

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

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Abstract:

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

Key words:

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

"I estimate that cinema will disappear around 2020."
Jean-Pierre Melville¹

01 Who "killed" cinema?

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

Cinema's death was proclaimed more than once³. It seems that every time a new technological mutation—the talking film, television, video tapes and recorders, DVD-players, streaming services, etc.—came out, somebody called for cinemas last rites. The last couple of times the

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

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

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

calls have gotten louder and louder. For David Cronenberg,⁴ “cinema is already dead” and according to Quentin Tarantino⁵ “digital projection and DCPs⁶ is the death of cinema” as he knows it. Peter Greenaway⁴ even claimed that it received its death blow by the remote-control zapper on 31 September 1983 and therefore declared cinema as brain dead. Cinema seems to have slowly faded away over the last 20 to 30 years, with not only film scholars trying to find out why⁷.

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

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

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

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

6 DCP stands for Digital Cinema Package.

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

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

02 What makes a medium strong

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

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

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

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

03 Classic Cinema: A Creator of Adulthood

The medium of cinema had its heroic times roughly from the early years up to the last decade of the 20th century. The entirety of the social functions it fulfilled then can maybe be summed up by the formula: *cinema created adulthood*. Of course, also this general function was something that cinema shared with other cultural media and practices, such as smoking, sex, or driving cars. Yet the key role cinema had with this regard can today only be guessed, for example, by watching older movies. Young people had to fight and to pretend to be older in order to be allowed to enter a cinema. Movies had strict limitations of access according to age: some were accessible beyond 18, some beyond 16, etc. This has since changed dramatically. Not only are movies produced for a large audience today always made in such a way that even minors can watch them without harm (while only strictly X- or NC-17-rated movies remain restricted to people over 18⁹), also, society's understanding of adulthood has changed. The "death" of cinema can be explained by the "death" of adulthood.

04 The death of adulthood

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

05 Cinema of desire & aspiration

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

9 https://www.filmratings.com/Content/Downloads/rating_rules.pdf accessed: 2020-03-15

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

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

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

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

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

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

10 See Ehrenreich 1983.

11 Freud 1942, p. 303.

12 Fiennes / Žižek 2006.

06 Dusk of divinity: when idols encourage mortal beings

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁵ Gaut 1999, p. 200 as cited in Coplan 2009, p. 101

¹⁶ See Freud 1933, p. 67.

¹⁷ See Mannoni 2003, pp. 68-92.

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

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

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

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¹⁸ See for this for example Signer 1997.

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

²⁰ See Huizinga 1950; cf. Pfaller 2014, chapter 3.

²¹ For this most useful formula see Mannoni 2003.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

29 See Cowie 2007, pp. 356-369.

30 See Pfaller 2012.

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

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

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

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

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

32 See Žižek 1989, p. 109f.

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

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

The structure of love for the stars seems to allow most for an explanation for the fact that, under the influence of cinema, people started changing their lives in the post-war decades. After all, this was, as Gilles Deleuze has pointed out, the epoch when the model of Foucauldian "disciplinary society" slowly came to its end,³⁷ and members of Western societies started replacing their disciplined superegotic standards by some more mild and liberal ones that they appropriated from mass media. People referred to their admired movie icons not by doing *the same things*; but they started to replace some of their own ethical, aesthetic, and maybe even political principles by the lifestyle of the stars; and they set out to do *similar things* to what the stars did, albeit *on a smaller scale*. One could maybe call this a kind of modest, "homoeopathic appropriation". Models for non-monogamous lives (or moments) for example were learned from, films and the movie stars³⁸—just think of Pietro Germi's *DIVORZIO ALL'ITALIANA* (IT 1961), Francois Truffaut's *JULES ET JIM* (FR 1962), Michael Gordon's *BOYS' NIGHT OUT* (USA 1962), Robert E. Miller's *ANY WEDNESDAY* (USA 1966), Gene Kelly's *A GUIDE FOR THE MARRIED MAN* (USA 1967), Paul Mazursky's *BOB & CAROL & TED & ALICE* (USA 1969) or Stephanie Rothman's *GROUP MARRIAGE* (USA 1973).³⁹ A certain polygamous touch had already characterized comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, such as *LIBELED LADY* (USA 1936, J. Conway), *HIS FAVORITE WIFE* (USA 1940, G. Kanin), *I LOVE YOU AGAIN* (USA 1940, W.S. Van Dyke), *DESIGN FOR LIVING* (USA 1933, E. Lubitsch), or *TO BE OR NOT TO BE* (USA 1942, E. Lubitsch).⁴⁰

34 Cf. Freud 1921, p. 116.

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

36 See Freud 1921, p. 134.

37 See Deleuze 1992; cf. Foucault 1979.

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

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

40 See Pfaller 2014a.

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

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

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

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

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

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

42 Ibid.

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

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

07 Death of desire & growth

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

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

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

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

44 See Nachtwey 2016.

45 See Kotsko 2012

46 See Piketty 2014; Milanovich 2016

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

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

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

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

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

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

49 See Althusser 1986, p 240.

50 See Ehrenberg 2010

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

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

08 Where cinema goes when we stop going there

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

55 Truffaut 1966, p. 150

in a sterile and clinical appearing surrounding where every detail is negotiated and fixed in advance by contract⁵⁶ (including when to shower and how to get rid of body hair).

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

If you want to see sex portrayed in a less troubled way nowadays, you probably have to turn your back on cinema and start watching series like *MAD MEN* (USA 2007–2015). In the exciting setting of an advertising agency in the 60s, people smoke and drink without inhibition in their offices and beyond, the clothes are elegant, the pill is available, and the colleagues cultivate their little hanky-pankies among each other. For Kotsko⁶¹, the main reason why *MAD MEN* is so popular might not be its

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

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

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

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

60 For this term see Sigusch 2005.

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

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

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

In disguise of "historic lifestyle", in *MAD MEN* two things are brought together: on the one hand upward social mobility, appeal and glam of the 1960s and on the other hand today's mantra of uncompromising self-centeredness where everyone is the architect of their own future. This seems to provide a utopia in particular for the depressives who, like all narcissists, highly depend on the appreciation of others. For them the appealing idea is, as Kotsko puts it: "What if I really and truly did not give a fuck about anyone?"⁶⁴ Yet it is completely clear for today's spectators that the upward social mobility, the glam, the light-hearted and cheerful sexual activity in *MAD MEN* is lost. The nostalgic mood seems to, at the same time, *create* and *disavow* the belief that everything was better in the past⁶⁵. By largely indulging in what is presented as the past's advantages but disavowing and denouncing them as pertaining to an unemancipated and unenlightened bygone past, it makes all those amoral, ruthless, patriarchal, and unhealthy behaviors consumable and prevents them from being unwatchable for some kind of spectators. Following the double operation of disavowal, pleasure can today apparently only be imagined of as a "sinful" uncastrated enjoyment, and for this to become digestible

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

63 Kotsko 2012, p. 47

64 Kotsko 2012, p. 4.

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

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

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

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

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

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66 Cf. Freud 1905, p. 208

67 Freud 1928, p. 191

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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