became known as the Ohnesorg effect, and it is to this effect that *Die Kommenden Tage* makes reference.<sup>20</sup>

Once again, the film *Die Kommenden Tage* plays on the RAF myths around the event. Careful consideration must be paid to the relationship between fact and mythos, and the representation of both in fictional form.

The death of Ohnesorg undoubtedly created a rallying point for the student movement and a push towards radicalisation. It is this dynamic that has become mythologised in the RAF myths. It was primarily Henschel's picture of the dead Ohnesorg that, as Carsten Dams explains, 'stylised Ohnesorg as a martyr.'<sup>21</sup> Patricia Leavy observes how iconic images are not historical but 'through a cultural process acquire historicity.'<sup>22</sup>

Ohnesorg's was called a martyr as early as 4 June 1962 when the *Berliner Morgenpost* commented that Ohnesorg was no martyr but a victim of the 'FU-Chinesen' (the 'red' students from the Freie Universität Berlin). Within the student movement the idea of Ohnesorg as a martyr was criticised. At a student rally with around 3000 students it was said that he was no martyr but a victim of a 'position (in government) that revealed itself to be unreasonable.'<sup>23</sup> In 1972, *Spiegel* journalist Horst Günter Tolmein wrote that Ohnesorg was the martyr gave birth to the RAF, while the *Spiegel* itself made critical reportage of the RAF its journalistic mission.<sup>24</sup> Many other magazines

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20 Expressed by Günter Ermisch, 48, CDU-Member and vice president of the Bundeskriminalamt, Federal Criminal Police Office of Germany. *Spiegel* 39/1981, 'Brutaler Vollzug, Stich um Stich', (21 September 1981) <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14346225.html>>

21 Carsten Dams, 'Polizei, Protest und Pop. Staatliche Ordnungsmacht und gesellschaftliches Aufbegehren in der Popmusik seit 1970', Sabine Mecking and Yvonne Wasserloos, *Musik – Macht – Staat: Kulturelle, Soziale Und Politische Wandlungsprozesse in Der Moderne* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2012). pp.303–319, p.305.

22 Patricia Leavy, *Iconic Events: Media, Politics, and Power in Retelling History* (Idaho Falls, ID: Lexington Books, 2007) p.3.

23 Tilman Fichter and Siegwand Lönnendonker, *Kleine Geschichte Des SDS: D. Sozialist. Dt. Studentenbund Von 1946 Bis Zur Selbstauflösung* (Berlin, Rotbuch-Verlag, 1977) p.110.

24 Horst Günter Tolmein, *Partisanen Unter Uns* (Mainz: Von Hase und Koehler, 1972) p.49.

and articles would describe Ohnesorg in this way, as a 'martyr of the left radical extremists'.<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, the concept of Ohnesorg as a martyr of the left needs to be placed into the realm of RAF mythos in its mediatized form, rather than in any historically detailed form. Neither the left nor the right saw his death as anything other than a condemnation of the other. For the right, the student movement that was to blame, for the students it was the authoritarian state.

It was the picture of Ohnesorg as martyr that became fixed in the cultural landscape. In 1990 a statue named *Der Tod des Demonstranten* (The Death of the Demonstrator), already constructed in 1971, was unveiled in front of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. And in the same year an official memorial panel was installed next to the sidewalk where Ohnesorg was shot. A theatre was named in his honour, and his hometown of Hanover named a bridge after him in 1992.

The real Ohnesorg was shot by the police, a representative of the state. In *Die Kommenden Tage* it is the terrorists themselves who plan and execute the murder of a demonstrator for their own means, in an attempt to engineer a tipping point of public indignation.

In *Die Kommenden Tage*, Die Schwarzen Stürme plan to manipulate the desperate protesters who are demonstrating against the politics of the German state. Members of Die Schwarzen Stürme disguise themselves as riot police in order to 'accidentally' shoot one of the demonstrators. Their aim is to create a martyr for the protest movement because, 'Martyrs move the hearts of the masses'. The leader of the terrorist group says, 'we need a dead person in Berlin.'

The internal logic of the film's narrative demands a deliberate dehistoricization of the events of 2 June. The film is a myth of a myth. The narrative is structured around a pre-existing interpretation of real historical

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<sup>25</sup> *Bunte Magazin*, (Burda, 1975) p.ix.

events. The depiction on screen of the actions of the fictional terrorists relies on this interpretation as being both readily accessible and uncontested.

The fiction is further complicated by the apparent implicit awareness of the fiction by the characters themselves. In the narrative, the characters act in a fashion that suggests they are aware of the Ohnesorg effect, without the narrative explicitly stating it. In effect, the fictional characters act to engineer something that happened in a particular interpretation of a reality external to the screen fiction. They attempt to bring the past back to life by force, but it is a mythos of factual past, where both the mythos and the factual past are external to the frame of reference as an internal reality the characters inhabit. In short, the characters work to produce an Ohnesorg effect. This can only mean that the narrative assumes the Ohnesorg effect is taken as read. The portrayal of Die Schwarzen Stürme actions narrativises a desire for a particular kind of certainty, the *fait accompli*, that can only obscure or weaken the connection to the specificities of the factual historical moment.

The film does not recreate the Henschel picture. Instead, the shooting of Linda, a student, by Konstantin is shown. Dressed as riot police, the characters Cecilia and Konstantin are attacked by demonstrators including Linda. Whilst the camera shows Linda hitting the prone Celia in a long shot, the gunshot happens outside the frame. Although the film shows Konstantin's arm holding the gun, the film does not show his face. When he gets up and holsters the gun, he is shown from the back, anonymised by riot gear.

The scene bears a reading in terms of the partial autonomous object, and its relationship with ideology. The image of the gun in the cut off arm forms what Žižek would call a partial object, an organ without body.<sup>26</sup> These partial objects described by Žižek evoke unease in the onlooker as the absence of the human element from the physical body. It is something that represents pure death drive, not a self-conscious subject. Žižek says, 'subjectivisation refers to the "whole person" as the correlate of the body, whereas the "pure" subject

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<sup>26</sup> Žižek, 2003b, p.35.

refers to the partial object alone.<sup>27</sup> The 'pure subject is 'a subject of the signifier', totally submitted to the symbolic order and its content, 'When the object starts to speak (in this case a gun shot), what we hear is the voice of the monstrous, impersonal, empty-machinic subject that does not yet involve subjectivisation.'<sup>28</sup> From this perspective Konstantin's deed is directed by the symbolic order he finds himself in, rather than his self-conscious subjectivity. The film amplifies the horror of Konstantin's deed through the use of the anxiety-inducing partial object. Before the event, he tells Celia that killing one person is only part of the general, systemic killing that is happening in the world that they live in.

Although Kraume consciously reveals the terrorists' double standards and showing their immoral and authoritarian methods, that is, shooting an innocent person for their own means, what he regards as the deciding factor in a new 'turning point' in politics is not who creates the martyr, but that it happens at all. The actionism shown by *Die Schwarzen Stürme* is the deciding factor, and their unethical methods succeed in providing the desired 'Ohnesorg effect'. *Die Kommenden Tage* shows a solemn vigil, demanding 'justice for Linda'. This is a clear parallel to the great reaction to – the reality being invoked – Ohnesorg's death, which was treated as political murder by the student protesters. Laura says to Konstantin, after seeing the rioting in the streets that follows the murder of Linda, 'It is unbelievable how powerful *Die Schwarzen Stürme* have become.'

*Die Schwarzen Stürme* not only emulate the 'Ohnesorg effect', but the film itself presents the radicalism of the near future as a carbon copy of the actionism associated with the late 1960s, as well as its terrorist extremes. The 'creation mythos' of the RAF, and the impetus for radicalisation it contains, is the point of reference for Kraume's terrorists. The *Schwarzen Stürme*'s nostalgia for the events and 'historical turning points' of the past show that they understand the past in its mythologised form. It displays an ahistorical

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p.155.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*



thinking, as they imagine the events are recreatable at any time. Here, myth is no longer metaphor, exactly as Žižek and Crockett lament, but an ahistorical event catalyst, that works even though its methods are questionable.

### The failures of the parent generation

One of the key myths that feeds into the narrative fabric of *Die Kommenden Tage* is that of the failure of the parent generation. Again, it is a harking back to, and remythification of, a real historical precedent, a filling in of the gaps with ideological content from a different, more recent historical moment.

The critique of the parent generation in *Die Kommenden Tage* resembles the critique of the Achtundsechziger<sup>29</sup> towards their parents' generation. The Achtundsechziger, or 68ers, and with them the RAF, saw their parents' generation as the creators and supporters of the imperialist politics of Western Germany, while simultaneously suppressing the nation's Nazi past. *Die Kommenden Tage* cinematically relives the idea that, in order to make credible politics, one has to be honest with one's own past as well as the present. As Laura tells her parents: 'You have to draw the consequences. Nobody has a future without knowing the past.'

The blaming of previous generations for today's problems is an idea that has renewed resonance. A dead-end situation brought on by living to the excess with no regard for the next generation, is blamed on the 'guilty ones, Germany's middle class baby boomers, who now strive for the same privileges as the aristocracy did once.'<sup>30</sup>

This new form of 'parent bashing' is not a solely German phenomenon. Paul Begala, former advisor to Bill Clinton, wrote an article for *Esquire* magazine called *The Worst Generation*. He claims it is legitimate to hate the baby boomers as a generation driven by selfishness, 'The orgy of greed, fed by a mountain of debt, ran the economy into the ground. The massive, selfish tax

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29 The word Achtundsechziger (Sixtyeighters) is a comprehensive term that describes to all those who organised and participated in student revolts in Western Europe in the late 1960s.

30 Felix Inman, 'Die Schuld der Deutschen', *Der Freitag*, (30 April 2010) <<http://www.freitag.de/politik/1017-die-schuld-der-deutschen>> [last accessed Monday, 12 September 2011]

cuts produced even more massive deficits and debt, which the Boomers passed on to those who followed.<sup>31</sup>

*Die Kommenden Tage* draws out the parallel between the anti-authoritarian movement of the 60s and today's contempt for the parent generation. Both generational conflicts blame their elders for the trouble they are in and the refusal to own up to their mistakes. Whereas the generational conflict of the 60s was geared towards the criticism expressed against the baby boomer generation, of which the Kuper parents are an example, and is more a hostility towards human ambition in general. Again, Kraume is re-mythologising the RAF: in this case, by re-appropriating the cultural understanding of the anti-authoritarian impulses that drove the student movement in the 60s, as a contemporary conflict of generations.

Fuelled by almost two decades of economic growth, the late 1960s in Germany were informed by a movement of unrest and protest. The economic boom provided space and possibility for personal freedoms that were in contradiction to previous, more authoritarian social structures. The post-war generation wanted to escape from what they regarded as the contradictions that formed the new Federal Republic, a combination of the *Wirtschaftswunder* (the rapid reconstruction and massive economic growth in Germany after the second world war) and an authoritarian political and social space. Moreover, this generation felt the need to deal with the country's Nazi past, which had, up to this point, not been come to terms with. As formulated by the Frankfurt School in its criticism of the authoritarian state, many students saw that it was the authoritarian structures of the older generation that allowed the possibility of the Third Reich in the first place.

Gudrun Ensslin's alleged outcry of outrage directed at 'Generation Auschwitz' came to stand for the attitude towards the failures of the parent generation. These failures were not only failures to stand up to the Nazi

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Begala, 'The Worst Generation', *Esquire* (April 2000) <<http://www.esquire.com/features/worst-generation-0400#ixzz1XNd9qohe>> [last accessed 12 September 2011]

regime but, moreover, to tolerate what was felt to be the same repressive state structures in the present. This failure has not only become seen as the main catalyst for the student movement, but, as illustrated earlier, has also become the explanatory model for the formation of extremist groups such as the RAF.

The actions of the RAF have, for some commentators, become seen as an acting out against the shortcomings of the parent generation. The psychoanalyst Hans-Jürgen Wirth sees the members of the RAF as 'subconscious delegates who act in the stead of their parents generation' fighting 'against a pugnacious past.'<sup>32</sup> Also Aust, by paraphrasing Andreas Baader's lawyer Horst Mahler, asserts that the motives of the RAF were 'not initially a protest against the Vietnam war, but a rebellion against a generation that had tolerated the Nazis and was consequently complicit in the murder of millions. The defendants drew the consequences and decided not to participate in a society that was founded upon exploitation, injustice and oppression.'<sup>33</sup> For Aust it is clear that the RAF wanted to 'provide the resistance (to the authoritarian state) that the parent generation failed to do.'<sup>34</sup>

These factors are all deliberately mediated through the fiction of *Die Kommenden Tage*. The film makes the deeds of the parent generation directly responsible for the ills that have befallen the globalised world, and consequently for the violent reaction of the young generation against the old political structures. The Kuper family is an upper-middle-class family; the father is a lawyer, who represents unscrupulous oil companies that have created ecological catastrophe, but knows that what he is doing is not right. When it comes to choosing between his children and his chambers he picks the politics of his children's generation against 'this shitty war'.

The character of the father fulfils the role of failed parental figure, representing the parents' generation's complicity in the crisis at hand and their

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<sup>32</sup> Fischer and Lorenz, 2007, p.195.

<sup>33</sup> Aust, 1986, p.76.

<sup>34</sup> Stefan Aust, 'Der letzte Akt der Rebellion', *Spiegel online* (10 September 2007) <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-52909294.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

failure to protest against what is happening. They cannot claim to be ignorant of what is happening; they are clearly complicit in their politics and its consequences.

### The characters of *Die Kommenden Tage*

The playing with RAF Mythos can be seen in the film's characters and their relationship to the archetypes, and the star personas of the actors chosen to fill the roles. The stars already embody a distinct narrative that they bring to the narrative of the film. The star thus, as Hayward describes, 'is the point of synthesis between representation and identification. She or he represents or re-presents the 'host culture' of which she or he is a part and with which the spectator identifies'<sup>35</sup> In the case of *Die Kommenden Tage*, the actors are thus placed in the role of their star persona, the archetype of the mythos and the role of the character itself.

The fictional terrorist couple, Cecilia and Konstantin, can only be modelled after the archetypal relationship of Baader and Ensslin. Konstantin, whose charisma convinces his girlfriend Cecilia to join Die Schwarzen Stürme, personifies many of the qualities associated with the idea of Andreas Baader – his mythologised archetype that is established the cultural landscape.

In fiction, evidenced in films such as *Baader* (2002) or *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, Andreas Baader is an id-monster, interested only in following his own dark hidden desires. In Christopher Roth's deliberately falsified film *Baader*, the character is described as 'Gangster, Autofreak, *Frauenheld* (womaniser). *Unberechenbar* (erratic), narzisstisch, charismatisch.'<sup>36</sup> In the tv documentary *Andreas Baader – Der Staatsfeind* (public enemy) (TV 2002) Baader is described as a 'dandy' from the outset, as well as a weapon fetishist with 'energy and the power of persuasion.' The programme puts emphasis on Baader's urge for *Aktionismus*: 'He always wanted something to happen. He was drawn to the happenings and events of the Kommune 1, where he was appreciated because he was always ready for action.' Ex-communard Reiner Langhans talks about Baader's 'impish pleasure in provocation.'<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2006) p.357.

<sup>36</sup> *Baader*, (Vienna: Polyfilm, 2002)

<sup>37</sup> *Andreas Baader – Der Staatsfeind* (public enemy) ARD (TV 2002)

In fiction, the mythological archetype is filled out and to some extent fixed as an entity by the film *The Baader Meinhof Complex*. Baader is played by Moritz Bleibtreu, whose star persona of the eternal man-child, as an ‘obercooler Typ!’<sup>38</sup> fits the film’s idea of Baader as a chaotic pistolero and a hard-nosed, thoughtless boor.

In *Die Kommenden Tage*, the Baader-cipher Konstantin is only interested in living out his own ideas of revolution. He is narcissistic, charming, brutal, sly and without compromise. Most of all, he is driven by the need to do something. He describes Die Schwarzen Stürme as ‘the organisation that I have always longed for.’

It is hard not to read the casting of Johanna Wokalek as Cecilia as anything other than an intentional reference to her role as Gudrun Ensslin in *The Baader Meinhof Complex*. Here, the use of the figure of Ensslin as a reference point is obvious. The character of Cecilia, like the real-life Ensslin, comes from a well respected, middle-class family.

Her relationship with Konstantin proves to be passionate but ultimately destructive. Ensslin’s relationship with Andreas Baader was described by her close friend Ernst Heinitz, ‘Gudrun was more than she knew, and more than her intellect admitted, slavishly dependent on Baader. She was infinitely emotionally connected to him.’<sup>39</sup> In the same way Cecilia is under Konstantin’s influence in *Die Kommenden Tage*. Hans Koerner describes how, in the mediated world of RAF images, ‘the blond pastor’s daughter Ensslin comes across as the crass opposite to Baader.’<sup>40</sup>

The rich narrative potential of the cool blond and the impulsive rake has often led to the conflation of Baader and Ensslin with Bonnie and Clyde. In

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38 The English translation would be something like ‘uber-cool’ – Interview. Moritz Bleibtreu: ‘Ein obercooler Typ!’, *Badische Zeitung* (14 May 2014) <<http://www.badische-zeitung.de/kino-neustarts/moritz-bleibtreu-ein-obercooler-typ--84754770.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

39 ‘Ein Seitenweg’, *Spiegel Online* (12 June 1972) <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-42928464.html>>, last accessed Monday, 12 September 2011

40 Anita Blasberg, *Mythos Rote Armee Fraktion*, *Mythos*, No. 1 (2004) (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann Verlag) pp.176–198, p.190.

*Die Kommenden Tage*, Wokalek's Cecilia is closely styled after her performance as Ensslin in *The Baader Meinhof Complex*. Her costumes and hair are strikingly similar in the two films. In effect, the casting of Wokalek as Cecilia evokes the mythologised Ensslin – an effect that leads to an understanding of Cecilia as a terrorist whose persona wears the vintage clothes of the RAF on the outside but is filled with a contemporary outlook.

A further reliance on RAF mythos in *Die Kommenden Tage* can be found in the relationship between Cecilia and her sister Laura. The focal point of the RAF mythos in this instance is exemplified in Margarethe von Trotta's film *Die Bleierne Zeit* (or *Marianne and Juliane*)(1981). The film is a RAF film, about the relationship between two sisters, Marianne and Juliane and is based on the real life relationship between Christiane and Gudrun Ensslin. Marianne becomes part of a violent terrorist group whereas Juliane is a journalist for a feminist magazine. In both films the daughters of the house go down different paths in an effort to escape the authoritarian structures that confine them. One is quiet and gentle, and her protest is verbal; the other is wild and rebellious, joins a terrorist organisation, and ends up in prison.

By repeating the motifs of *Die Bleierne Zeit*, *Die Kommenden Tage* draws a formal connection with an early example of RAF mythology. In a similar fashion to its re-appropriation of the mythologised characters of Baader and Ensslin, *Die Kommenden Tage* uses the cultural reference of the two sisters and turns them into spokespersons for contemporary conflicts.

### **Counterculture**

One aspect of 1960s and 1970s counterculture that Kraume evokes in *Die Kommenden Tage* is the image of the Hippy, the societal dropout who withdrew from the authoritarian moral codes of the time to live in remote places of the world that catered to their hand to mouth lifestyle such as India, Ibiza or Morocco.

The ideas of counterculture and the lure of alternative lifestyles in *Die Kommenden Tage*, come to mind when Cecilia enters the terrorists' space. She



is shown wandering around the flat, fascinated and frightened by the otherness of the place.

Laura's boyfriend Hans (Daniel Brühl), withdraws from society and contact with other people to live in a cabin in a remote part of the Alps. There he lives on only the bare essentials while pursuing his private passion, bird-keeping. His only companion is a Man Friday character, a young African emigrant whom he has taken in.

The romanticism inherent within idea of the dropout, is often counterposed with accusations of shying away from the problems at hand or destroyed by reality catching up with them. In *Die Kommenden Tage* reality catches up with Hans in the form of Konstantin, who has come to the cabin to claim back Laura and his son. Konstantin shoots Hans and burns down his cabin. By carefully destroying the mythos of the care free abandonment of society, *Die Kommenden Tage* emphasises that no one can escape the collapse of a global society.

Another facet of counterculture utilised in *Die Kommenden Tage* is the politicising of the personal. Konstantin and Cecilia's relationship changes once they meet Vincent (Mehdi Nebbou), the contact that introduces them to die Schwarzen Stürme. Vincent moves in with them, into their student house which is obviously paid for by Cecilia's and Laura's parents. Laura is already uncomfortable with the way Konstantin takes for granted the sharing of the food and the house; she is surprised, accepting but most of all intrigued by the new open-mindedness in Konstantin and Cecilia's relationship. Once Vincent moves in, the image of a 60's commune comes to mind, especially when Laura comes home one day to discover Cecilia, Konstantin and Vincent having sex together. The staple of 60s counterculture, in the form of free love, is knowingly brought into play by Kraume.

Inspired by writings such as those of Horkheimer,<sup>41</sup> many of the 68ers saw the traditional family structure as the root of all authoritarian evil. Their

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<sup>41</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Studien Über Autorität Und Familie: Forschungsberichte Aus D. Inst. Für Sozialforschung*, 21936th edn (Lüneburg: Zu Klampen, 1987).

goal was to break away from what they saw as the bourgeois moralities imposed by the state. The philosophy was that, before there can be a successful revolution, the revolutionaries have to first of all revolutionise themselves. The idea of ownership was also questioned in terms of interpersonal relationships, and many tried to follow an ideal of an emancipated sexuality. Gudrun Ensslin acted in a short film called *Das Abonnement* (1967) which promoted free love and alternative lifestyles.

Several films about the legacy of the 68ers deal with the inevitable jealousies that occurred between people 'against their better judgement', and which put dampers on the idea of free love. E.g. The films *The Baader Meinhof Complex* and *Wer nicht wenn Wir* (2011) deal, respectively, with the problems Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin have with practising free love.

In *Die Kommenden Tage*, the scene in which Laura sees the other three characters having sex is a play on understandings of 1960s counterculture and its demystification. This scene also implies that the sex between Konstantin, Vincent and Cecilia is motivated not simply by personal preference, but by a political agenda that will reveal the real power-structure of Konstantin's and Cecilia's love and will also spell its inevitable end.

*Die Kommenden Tage* uses different aspects of the RAF mythos, and general mythologies of the 68 movement to develop ideas of what terrorism in Germany may look like in the near future. Kraumes imagines a 'lifestyle terrorism', an embodiment of the revolutionary spirit of the RAF. He says of *Die Schwarzen Stürme*,

'They are similar to the revolutionary cells in the 1970s, of whom very few were caught in the end. They (RAF) were also, to say it crudely, 'Feierabendterroristen' (after-work-terrorists). All lived in a bourgeois, normal milieu and did their attacks in the evening. And it is the same with these terrorists (DSS), they continue living in their middle class situation. Konstantin's official job is as a corporate consultant and Cecilia works as a manager of a fancy restaurant. And it is within this

framework that she does her terrorism by poisoning her guests with Salmonella.’<sup>42</sup>

Kraume’s description of the RAF as *Feierabendterroristen* is a crude simplification of the historical reality of the RAF but exposes Kraume’s understanding of the idea of RAF as a mythical entity. In *Die Kommenden Tage* he transposes this mythos into *Die Schwarzen Stürme*, and creates a terrorism that relies on the forms, but not the content, of old to imagine a protest movement for today. The motivations for apocalyptic thinking are not thematised but have become part of a new cultural hegemony of the post-political.

### ***Endzeitdenken: Living in the End Times***

*Die Schwarzen Stürme* are motivated by their frustration towards the ideas of contemporary capitalism that, in the film have run their ‘logical’ course – new imperialist wars for the last resources; mass immigration by economically and ecologically displaced people, who in turn create a dismantling of the German welfare state; general poverty; wars; new borders.

However, the science fiction scenario that the film portrays, takes its cues from a constitutive myth of the post-political. The fear that capitalism has grown out of control, exacerbated by the recent financial crisis, posits capitalism as an entity gone bad. The fear of a ‘Turbo-Capitalism’, a term created by the conservative Edward Luttwak,<sup>43</sup> can be found across the political spectrum today, from the right as well as the left. Leftist philosopher John McMurtry dramatically calls it ‘The Cancer Stage of Capitalism’;<sup>44</sup> writer Naomi Klein notably describes it as ‘disaster Capitalism.’<sup>45</sup> This new, out of control capitalism, it is thought, brings about unchecked global warming,

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42 Interview Lars Kraume, *Die Kommenden Tage* DVD

43 Edward Luttwak, *Turbo-Capitalism: Winners and Losers in the Global Economy*, 1st edn (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000).

44 John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism: And Its Cure* (London: Pluto Press, 1998).

45 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010)

catastrophic climate change and other ecological disasters directly linked to a predatory exploitation of the world's resources. This will, in turn, bring about an ever increasing chasm between rich and poor, both within and between nations. Impressions of a never-ending military conflict, and massive cultural antagonisms in the 'war on terror', dominate world politics. For example German government spokesman Thomas Steg, 'applauded the high moral aims of the (G8) protesters and their important contribution to pointing out the social risks posed by a world economy spinning out of control.'<sup>46</sup>

The *Endzeitdenken* (thinking in terms of the end times) expressed in *Die Kommenden Tage* has, more generally, become symptomatic of the micro-political discourse in the post-political. Susan Sontag presaged this phenomenon in her essay 'AIDS and Its Metaphors':

Much of the well-intentioned public discourse in our time expresses a desire to be candid about one or another of the various dangers which might be leading to all-out catastrophe. ... The taste for worst-case scenarios reflects the need to master fear of what is felt to be uncontrollable. It also expresses an imaginative complicity with disaster. The sense of cultural distress or failure gives rise to the desire for a clean sweep, a tabula rasa.<sup>47</sup>

Kraume's film is an expression of the need, as described by Sontag, to feel in control of what is perceived to be an uncontrollable world. 'Change and uncertainty have acquired negative connotations in the contemporary imagination', writes Furedi, 'such sentiments fuel a palpable sense of dread towards the unknown and acquire a coherent expression through the ascendancy of possibilistic thinking.'<sup>48</sup> The crises of the present are envisioned as catastrophes of the future, because, as there is a lack of a coherent, popular body of thought in the post-political that envisions how the present should be shaped. According to Žižek, 'It is precisely within the domain of ecology that

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<sup>46</sup> Sabine Beppler-Spahl, 'G8: the myth of 'them and us', *Spiked* (7 June 2007) <[http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/3451#.VA1mnUv\\_w\\_t](http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/3451#.VA1mnUv_w_t)>

<sup>47</sup> Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 1st edn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989) p.86–87.

<sup>48</sup> Furedi, 2007, p.156.

one can draw the line that separates the politics of emancipatory terror from the politics of fear at its purest.<sup>49</sup>

The problems of the present are seen outside of society, and the concept of nature plays a big part in this imagination. Erik Swyngedouw describes how the concept of 'Nature', 'as a predictable and determined set of processes that tends towards a (dynamic) equilibrium – but one that is disturbed by our human actions and can be 'rectified' with proper sustainable practices', has become self evident in the post political.<sup>50</sup> Nature, regarded as something that is outside subjectivity, is for Žižek, one of the symptoms of the post-political. At first glance Žižek's own outlook seems to subscribe to a post-political, environmentalist body of thought. *Living in the End Times* talks about the scenario of constant end times, that the failures of capitalism are bringing about an ecological and economical catastrophe. He poses climate change, lack of resources and bio engineering as real threats to the lives of people. However, Žižek places the understandings and actions taken by environmentalists firmly in the post-political body of thought. He insists first of all that there is nothing like a balance in nature, 'Nature does not exist', nature's excesses are not an 'answer' to human behaviour.<sup>51</sup> Žižek says that people react in three different way to environmental disasters. In the first case, events, especially those in nature become normalised into the human experience as soon as they happen. 'Once the catastrophe occurs, it will be perceived as part of the normal run of things, as always having been possible.'<sup>52</sup> A second way of dealing with catastrophes is achieved by those

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49 Slavoj Žižek, 'Nature and its Discontents', *SubStance*, Issue 117 (Volume 37, Number 3, 2008), pp.37–72. (Kindle edition) <<http://eng12738-f11-cerrone.wikispaces.umb.edu/file/view/Žižek+Nature+and+its+Discontents.pdf>> [last access 4 September 2014]

50 Erik Swyngedouw, 'Impossible/Undesirable Sustainability and the Post-Political Condition', Krueger J.R. and Gibbs D, *The Sustainable Development Paradox* (ed.) pp.13–40 (New York: Guilford Press, 2007) <<http://sustainabilityparadox.commons.gc.cuny.edu/files/2011/03/Swyngedouw.doc.>> [last access 4 September 2014]

51 Žižek, 1992, p.24.

52 *ibid.*

who fail to normalise events (environmentalists). What they do is understand the catastrophe on the level of libidinal investment, id driven obsessional behaviour.

The obsessional participates in frenzied activity, he works feverishly all the time – why? To avoid some uncommon catastrophe that would take place if his activity were to stop; his frenetic activity is based on the ultimatum, “If I don’t do this (the compulsive ritual), some unspeakably horrible X will take place”.<sup>53</sup>

This understanding is to see these events as a moral punishment for mistreating nature: ‘The lesson drawn by those who react in this way is that we must cease our derailed, perverted way of life and begin to live as part of nature, accommodating ourselves to its rhythms, taking root in it.’<sup>54</sup>

For Žižek, the last approaches fail to see the event in its proper context. By understanding environmental events through the prism of symbolic subjectivisation, their complexity and randomness become foreclosed. For Žižek ‘apocalypse means revelation, not catastrophe’.<sup>55</sup> It is through extreme events that modes of thinking can be analysed through ‘the irreducible gap separating the real from the modes of its symbolization.’<sup>56</sup>

In post-political environmentalist thinking these avenues of reading natural catastrophes have become unthinkable. As Swyngedouw exemplifies,

The popular response to Katrina, the barrage of apocalyptic warnings of the pending catastrophes wrecked by climate change and the need to take urgent remedial action to engineer a retro-fitted ‘balanced’ climate are perfect examples of the tactics and configurations associated with the present post-political condition.<sup>57</sup>

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53 *ibid.*

54 *ibid.* p.35.

55 Liz Else, ‘Slavoj Žižek: ‘Wake up and smell the apocalypse’, *New Scientist* (30 August 2010) <<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20727751.100-slavoj-Žižek-wake-up-and-smell-the-apocalypse.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

56 Žižek, 1992, p.25.

57 Swyngedouw, 2007.

Žižek is aware of the anti-humanist strain contained within the conservationist idea:

While we cannot gain full mastery over our biosphere, it is unfortunately in our power to derail it, to disturb its balance so that it will run amok, swiping us away in the process. This is why, although ecologists are constantly demanding that we radically change our way of life, underlying this demand is its opposite – a deep distrust of change, of development, of progress: every radical change can have the unintended consequence of triggering a catastrophe. It is this distrust that makes ecology the ideal candidate for hegemonic ideology, since it echoes the anti-totalitarian post-political distrust of large collective acts.<sup>58</sup>

Fear of ecological catastrophe as a narrative of the post-political works as a constitutive fantasy of the post-political. The world is experienced as 'unknowable' and 'uncontrollable', as this fear finds fruitful ground in the public imagination and with it in Kraume's film. He transposes this fear into a filmic vision of the future. Sci-fi has always served as an artistic outlet for, and a critique of, the social fears and political concerns of the time. In the context of sociology the conditions for our imagination of the future are described by Furedi; 'The relationship between the present and the future depends on how society feels about itself today. Fears about the future are linked to anxieties about problems today. And, if the future is feared, then reaction to risk is more likely to emphasise the probability of adverse outcomes.'<sup>59</sup>

For Kraume, these fears constitute themselves in *Die Kommenden Tage* as an acceptance of the old mythos of the RAF and the contemporary mythos of the imminent global collapse. For a German born in 1970, Kraume's expression of these fears is unique to a certain cultural understanding and history of the politics of fear described under the umbrella term German Angst.

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58 Slavoj Žižek. "Nature and its Discontents", *SubStance*, Issue 117 (Volume 37, Number 3), pp.37–72. <<http://engl273g-f11-cerrone.wikispaces.umb.edu/file/view/Žižek+Nature+and+its+Discontents.pdf>> [last access 4 September 2014]

59 *ibid.* p.25.

## German Angst

*Die Kommenden Tage* imagines what the terrorism of the future will look like and the forms it will take. What it conjures up is Die Schwarzen Stürme. It is an organisation that, according to their spokeswoman, wants to use violence to tear down civilisation, to bomb into being an 'empty space', out of which a just society can emerge. The spokeswoman, whose tone of voice is reminiscent of RAF member Ulrike Meinhof, says to new recruit Cecilia, 'In the future, we will do the same thing: place explosives so that our society implodes, but which spares as much life as possible in its demise. Should we fail, our civilisation will soon destroy all life on earth.' The message is clear, destroy the system before it destroys the world.

The idea expressed by the terrorists in the film (that 'self defence against the system' is not only legitimate but needed to prevent the excesses of an inherently corrupt system) is a self-conscious echo of Germany's recent past. The real-life terrorist group RAF made it their mission to lead a struggle against the building blocks of the capitalist system. This system they regarded as a self-perpetuating, vicious circle of injustice and exploitation that had to be eradicated. They write in one of their statements:

Only through violent struggle – which radically breaks with everything that always returns man to the deadly mills of the system; which shows that and how it is possible to bring the system to its knees by materialising the destruction of consensus and destroying the political bases of the rotten system, destroying its last moments of legitimacy and attractiveness, – can and will revolutionary politics be implemented.<sup>60</sup>

The fictional group Die Schwarzen Stürme seem to reproduce in fiction the goals and rhetoric of the politics of the past. However, their agenda very much reflects the fears of contemporary Germany, that is, the fear of capitalism's disregard of social and ecological sustainability. This fear is found everywhere, but expressed plainly by the newsmagazine *Spiegel* in its topic page on

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<sup>60</sup> RAF, 'An die, die mit uns kämpfen', (April 1971), *Rote Armee Fraktion: Texte Und Materialien Zur Geschichte Der RAF*, 1st edn (Berlin, ID-Verlag, 1997) pp.349–360, p 354.



sustainability: 'Oil supplies are running out, the planet is warming up, sea levels are rising – Humanity has recognised that we cannot go on like this.'<sup>61</sup>

Die Schwarzen Stürme in fictional form express the real life desire: a radical implementation of sustainability in order to avoid what is seen as the inevitable outcome of uncontrolled capitalism – wars, ecological disasters and an escalation of misery.

The idea of sustainability has become something close to an unquestionable truism in German culture. The precautionary principle, which states that policies that are felt to be harmful to humans or the environment are to be rejected outright without the need for scientific proof, has been the guiding principle of the German government since the early 1970s. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck talks, in his influential book *Risikogesellschaft*, of a 'risk society,' where unnecessary and involuntary risks are pervading the social fabric of Europe. He insists on the necessity of a world wide practise of the precautionary principle as it is (for Beck still not sufficiently) practised in Germany.<sup>62</sup> The precautionary principle is thoroughly ingrained in the self-conception of Germany and a disregard for it (for Germans particularly prominent in US policies) is often met with a general feeling of incomprehension and emotional outrage.

Swyngedouw, describes how it has become a dictum of the post-political to manage nature through the concept of sustainability.

The fantasy of 'sustainability' imagines the possibility of an originally fundamentally harmonious Nature, one that is now out-of-synch but, which, if 'properly' managed, we can and have to return to by means of a series of technological, managerial, and organisational fixes. ... Disagreement is allowed, but only with respect to the choice of technologies, the mix of organisational fixes, the detail of the managerial adjustments, and the urgency of their timing and implementation.

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<sup>61</sup> Spiegel Online, *Thema: Nachhaltigkeit* <<http://www.spiegel.de/thema/nachhaltigkeit/>> [last accessed 12 September 2011]

<sup>62</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risikogesellschaft: Auf Dem Weg in Eine Andere Moderne*, 1st edn (Frankfurt am Ma, Suhrkamp, 1986)

Nature's apocalyptic future, if unheeded, symbolises and nurtures the solidification of the post-political condition.<sup>63</sup>

The dialectic between sustainability and the precautionary principle has impregnated the German psyche for longer than most other countries.

A good example for the specifically German notion of a turning away from a universal project, and with it the concept of progress as such is the dystopian vision of writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger, a poem titled called *Untergang der Titanic/The Sinking of the Titanic*. This poem represented a 'Riß im Rumpf des Fortschritts' (a rupture to the idea of progress).<sup>64</sup>

Enzensberger used the metaphor of the unsinkable Titanic as a metaphor for the hubris of Enlightenment thinking in particular the idea of progress, and by extension for the modernist project as such. Disillusioned by the failure of the 60s to produce a meaningful counternarrative to capitalism and resulting in the terrorism of the RAF in the 1970s, his understanding that utopias end in dystopias is echoed in Habermas' exclamation of 'Linksfaschismus.'

Enzensberger's motivations for his poem are formulated by Alasdair King's analysis, saying that for Enzensberger, 'political action never turns out as hoped: one never achieves exactly what one sets out to.'<sup>65</sup> King sums up Enzensberger's conclusion to what is to be done to avoid fascism of any kind in Germany as, 'what is needed is clear thinking and modesty.'<sup>66</sup>

Enzensberger's position perfectly describes the post-war attitude in Germany that enabled and favoured the emergence of a social, cultural climate based on risk avoidance and sustainability.

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63 Swyngedouw, 2007.

64 'Riß im Rumpf des Fortschritts' Nicolas Born über Enzensberger: "Der Untergang der Titanic", *Der Spiegel* (23.10.1978) <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-40606219.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

65 Alasdair King, 'Enzensberger's Titanic: The sinking of the German Left and the aesthetics of survival', Bergfelder, Tim and Sarah Street, eds., *The Titanic In Myth And Memory: Representations In Visual And Literary Culture* (London/NY: I. B. Tauris, 2004) pp.73–83, p.76.

66 *ibid.*

The obsession with environmental catastrophes such as Waldsterben (trees dying because of acidic rainfall) and nuclear power have been at the heart of Germany's political consciousness. These causes are so emotionally invested that a scientific and/or historical evaluation that does not question these ideas is understood in terms of fascist ideology. (The vocabulary of 'denier' – a term reserved for the concept of a fascistically motivated denial of the Holocaust has become a way of describing views held to be unassailable today, 'implying not merely wrong but evil')<sup>67</sup> All this has given the impression that there is an inherent fear of risk taking in German culture, often described as German Angst. Many see this as a 'fear of impoverishment of competence and a fallback into barbarity'<sup>68</sup> – i.e. falling back into the barbarity of the Third Reich.

This fear is analysed rigorously by political scientist Hamed Abdel-Samad, 'My thesis is: The greatest fear the Germans have is from themselves. Many believe that they do not live in a developed democracy which can deal with a homogenous society. They think many are able to just follow the next fanatic. One looks into the rearview mirror and believes that one looks into the future.'<sup>69</sup> Bearing in mind this attitude, towards what could be described as a fear of too much freedom, it is not surprising that *Die Kommenden Tage* was welcomed by the German press as a film with 'high plausibility'<sup>70</sup> and a 'close

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67 This is succinctly described by Furedi, 'Those who question prevailing cultural orthodoxies are often treated as immoral, evil people and their arguments depicted as a form of secular heresy. Many influential figures have a cavalier attitude to free speech, believing that 'dangerous' ideas should be repressed. Disbelief in today's received wisdom is described as 'Denial', which is branded by some as a crime that must be punished. It began with Holocaust denial, before moving on to the denial of other genocides. Then came the condemnation of 'AIDS denial', followed by accusations of 'climate change denial'. This targeting of denial has little to do with the specifics of the highly-charged emotional issues involved in discussions of the Holocaust or AIDS or pollution. Rather, it is driven by a wider mood of intolerance towards free thinking.', Frank Furedi, 'Denial, There is a secular inquisition that stigmatises free thinking', *Spiked*, 31 Jan 2007, <[http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/2792#.VAWO9Uv\\_w\\_s](http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/2792#.VAWO9Uv_w_s)> [last access 4 September 2014]

68 Sabine Bode, *Die Deutsche Krankheit = German Angst* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2006) p.257.

69 *Zeit Online*, 'Angst ist das deutsche Lebenselixier', *Interview-Broder-Abdel-Samad* (14 March 2011) <<http://www.zeit.de/2011/11/Interview-Broder-Abdel-Samad>> [last accessed 12 September 2011]

70 Christian Buss, 'Guerillas in Nadelstreifen', *Spiegel online* (3 November 2010) <<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/0,1518,726680,00.html>> [last access 4 September 2014]

relationship to today',<sup>71</sup> that shows how the world 'will look like in ten years time.'<sup>72</sup> Director Lars Kraume has made a film about the future that is regarded by some sections of its audience as if it were a documentary. The story has been lifted out of the realm of fiction and has become truth; a truth about an apocalyptic future met by a terrorism that has the credentials of a radical past.

*Die Kommenden Tage* does not try to decontextualise existing assumptions, in the way *The Baader Meinhof Complex* tries to do with the RAF mythos. Instead, *Die Kommenden Tage* presents in its reworking of the politics of fear through science fiction scenario assumptions of the past and the present and takes them at face value – it assumes an understanding of mythos as a normalised, unquestionable truth. The film does not allow a mythos to be used as a tool of abstraction and analysis but, by taking it literally, demonstrates the politics of fear in its creative imagination.

In *Die Kommenden Tage* the normalisation of mythos into reality that Žižek describes, forgoes this process, which is the need to question the inconsistencies of the RAF mythos itself. The materialist reality is that this is still a mythos. The film overcomes this problem by setting the mythos into the genre of science fiction, where the possibility for the reality of the events in the future is part of the genre's conventions.

The film sees no need to interpret the mythos of the past, taken collectively as the RAF mythos, and ultimately sees no need to abstract into its narrative its own basic assumptions. The visual translation of this idea is in the cinematic idea of what could be termed 'background apocalypse'.

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71 Patrick Seyboth, 'Die Kommenden Tage – eine düstere Zukunftsvision', *Badische Zeitung* (4 November 2010) <<http://www.badische-zeitung.de/kino-neustarts/die-kommenden-tage-eine-duestere-zukunftsvision--37359472.html>> [last accessed 12 September 2011]

72 Sophie Albers, 'Apocalypse now – auch daheim', *Stern.de* (4 November 2010) <http://www.stern.de/kultur/film/die-kommenden-tage-apocalypse-now-auch-daheim-1620261.html> > [last accessed 12 September 2011]

**The future is bright and full of fear –  
science fiction as a genre device to normalise myth**

*Die Kommenden Tage* does away with the fantastic element in its sci-fi narrative. Through, what Žižek would call, ‘filling in the gaps’ with contemporary biases, the film manages to leave the realm of fiction and become part of an accepted truth. A good way of examining how this happens is by comparing *Die Kommenden Tage* with another film that, superficially at least, has the same agenda – Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men*.

Both films rely on the same visual language of a broken society in the near future; but where *Children of Men* stays within the bounds of fiction, *Die Kommenden Tage* does not.

It is through the images of the future that more often than not the sci-fi element is established in sci-fi films. From the monumental Cityscapes of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) to the chaotic street life in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), the way the future becomes part of the narrative is often to be found in the backdrop of the scenes rather than in the foreground of the narrative.

Dystopian futures have always been part of the canon of sci-fi. Sci-fi film is a genre that strongly relies on *mise-en-scène*, for it is here that the new is interwoven with the familiar, without being directly involved in the diegesis – the vision of the future is inconspicuous. Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, Gyan Prakash describe how a ‘dystopian narrative – because it is so much more common (than a utopian narrative) – bears the aspect of lived experience.’<sup>73</sup>

This is no different in *Die Kommenden Tage*. The collapse of society is more clear in the background than in the narrative itself. Žižek describes this phenomenon referring to *Children of Men*, ‘The fate of the individual is the prism through which we see the background more clearly.’ He goes on to say, ‘If you look at the thing too directly, the oppressive social dimension, you

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<sup>73</sup> Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley and Gyan Prakash, *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010) p.2.

don't see it. You see it an oblique way only if it remains in the background.'<sup>74</sup> Here, the background becomes the actual story onto which the characters provide a connecting thread.

*Children of Men* is based on the PD James novel of the same name, which was published in 1992. The film takes place in 2027, and describes a world in which two decades of global human infertility have left humanity with less than a century to survive. The action takes place in the UK, which is the only European country left that has not completely collapsed. Instead a brutal, authoritarian police state tries to keep the country going. In the midst of the dying society, main character Theo Faron (Clive Owen) is asked by his former partner to secretly escort a pregnant refugee to the safety of the Human Project.

The comparisons between *Die Kommenden Tage* and *Children of Men* are worth making. Both films are created with high verisimilitude in their mise-en-scène, with the intention of portraying the collapse of society accurately and believably. Like *Die Kommenden Tage*, *Children of Men* is set in the near future: society has collapsed through migrant influx and the demise of a social structure within the state. Terrorism is rife, resources are rare and people are increasingly hysterical. The visualisations in both films of society's collapse are uncannily similar. For both films to be effective, the mix of the familiar and the futuristic elements has still to be recognisable as 'our time' (we are familiar with what we see) whilst experiencing an *Entrückung*, a rapture, from this very familiarity.

In both films, the first signs we are in the future are glimpses of new forms of advertising billboards that show moving images. This is a common trope in many recent sci-fi films, and the fact that these particular forms of advertising are already found in some places indicate how quickly these signifiers of the future become normalised once they happen. They fail to have the same impact for audiences in 2014, as they did in 2006 and 2010 respectively.

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<sup>74</sup> 'Comments by Slavoj Žižek.' *Children of Men* DVD. Universal Pictures (2006).

Both films introduce the ‘future’ through garish adverts on the side of buses. The next indicator is that technology has advanced in daily life is expressed through the characters’ familiarity with a new generation of computer screens. Both films image the screens of the future to look like sheer, illuminated glass panels.

In their book *Make It So: Interaction Design Lessons from Science Fiction*, Nathan Shedroff and Christopher Noessel observe that, ‘The most prominent visual aspect of speculative technology is that it glows.’<sup>75</sup> They try to answer the question why this could be,

Why does sci-fi glow? We suspect it’s because things of power in the natural world glow: lightning, the sun, and fire. Other heavenly bodies glow as well – stars, planets, and the moon (especially against a black background) – and have been long associated with the otherworldly. Additionally, living things that glow captivate us: fireflies, glowworms, mushrooms, and fish in the deep seas. It’s worth noting that while most of real-world technology glows, a lot of it doesn’t, so its ubiquity in sci-fi tells us that audiences and sci-fi makers consider it a crucial visual aspect.<sup>76</sup>

The visual effect of illumination draws the eye onto the futuristic background and elements – that which is to come. In *Die Kommenden Tage* everyday objects such as the kitchen shelves are illuminated in the future. But also this method draws the eye to what is happening in the future, the most obvious example is the image of the terrorists’ headquarters in which an illuminated writing on the wall spells out ‘Capitalism kills’.

This is where the comfortable images of the future stop. What comes next is more unsettling. A distortion of familiar landmarks; of London in *Children of Men* and Berlin in *Die Kommenden Tage*. In both films recognisable landmarks have gone wrong. In *Die Kommenden Tage*, the panoramic view of the Reichstag is obstructed by ugly scaffolding; the first letters of the sign of

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<sup>75</sup> Shedroff, Nathan and Christopher Noessel, *Make It So: Interaction Design Lessons from Science Fiction* (New York: Rosenfeld Media, 2012) p.40.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

the Staatsbibliothek are broken, symbolically indicating the loss of the state as a public institution.

In *Children of Men*, tanks and heavily armed policemen guard the entrance to the Mall at Admiralty Arch; the view from Trafalgar Square to Big Ben is also spoilt by ugly scaffolding. In *Die Kommenden Tage* we see increasing homelessness; empty shelves in the supermarket – images of contemporary poverty are used to induce fear of the future.

Both films create their uncanny re-imaginings of ‘what is to come’ through images of what is uncomfortable in the present. An almost circular logic that shows the ugliness of poverty by showing how ugly poverty is.

In *Children of Men* and *Die Kommenden Tage* there are images of ever increasing rubbish on the street. Shanty towns fill the screen, and homeless people are on every corner. Both films use a visual understanding of contemporary poverty to describe their future fantasy of what poverty will look like. In this context even the technological advancements; the screens, the modern cars, the Zeppelins or the fields of solar panels in *Die Kommenden Tage* – the illuminated future – and are not seen as part of a positive development. ‘Science-fiction film is caught in a curious paradox: the more the advancement of technology lends itself to narratives fed by anti-technological anxiety and conspiracy, the more the representational strategy can rely on technological development’, says Barbara Mennel, ‘cities are dystopian sites of decay based on seeing technological advancement not as utopian fantasy but as extreme dystopian fantasy.’<sup>77</sup> In *Children of Men* and *Die Kommenden Tage* progress is not progress at all, but is in itself an indicator of the wrongness of the society depicted.

In both films life in the future is revealed by following the protagonists, often in tracking shots, through the streets of the city, revealing the state of affairs as the background to the protagonist’s story. What are usually mere establishing shots (Where is the scene set? How does character A

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<sup>77</sup> Barbara Mennel, *Cities and Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2008) p.140.



get to place B?) are now the most important part of the narrative; by following the character is to encounter by association the ruination of decent standards of living. The background in the film is also the metaphorical background of the protagonists' circumstance.

Moreover, the background of both films reveals the misery that is the outcome of global capitalism: migration on the scale of a *Völkerwanderung*, a tidal wave of migration, and the mistreatment of migrants and the local population as a consequence.

The films show a future that is a combination of not only what is typically thought of as rightwing propaganda – that is the horrendous consequences of a drastic influx of immigrants –, but also what has been described as leftist apocalyptic theorising – visions of capitalism's endpoint due to an exhaustion of the earth's capabilities. This vision of the future encapsulates Žižek's criticism of environmentalist thinking as 'ideal candidate for hegemonic ideology',<sup>78</sup> the politics of fear that confronts people with their nightmare scenarios in form of their conservative fears.

### **The truth of *Die Kommenden Tage***

Both *Children of Men* and *Die Kommenden Tage* depict the failure of global capitalism, but there is a qualitative difference between the two in terms of internal logic. In *Children of Men*, the global crisis is brought about because procreation has stopped inexplicably. In terms of narrative the loss of fertility is symbolic and symbolises the loss of history.

In an interview *Children of Men* director Cuarón says:

I never cared about infertility from a literal standpoint. For me it's a metaphor for the fading sense of hope and the lack of human historical perspective. Meaning that humanity's living a culture of hedonism in which everything is instant gratification. Even our economy is about instant gratification, it's economic growth without any concern about

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<sup>78</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Nature and its Discontents', *SubStance*, Issue 117 (Volume 37, Number 3) pp.37–72. <<http://engl273g-f11.cerrone.wikispaces.umb.edu/file/view/Žižek+Nature+and+its+Discontents.pdf>> [last access 4 September 2014]

the consequences. In other words there's a complete disregard for the next generation.<sup>79</sup>

In other words, for the purposes of narrative, in *Children of Men* a fantastic event is invented to articulate contemporary fears.

In *Die Kommenden Tage*, however, the mythos of the impending apocalypse is treated as an 'everyday occurrence', a self-evident truism that is, in itself, a metaphor for the wrongness of contemporary politics. The global crisis is not a metaphor, but the expansion within the narrative of the 'war on resources' that is already felt to be going on in real life. In several newspaper reviews, it is felt to be a truth that makes the film relevant. The magazine *Der Stern* writes:

Now seriously, joking aside, really, truthfully and without bullshit: Why are we still shocked when somebody says what is true? Why does it cost so much bravery to describe the current world condition? The thirty-seven year old (Kraume) has managed, with the epic family story *Die Kommenden Tage*, to create a genius translation of the presentiment we have all learned to suppress so well. It is a dark vision of the future of how the world will look in ten years time if all will not go right.<sup>80</sup>

For *Der Stern*, the fact that *Die Kommenden Tage* is about a truth that no one wants to hear makes the film even more urgent politically. Here is Žižek's 'filling in' in operation; the unknown future is filled in with the apocalypse and thus the film creates its 'truth effect'.

By replacing myth for truth the film actively rules out the possibility of a metaphorical element in its sci-fi narrative. That which Darko Suvin describes as the novum, the fictional 'novelty or innovation validated by cognitive logic', has been left out of the narrative of the film, and left the film without its inner logic.<sup>81</sup> According to Suvin, the novum is the distinguishing feature of sci-fi

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79 Rahner, Mark, 'Alfonso Cuarón, director of 'Y tu mamá también' searches for hope in 'Children of Men', *The Seattle Times* (December 2006) <<http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=20061222&slug=cuaron22>> [last accessed 12 September 2011]

80 Stern.de, 2010.

81 Darko Suvin, *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology* (Bern: Verlag Peter Lang, 2010) p.67.

narrative. It is a 'totalising phenomenon'... 'a means by which the whole tale can be analytically grasped.'<sup>82</sup> In Žižek's terms, this would be the transcendental tool in narrative which can bridge the world of the subject and the world outside it. Without the novum, *Die Kommenden Tage* is left without a self-contained logic that sutures the narrative to the background images of the future.

In *Children of Men*, it is the desperation born of hopelessness, the lack of a future generation, that gives the background of the film context and a point of entry into this vision of the future. The fantastic element, by creating an imaginative leap into an alternate reality, renders the unimaginable acceptable. The metaphor of global infertility enables the subject to transcend into a realm of possibility that would not otherwise be open to him. This is the element of sci-fi, the novum which is 'validated by cognitive logic.' The premise does not have to be believed before the narrative can operate. The premise is intentionally fantastic yet logical in its own terms. In *Children of Men*, the background is not only a logical visual extension of the fantastic premise, but also the key to accessing the logic of the narrative.

In contrast, in *Die Kommenden Tage* the envisaged future is never explained in terms of its own fiction. The truth, which is held to be self-evident, that we are indeed reaching an endpoint of global capitalism due to an exhaustion of what nature and politics can deliver, is external to the fictional narrative.

In the film, the causes for the collapse of society rely on what is perceived to be true outside the narrative. The novum of the story, that which is 'other' in the imagined future, is assumed from the outset and not explored by the narrative. The internal logic of: 'no more oil' to 'no more everything' is never explained, neither by the images nor by the characters themselves. It is assumed that the logic of the narrative is self-explanatory.

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<sup>82</sup> *ibid* p.68.

In *Children of Men*, belief in its narrative does not rely on anything outside it. In *Die Kommenden Tage*, the premise is built on a collusion between filmmaker and audience, a shared set of assumptions. Without investment in these assumptions the narrative cannot operate effectively.

*Die Kommenden Tage* understands itself as a cautionary tale about the dangers of excess capitalism. But it is a cautionary tale only if accepted as one. The dystopian background in *Die Kommenden Tage* only enhances the incoherence of the film; the characters' actions and motivations are never understood in terms of the world they live in. The background is not a mirror of the characters' lives, as in *Children of Men*. In fact, in *Die Kommenden Tage* the story told through the background has no real relation to what happens to the characters.

*Die Kommenden Tage* is an attempt to visualise the future, extrapolated from what feels like the worst case scenario today. However, instead of providing an artistic vision with the help of a mythical metaphor, *Die Kommenden Tage* does not thematise contemporary problems but instead embodies a fear of them, in particular a German fear of 'falling back into barbarity'. It is not surprising that *Die Kommenden Tage* deals with the terrorism of the future using the same method of displacing mythos with assumed truths. The actions of *Die Schwarzen Stürme* is also void of this narrative suture. Their motivation is predicated on the assumption of the RAF mythos as real.

## Conclusion

Jameson said, 'someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.'<sup>83</sup> This is what has been done in *Die Kommenden Tage*.

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<sup>83</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Future city', *New Left Review* (2003) pp.65–80. <<http://newleftreview.org/II/21/fredric-jameson-future-city>> [last access 4 September 2014]

Ultimately what *Die Kommenden Tage* represents is the post-political loss of faith in human agency and progress. This is shown by the methods of realising the RAF mythos and the mythos of imminent social and ecological catastrophe. Inspired by the imperative, that is felt more in Germany than elsewhere due to its history, of an imperative to avoid all kind of extremism and this is done by risk avoidance altogether.

Kraume utilises the assumptions around imminent global collapse, as well as assumptions around the emergence of terrorist behaviour in Germany's past, to 'fill in the gaps' provided by the real fear of the new unknowns. *Die Kommenden Tage* takes the ecological catastrophe and the RAF Mythos out of the realm of mythos and presents them as a straight realist narrative, what is described by Žižek as reading mythos itself as a 'real story'.<sup>84</sup>

This sci-fi of *Die Kommenden Tage* reflects real life world fears of an unknowable future and presents the mythologised concept of worst case scenario as indubitable. Kraume 'fills the gaps' of uncertainty with the worst case scenario, thus articulating in fiction the prophesied 'falling back into barbarity.' One could say that the film is an experience of the precautionary principle in filmic form, and it is this that makes *Die Kommenden Tage* a very German encounter.

Another particularly German aspect of *Die Kommenden Tage*, is in its treatment of terrorism of the past, and its acceptance of the RAF mythos as a coherent historical entity. What started out as a demystification mission in *The Baader Meinhof Complex* is taken to its logical conclusion in *Die Kommenden Tage*. Where *The Baader Meinhof Complex* saw itself as providing the film with a new mythological framework that was supposed to reveal the gritty truth of the RAF, *Die Kommenden Tage* is not interested in the artistic exploration of its mythos but takes them as truths from the outset.

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<sup>84</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?: Four Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London: Verso Books, 2002) p.35.

## Final comments

This thesis set out to explore the post-political through the prism of how terrorism – contextualised as a symptom, as described by Žižek – is put on screen in Hollywood, British and German cinema. By using a theoretical framework based on the work of Žižek, and his concept of the post-political in particular, the argument concentrated on how the foreclosure of the universal element and the consequential impossibility of true emancipation – the freeing from social and political constraints – is translated to the cinema screen in a duality of the post-political in film and film in the post-political. However, any discussion around emancipation requires a discussion around what freedom means.

Again Žižek is helpful here. For him the question of freedom is answered through an evocation of Lenin's, 'Freedom yes, but for WHOM? To do WHAT?'<sup>1</sup> What this points to is a vital distinction of the concepts of formal and actual freedom or, the context and terms in which freedom takes place. Formal freedom is guaranteed by the symbolic order, whereas actual freedom means, so to speak, to change the rules of the game – freedom on one's own terms. However, the heavily qualified, constrained freedom in the name of universalist thinking in the post-political, goes hand in hand with the erosion of individual freedoms experienced.<sup>2</sup> In short, freedom means the possibility of

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek and Lenin evince Marx's dismissal of liberal, bourgeois ideas of freedom that want to just tolerate aller möglichen Sorten religiöser Gewissensfreiheit (all possible ideas of religious freedoms) but will never transgress das "bürgerliche" Niveau / its own 'bourgeois' parameters. Their call for freedom is for a transcending of the coordinates of a given situation... to redefine the very situation within which one is active.' Karl Marx 'Kritik des Gothaer Programms' London, 5 May 1875, *Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels – Werke*. (Karl) Dietz Verlag, Berlin. Band 19, 4. Auflage 1973, unveränderter Nachdruck der 1. Auflage 1962, Berlin/DDR. S. 13–32. *ML Werke* <[http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me19/me19\\_013.htm](http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me19/me19_013.htm)> [last access 4 September 2014] Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2003a) p.114. emphasis in original.

<sup>2</sup> Furedi's example is how the metaphor of 'zero tolerance' has become a political slogan, a term that 'implies notions of zero-judgment and zero discretion. These are policies that are meant to be applied arbitrarily and punish without regard to circumstances.' Frank Furedi, 'The elites are making a virtue of intolerance' *Frank Furedi* 8 March 2012 <<http://www.frankfuredi.com/site/article/542/>> [last access 4 September 2014]

accessing the dimension of transcending and ultimately transforming one's own circumstances. If, in the post-political, the universal is foreclosed, and transcending it impossible, the question is, to quote Žižek, 'How, then, do things stand with freedom?'<sup>3</sup>

Historically, the concept of freedom has always been intimately bound up with the idea of the subject. In order to implant actual freedom it is vital to have a subject that is able to make this transcendence away from the symbolic, to change the very co-ordinates of their situation. Today, this possibility has become difficult. The politics of the subject – the political of particulars that stand for the universal – are diminished. The primary discourses of the subject frame the concept in terms of either biological or social determinants. (Of course humans are to some degree determined by their role in the natural order, but this is not the end of it. They are also exceptional, in that they can be free to become subjects, as Malik says, 'to order nature and shape events external to us.')<sup>4</sup> Losing faith in the subject is also losing faith in history and the transformative potential of the subject. As Furedi puts forward, 'Contemporary society lacks certainty about its beliefs. It finds it difficult to transmit a clear vision of a just world. In particular, there seems to be great hesitancy about offering people a clear system of meaning. ... Today's cultural elite may lack confidence in telling people what to believe, but it feels quite comfortable about instructing people how and what to feel.'<sup>5</sup>

In more Žižekian terms, there is a tension around how to, not only map oneself in society, but moreover how to design it. This confusion finds its way onto the cinema screen, and is most evident in cinematic translations of subjective motivation, the most extreme example being terrorism. Terrorism becomes a symptom of the post-political, it constitutes society and is constituted by it. By using the symptom of terrorism to read the film, one can

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<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2003a) p.114.

<sup>4</sup> Kenan Malik, 'determining the self', 6 november 2001 <[http://www.kenanmalik.com/debates/self\\_oxford.html](http://www.kenanmalik.com/debates/self_oxford.html)> [last access 4 September 2014]

<sup>5</sup> Furedi, 2003, p.197.

access the ways the role of the subject is imagined. This extreme subject is given an aesthetics determined by the interpretation of this tension around the subject altogether. The disparate films discussed in the thesis show this confusion about what it means to be a subject today. They show the extent to which and the ways in which the universal is foreclosed for the subject.

In Hollywood cinema, the narrativisation of the 'war on terror' shows that a loss of historical perspective has led to a contextualising of societal fears and moods through mediatized fantasies. In *Munich*, the desire to evoke empathy through an interpassive spectatorial alignment, suggests that there is an imperative to understand others through the state of intersubjectivity where power relations between subjects are suspended from the outset.

In *Zero Dark Thirty* the desire for unmediated representation can be felt with not only an emphasis on verisimilitude but also a mandate on it. By deliberately avoiding a critical assessment of the 'war on terror', the film is caught in a confused dramaturgy that fails because it does not know what it wants to show. It is failure in the Sontagian sense, in that it is a camp interpretation of apoliticalness.

The examples of *Hunger* and *Four Lions* show a different approach. These films, like the others, embody the spirit of the foreclosure of the universal in post-politics, but also speak of a desire for an alternative. Whether or not this derives from their origins as British films is hard to say and is, for this analysis, not a prime consideration.

The analysis of the German films *The Baader Meinhof Complex* and *Die Kommenden Tage* indicate that there is a decided laxity in the borders between fact and fiction, myth and truth, subjective and collective beliefs. This is, on the one hand, determined by the country's particular historical circumstance, and on the other by the general post-political climate. The visual translation of this mixture brings about a need to fill the gaps of a possible misunderstanding of radicalism; the foreclosure of ideas that are concerned with universalising, historical principles, which are understood as too dangerous, is actively pursued by these films.



The films chosen for this thesis are too small a sample as to categorically indicate any cultural distinction within each national cinema towards a particular depiction of the post-political through terrorism. What this analysis shows is that there are trends displayed by these films that hint at a cultural preoccupation with the certain themes and subjects. However, the dynamics of these trends requires further study and should be undertaken in a greater scope than this analysis can provide.

One of these themes, articulated especially by *Hunger* and *Four Lions*, is the foreclosure of a particular possibility, that of the subject leaving the symbolic. This provides those films with a greater potential to provide meaning. *Hunger* focuses on the body, but in doing so it becomes clear how closely the idea of the body is related to the ideas of freedom; it becomes the instrument for the act and so the instrument for becoming a political subject.

*Four Lions* is directly about the exclusion of the subject from history. By creating a certain relationship with the characters, the film creates meaning around their alienation, an alienation which can only be expressed in acting out and, ultimately, in a *passage à l'acte*.

These two films, rather than trying to explore subjects' motifs (as is done in *Zero Dark Thirty*, *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, *Die Kommenden Tage*) or the subjects' motives within the subjects themselves, as a subjective experience (as it happens in *Munich*), contextualise their motives in a more meaningful way in that they expose the subjects to the gap between the subject and the material world. Examining the approaches of filming the subject in the post-political in the Hollywood and German examples are helpful in their own right, as they provide an insight into the ways in which subjects are portrayed and societal fears and preoccupations are given shape. *Hunger* and *Four Lions*, however, go beyond this and have become examinations of the post-political in themselves.

*Hunger* and *Four Lions* could perhaps be held up as examples of, what Žižek suggests, 'what revolutionary cinema should be doing: (is) using the

camera as a partial object, as an “eye” torn from the subject and freely thrown around.’<sup>6</sup>

Film has the ability to look at the subject in society from outside the subject and show this reflection – of how the subject is in their own right – back to the subject, giving them the possibility of seeing themselves as they are seen from the outside. In this way, the subject is handed the opportunity to be directly confronted with its alienation – the gap between how it sees itself and how it is positioned in society. The camera allows us to see ourselves from the viewpoint of the partial object which is not attached to the strings of a particular subject – the camera eye has the potential to be truly objective. Cinema, in this sense, becomes that space from which the subject can access the real, the space where they can transcend the symbolic and become free subjects. Žižek says,

... once the fantasy object is subtracted from reality, it is not only the observed reality which changes, but also the observing subject himself: he is reduced to a gaze observing how things look in his own absence ... we see ourselves “from outside,” from this impossible point, the traumatic feature is not that I am objectivised, reduced to an external object for the gaze, but, rather, that it is my gaze itself which is objectivised, which observes me from the outside; which, precisely, means that my gaze is no longer mine, that it is stolen from me.<sup>7</sup>

These tactics of looking at the subject, and in turn at oneself/society from an objectivised viewpoint, can be seen to be employed by those filmmakers that seek to express the limits of subjectivity in the post-political. McQueen shows this spirit in his desire to throw ‘the camera in the air’ in his art, most notably in his artistic piece *Catch* – where the camera literally becomes an ‘eye torn from the subject thrown around’?<sup>8</sup>

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6 Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Camera’s Posthuman Eye’, Henry Bond and Slavoj Žižek, *Lacan at the Scene* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012). pp.xi – xv, p.xii.

7 *ibid.*

8 Patricia Bickers, ‘Let’s get physical: Steve McQueen interviewed by Patricia Bickers’, *Art Monthly* 202 (1996-97). <<http://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/steve-mcqueen-interviewed-by-patricia-bickers-dec-jan-96-97>> [last access 4 September 2014]

In his films, including *Hunger*, McQueen focuses on the alienation of the subject, by producing an artistic experience – rather than an analytical, critical or narrative one – of the idea of the subject who finds him/herself in a world of unreason.

Similarly, the comedic style of Morris makes us see ourselves from the outside. Looking at the habits of the characters, we are confronted with our own habits, their alienation is our alienation. By putting the subject, confused by the tensions of the post-political, centre-stage, the film gives (film)form to the desires of overcoming this limited subjectivity.

In this light, the most revolutionary character in *Four Lions* is Waj. Waj wants to find out if he is confused by taking a picture of himself to check if his face is his confused face. He takes the camera eye to look at himself and to examine his own confusion in society by looking at himself from outside. It is one of the subversive pleasures of the film that he is the most subversive of all the characters. This image of the terrorist as confused – who they are and what they are doing – is a succinct condensation of the analysis in this thesis.

This study outlines the profound confusion of the role of the subject in society and ideology, and the ways in which this confusion is given a distinct cinematic vocabulary. This vocabulary informs how we are to understand and ultimately to relate to the subject. Rather than relying on understanding the film form of the post-political through its formative elements such as technical preferences, such as run-and-gun style shooting, or idealistic principles such as empathy, or ideological goals such as demystification, it is vital that these methods are analysed in the context of their own making.

When all is considered, the study of the visual language of the post-political through the lens of its symptoms, such as terrorism, is a fruitful exercise. Not only does it provide access to a contextualisation of the post-political in film but also truly transgressive film forms can be determined. Here Žižek's methods do not just explore a mapping of the subject in society, but also an exploration of the possibilities of analysing and articulating the artistic language and aesthetics of truly transgressive ideas. Žižek's method is

equipped for these topics and, with his ability to rapidly produce volumes of material, it seems to become more fitting as time goes on. To contribute to a field of study that contemplates Žižekian perspectives in film studies will, with luck, engender further research into a revolutionary cinema of the post-political, and this would provide a big field of research opportunities.

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- Jaws*, dir., Steven Spielberg, (1975)
- Jurassic Park*, dir., Steven Spielberg, (1993)
- K-(19: The Widowmaker*, dir., Kathryn Bigelow, (2002)
- Keine Lieder über Liebe*, dir., Lars Kraume, (2005)
- Kung Fu Panda*, dir., Mark Osborne, John Stevenson., (2008)
- Last Exit to Brooklyn*, dir., Uli Edel, (1989)
- Lebanon*, dir., Samuel Maoz, (2009)
- Lincoln*, dir., Steven Spielberg, (2012)
- Metropolis*, dir., Fritz Lang, (1927)
- Minority Report*, dir., Steven Spielberg, (2002)
- Mogadishu*, dir., Roland Suso Richter, (2008)
- Munich*, dir., Steven Spielberg, (2005)
- My Fair Lady*, dir., George Cukor, (1964)
- Near Dark*, dir., Kathryn Bigelow, (1987)
- Omagh*, dir., Pete Travis, (2004)
- Point Break*, dir., Kathryn Bigelow, (1991)
- Predator*, dir., John McTiernan, (1987)

*Saving Private Ryan*, dir., Steven Spielberg, (1998)  
*Schindler's List*, dir., Steven Spielberg, (1993)  
*Shame*, dir., Steve McQueen, (2011)  
*She's All That*, dir., Robert Iscove, (1999)  
*Sophie Scholl – The Final Days*, dir., Marc Rothemund, (2005)  
*Speed*, dir., Jan de Bont, (1994)  
*Spider-Man*, dir., Sam Raimi, (2002)  
*Stammheim*, dir., Reinhard Hauff, (1986)  
*Starbuck*, dir., Gerd Conradt, (2002)  
*Syriana*, dir., Stephen Gaghan, (2005)  
*Team America: World Police*, dir., Trey Parker, (2004)  
*The Color Purple*, dir., Steven Spielberg, (1985)  
*The Hunger Games*, dir., Gary Ross (2012)  
*The Hurt Locker*, dir., Kathryn Bigelow, (2008)  
*The Legend of Rita*, dir., Volker Schlöndorff, (2000)  
*The Lives of Others*, dir., Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, (2006)  
*The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum*, dir., Volker Schlöndorff, (1975)  
*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, dir., Sophie Fiennes, (2006)  
*The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, dir., Sophie Fiennes, (2012)  
*The State I Am In*, dir., Christian Petzold, (2000)  
*The Usual Suspects*, dir., Bryan Singer, (1995)  
*The War of the Worlds*, dir., Steven Spielberg,  
*Todesspiel – Teil 1 & 2*, dir., Heinrich Breloer, (1996-97)  
*Tödliche Schokolade*, dir., Egmont R. Koch, TV (2010)  
*Unbreakable*, dir., M. Night Shyamala, (2000)  
*United 93*, dir., Paul Greengrass, (2006)  
*Vertigo*, dir., Alfred Hitchcock, (1958)  
*Waltz With Bashir*, dir., Ari Folman, (2008)  
*War Horse*, dir., Steven Spielberg, (2011)  
*Wer nicht wenn Wir*, dir., Andres Veiel, (2011)  
*World Trade Center*, dir., Oliver Stone, (2006)

*Zero Dark Thirty*, dir., Kathryn Bigelow, (2012)

*Zoolander*, dir., Ben Stiller, (2001)

*Žižek!*, dir., Astra Taylor (2005)