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THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH
School of Literatures,
Languages and Cultures

**Absurd Black Humour as Social Criticism in Contemporary
European Cinema**

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Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Edinburgh

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Submitted in satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of PhD in Film Studies at the University of Edinburgh

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Declaration of Own Work

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

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Signature: Eszter Simor, 10 December 2019

Abstract

This thesis investigates how contemporary European art cinema establishes an absurd worldview to express social criticism that can be read as evidence of – as well as a response to – European socio-political crises. The thesis also explores the political and aesthetic solutions to these crises as offered within a selected film corpus. Thus, the argument is twofold. The first considers a broader relationship between film and reality: how does film as an art form relate to real-world cultural and political developments? The second focal point is a study of ways in which the comic and the absurd are represented on screen as a response to such developments.

The thesis ascribes to an Existentialist understanding of the absurd in which, according to Albert Camus's definition in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955/1991), human beings desperately want the world around them to make sense, but the world remains irrational and silent. Contemporary European cinema tries to make sense of an irrational world by proposing an alternative approach that challenges prevailing neoliberal ways of thinking.

The corpus focuses on post-2000 European arthouse films from countries including Italy, Germany, France, Austria, Hungary and Greece. All of the films explore the absurd and the comic as expressions of social anxiety and feature themes of social crisis, grotesque death, and taboo-breaking (disobedience, transgression, mental illness or social dysfunction). These films reflect on death and social taboos through the lens of absurd humour to express anxiety, highlight social injustice and question prevalent values and established institutions. The films can be interpreted as symptoms of crisis, while they also endeavour to shape society by calling attention to these issues.

Lay Summary

This thesis is an exploration of ways in which contemporary European cinema reacts to absurdity. I argue that contemporary European films – through their respective absurd worldviews – offer alternative ways of thinking compared to the dominant neoliberal ideology. Absurd comedy highlights a gap between the brute irrationality of the world and the order that humans imagine informs that world. Following this Existentialist understanding of the absurd, there is a clash between the desire for a rational (neoliberal) society and the senselessness of our world, which does not quite fit into the neoliberal model. Crisis is a result of the absurd, the representation of this clash between the rational and the irrational and thus, is defined here as a logical contradiction of the capitalist system. The thesis consists of five chapters and each examines a different aspect of absurdity through the analysis of a film example. While every film is viewed through the prism of the absurd, they each emphasize a certain theme in regard to absurdity: sexuality, politics, identity, and the idea of death.

INTRODUCTION: The Absurd and the Critique of Neoliberalism in Cinema

This work is a comparative and exploratory study of the cinematic representation of absurdity in contemporary European cinema and its relationship to socio-political developments. Comparative, because it mainly focuses on eight selected European films and emphasizes the similarities these works share, and exploratory, because it is also interested in the various solutions these films offer in their different representations as reactions to the world's meaninglessness.

This thesis presents an exploration of ways in which the absurd is represented as a form of social and political criticism in contemporary European cinema. Developing an Existentialist understanding of absurdity, the thesis engages with the cinematic expression of absurd black humour as a method of socio-political criticism. In order to explore how social anxiety is articulated in a selection of European films¹ the thesis brings together philosophical film comedy with absurd Existentialism and in this way synthesises psychoanalytic and Existentialist approaches in its film analysis. While Existentialist and psychoanalytic thinking differ in a multitude of ways, they do converge in their ideas on death. The thesis uniquely applies this dual perspective in order to explore the “blackness” of absurd humour and its representation in contemporary European arthouse film.

In each chapter, award-winning representative examples of European cinema are analysed from the perspective of the absurd. Naturally, I could have chosen many other films

¹ When I talk about the films of European cinema in the thesis, I primarily mean the eight films I have chosen as examples. Thus, the broader argument of the thesis is explained with reference to these specific film examples and within the established framework.

from different countries,² however, I believe that these film examples are especially useful in order to explain my argument. The selected works fulfil all the eligibility criteria set up for the corpus, while at the same time, each of them highlights a certain theme in regard to absurdity. Thus, while all of these films establish an absurd worldview, their focus and methods of representation are different.

The thesis presents a qualitative more than a quantitative analysis, where the connection between certain films is not necessarily chronological but analogical. My goal here is not to map the full history of European cinema, but to consider some key examples of the cinematic representation of absurd humour and its relationship to the social-political environment. Nor does the thesis aim to present a complete encyclopaedia of every genre of comedy but rather, it offers a critical response to the films that I found most expressive of my argument. These films not only fit the specific thematic framework but are also very recent and award-winning representatives of European cinema, screened at major film festivals.

The thesis focuses on post-2000 European arthouse films from countries including Italy, Germany, France, Austria, Hungary and Greece. The films discussed in detail are *The Great Beauty* and *Youth* (Paolo Sorrentino, 2013 and 2015); *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2017); *Raw* (Julia Ducournau, 2016); *Wild* (Nicolette Krebitz, 2016); *Amour Fou* (Jessica Hausner, 2014); *On Body and Soul* (Ildikó Enyedi, 2017) and *Toni*

² Romanian New Wave films are often praised for their dark sense of humour. For example, *Police, Adjective* (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2009) does not reflect on death or suffering but the paralyzing bureaucracy of police investigation through the prism of absurd humour. Scandinavia is also renowned for its dark sense of humour. The Swedish director Roy Andersson built his whole oeuvre on depicting the contemporary world through absurd humour while reflecting on Existentialist questions. *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014), which is described in its opening title as “the final part of a trilogy about being a human being”, opens with three short episodes about death. In Andersson’s world however, it is not dying that is tragic, but living a life in the shadow of the unescapable end, which is conveyed through the characters extreme deadpan delivery. Andersson raises the question of national responsibility and commands the viewers to confront the horrors of Swedish history. Other European film directors whose films are associated with dark humour include, for example, Aki Kaurismäki (*The Other Side of Hope*, 2017; *Le Havre* 2011); Małgorzata Szumowska (*Mug* 2018; *Body* 2015); Alex van Warmerdam (*Schneider vs. Bax* 2015; *Borgman*, 2013); Ben Wheatley (*A Field in England* 2013; *Sightseers* 2012); Samuel Benchetrit (*Dog* 2017; *Macadam Stories* 2015); Quentin Dupieux (*Keep an Eye Out* 2018; *Rubber* 2010); Jaco Van Dormael (*The Brand New Testament* 2015); and Hans Petter Moland (*In Order of Disappearance*, 2014; *A Somewhat Gentle Man* 2010).

Erdmann (Maren Ade, 2016). Regardless of their countries of origin, all of these films represent the idea of transnational cinema, since they are award-winning, critically acclaimed European films, screened at major European film festivals. The thesis ascribes to the idea that every cinema is transnational, and this way complicates the reductive definition of European cinema as art versus American cinema as entertainment.

In order to highlight social injustice and express political critique, the films of European cinema express irrationality not only in their narratives but also in their aesthetics. In order to explore different expressions of absurd laughter in contemporary European cinema, the introduction presents three main topics: absurdity, humour and politics. The conclusion re-evaluates the relationship of these concepts through the analysis of a final European film (*Toni Erdmann*, Maren Ade, 2016). Finally, this thesis redefines absurd black humour according to the depicted solutions offered in the films' endings.

First, by providing a thematic review of existing academic literature, the introduction develops the main concepts, discussing the relationship between humour and film (introducing comedy as a mode), the connection between film and politics (discussing the meaning of European cinema) and the absurd (introducing Albert Camus's definition). Each chapter reads the absurd and the comic as expressions of social anxiety. According to the main argument, contemporary European films reflect on death and social taboos through the lens of absurd humour to express anxiety, highlight social injustice and question prevalent values and established institutions. Using the framework of the absurd and focusing on a specific time period, this critical analysis of European cinema offers the possibility not only to engage with the medium of film but also to ask questions about the workings of our contemporary society.

Even though Albert Camus was not a self-proclaimed Existentialist thinker, he is considered to be a major representative of this tradition (Wartenberg, 2008; Flynn 2006; Shaw 2017). According to Camus's definition of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955/1991),

human beings desperately want the world around them to make sense, but the cruel reality is that the world remains highly irrational. In the conclusion, the thesis redefines the concepts of the funny and the humorous according to the absurd. Absurd laughter has two different forms of expression: ironic detachment and awkwardness. In the films which express themselves ironically, the characters' deadpan acting style becomes a political act. While, on the other hand, the second category of films primarily expresses social criticism through awkwardness as a new comic mode.

Thus, the European filmmakers under discussion are trying to make sense of an irrational world by proposing alternative readings, which challenge the prevailing neoliberal way of thinking. Absurd humour is expressed in European cinema as a reaction to our own world's irrationalities, and its films articulate this absurdity both in their stories and in their aesthetic solutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Absurd

The thesis ascribes to an Existentialist understanding of absurdity. Existentialism is considered both a negative and a positive philosophy; thus, it is a concept which "defies exact definition" (Porfirio, 1976, p. 213). It means more than just a philosophical school of thought (with both notable Christian and atheist representatives) and Porfirio defines Existentialism as follows:

For our purposes, it is best to view it as an attitude characteristic of the modern spirit, a powerful and complex cultural movement erupting somewhere on the edges of the Romantic tradition, and therefore a result of some of the same cultural energies which led to surrealism, expressionism and literary naturalism. Existentialism is an outlook which begins with a disoriented individual facing a confused world that he cannot accept. It places its emphasis on man's contingency in a world where there are no transcendental values or moral absolutes, a world devoid of any meaning but the one man himself creates. (Porfirio, 1976, p. 213)

Because of its multi-layered approach, Existentialism is often described with both positive and negative key phrases. Its positive characterizations, according to Porfirio, include "freedom",

‘authenticity’, ‘responsibility’ and the ‘leap into faith (or the absurd)’”. Meanwhile its negative description “emphasizes life’s meaninglessness and man’s alienation; its catchwords include ‘nothingness’, ‘sickness’, ‘loneliness’, ‘dread’, ‘nausea’” (Porfirio, 1976, p. 213). While Porfirio lists the absurd among Existentialism’s positive terms, I emphasize how the absurd itself constitutes this dualistic approach of detachment and identification.

The origins of absurd humour trace back to the “Theatre of the Absurd” (Esslin, 1960, pp. 3-4) and absurdist literature, which became popular after the Second World War. The first absurdist plays of the 1950s addressed the problems of the age in a meaningful manner, expressing the audiences’ feelings about the incomprehensible horror of the war. The most commonly associated writers of absurdist fiction (besides Samuel Beckett) are Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose philosophical essays also paved the way for Existentialist thinking. The humour of absurdist plays arose from subverting the audience’s expectations by presupposing a critical position and creating a space of ambiguity.

Michael Y. Bennett (2015) identifies four “common threads” about the group of absurdist writers active in the 1950s, 60s and 70s:

[...] the four “common threads” found in absurd literature, generally written between the 1950s–70s, are (1) experimentation with language (generally, working against “realistic” language); (2) tragicomedy is the genre; (3) frequently, though not always, experimentation with non-Aristotelian plot lines (where, often, the plots take the structure of a parable); and maybe most outwardly noticeable, (4) the literary works are set in “strange” (i.e., Kafkaesque, surreal, and ridiculous) situations. (Bennett, 2015, p. 19)

Despite the difficulty of coherently defining the absurd, these four criteria provide useful guidelines. Number (1) and (2) refer to what I describe as ironic expression. “Working against ‘realistic’ language” could stand as a definition for irony, which primarily works with ambiguity and requires interpretation from the viewer from a critical position. What Bennett describes as tragicomedy also reflects on ironic expression, since Bennett defines it as follows: “one must both laugh and cry, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes alternately, and

sometimes one is unsure which response is adequate and/or appropriate” (2015, p. 19). This is again a key characteristic of ironic expression. The ingenuity of ironic humour is that first it makes the audience laugh, then it immediately makes them question whether they were supposed to laugh at all. As I will discuss, this critical understanding is crucial for irony to happen. Points (3) and (4) refer to what I describe as the cinematic representation of the absurd. The European films under discussion use non-traditional forms of narration (narration here is defined according to Bordwell, 1985, p. 33; and Branigan, 1992, p. 65) as opposed to traditional Hollywood storytelling. These films often depict “strange” worlds, which look similar to our contemporary present-day reality, however, in their cinematic representations, these worlds become metaphors expressing criticism of the prevailing ideology. In order to further explain what absurdity means, first it is important to explore the definition of humour and its relationship to film.

Three Theories of Humour

There are three established theories of humour: superiority, relief and incongruity. While each of these theories approaches the definition of humour from a different perspective, they introduce interrelated, rather than completely separate explanations. The first theory focuses on the relationship between the narrator and the receiver of the joke, the second examines the effects of laughter, and the third interrogates its source.

1. Superiority Theory

According to this theory, we laugh when we find a weakness in the other and this discovery makes us feel superior. Plato is one of the earliest and most-cited thinkers (cited in Feickert, 2014, p. 119; Trahair, 2007, p. 128; Diffrient, 2014, p. 41; Morreall, 2009, p. 4), who is interested in the meaning of laughter, and he approaches its explanation from the point of view of superiority. In *The Republic*, Plato describes laughter as a type of potentially dangerous and

abusive behaviour as humans seem to lose self-control in the act (360 B.C./1881, p. 34). The person who laughs is always in a higher position compared to the person who is the target of the joke. The superiority theory approaches the definition of humour from the point of view of dominance, however, it does not sufficiently explain some other forms of laughter, like self-deprecatory humour.

2. Relief Theory

The relief theory is often explained in academic literature according to Freud's psychoanalytic findings (Morreall, 2009, p. 17; Hewitson, 2012, pp. 213-235; Diffrient, 2014, p. 45; Trahair, 2007, p. 169; McGowan, 2017, p. 55). In *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905/2002), Freud argues that jokes are expressions of the unconscious and that laughter has an elevating and liberating effect (p. 134). According to Freud, what humans primarily find funny revolves around topics that must be repressed and that is why most jokes are either hostile or obscene (1905/2002, p. 94). When we laugh at a joke, a certain psychic energy is released that was originally summoned for repressing inappropriate feelings. While this theory focuses on the effect of laughter, the next theory of humour explains its source.

3. Incongruity Theory

According to the incongruity theory, the source of humour is always contrast; we laugh, because we discover a connection between elements that we previously perceived as disparate. Henri Bergson (1900) is one of the earliest seminal thinkers (cited for example in Morreall, 2009, p. 7; Diffrient, 2014, p. 52; Trahair, 2007, p. 16; Hewitson, 2012, p. 223; Carpio, 2017 p. 347; McGowan, 2017, p. 52), who explains laughter as a reaction to incongruity. In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900/2007), Bergson writes about a surprising contrast, when "a person gives us the impression of being a thing" (p. 25). Here the incongruity revolves around the different behaviour of humans and machines, and laughter happens when we suddenly discover a previously unseen connection between the two.

John Allen Paulos (1980) explains incongruity as follows:

[...] a necessary ingredient of humour is that two (or more) incongruous ways of viewing something (a person, a sentence, a situation) be juxtaposed. In other words, for something to be funny, some unusual, inappropriate, or odd aspects of it must be perceived together and compared. (Paulos, 1980, p. 9)

This juxtaposition can revolve around the disruption of rules, disappointed expectations, or some type of extraordinary behaviour that goes against what is perceived as normal or customary.

John Morreall (2009) however notes that incongruity means more than elements that do not fit. We humans discover patterns when we learn about the world, so incongruous humour sheds light on something that does not meet our expectations, that does not fit with the patterns we have learned (Morreall, 2009, p. 10). Morreall's definition of comedy emphasises a "cognitive shift" (2009, p. 141), a change of mental state "that would be disturbing under normal conditions, that is, if we took it seriously. Disengaged from ordinary concerns, however, we take it playfully and enjoy it" (2009, p. xii). In this observation, Morreall reveals how humour's incongruity expresses criticism of how those learned patterns work, that is, how humour always has a socially critical function.

Simon Critchley's contemporary philosophical essay *On Humour* (2002) also highlights this inherently socially critical aspect of humour. Influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, Critchley argues that humour highlights "a world with its social practices turned inside out" (2002, p. 1). In his explanation, jokes have a relation to the unconscious and that is why they can be interpreted as "symptoms of societal repression" (Critchley, 2002, pp. 75-76). Understanding humour would not be possible without a shared social world: "no social congruity, no comic incongruity", writes Critchley (2002, p. 4). Jokes do not only express incongruity in their form (ending in a surprising punchline) but they also have a "critical function with respect to society" (Critchley, 2002, p. 10). Critchley argues:

Thus, jokes are a play upon form, where what is played with are the accepted practices of a given society. The incongruities of humour both speak out of a massive congruence between joke structure and social structure, and speak against those structures by showing that they have no necessity. (Critchley, 2002, p. 10)

Critchley's definition of humour echoes the existential understanding of life's absurdity. Incongruous humour reveals the created nature of the social structure, that is, no matter what our ideology about the world is, the world in its reality will never quite fit it. We laugh when we suddenly realize this juxtaposition.

Noël Carroll defines incongruous humour as a juxtaposition where our expectations are disappointed. According to Carroll, comic amusement is created when a deviation from presumed norm is perceived. In this case an anomaly suddenly disrupts the otherwise taken for granted framework which governs the ways in which we think about the world. That is, what we find humorous is a subversion of our expectation (Carroll, 2014, p. 17). Carroll's moralist point of view emphasizes that we operate in societies with rules, prudence and etiquette. Since humour's incongruity reveals the made-up nature of the rules that dictate our lives, it is not surprising that the majority of jokes focus on immorality and impropriety. Humour in this sense represents deviations from normatively governed behaviour (Carroll, 2014, p. 21). Thus, Carroll's approach further indicates that comedy always has a socially critical function, since this aspect is embedded in humour's very definition.

Alenka Zupančič describes comedy as "the genre of the copula" (2008, p. 213). Copula is a connecting word, meaning a term for a word that links the subject to a complement in linguistics. However, Zupančič does not only emphasize this connecting meaning of the word but how it also expresses disruption. She argues that the "true realism of comedy" is a "fundamental discrepancy as constitutive of human beings" (2008, p. 217). This fundamental discrepancy is expressed by the metaphor of "short circuits" (2008, p. 8). In Slavoj Žižek's introduction to Zupančič's book on comedy (2008), he defines a short circuit as a "faulty connection in the network" (Žižek, 2007, p. ix), where this faultiness is defined from the point

of view of the network's smooth functioning. In Zupančič's theory, comedy is based on the structure of desire and drive (2008, p. 218), where the short circuit becomes a metaphor for comedy's logic as it reveals hidden truths about the routines of our everyday life.

Todd McGowan's theory of humour also revolves around the incongruous nature of social life. McGowan argues that comedy happens when we suddenly discover a link between seemingly unconnected elements (2017, p. 9) and this discovery (a punchline of a joke, or the climax of a funny scene) takes us by surprise (2017, p. 8). McGowan's theory is also influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, arguing that the comic moment is always traumatic, because humour always disrupts everyday life's established rules (2017, p. 11). Based on monotonous routine, everyday life hides comedy, while the comic moment upsets this routine by making apparent the contradictions of social rules (2017, p. 11). According to McGowan, comedy can reveal irregularities, which usually remain hidden in the seriousness of ordinary life. When comedy reveals that our society can never function perfectly, it can play an "emancipatory role in political struggle" (McGowan, 2014, p. 201). That is, comedy can function critically and even politically because it is able to reveal the imperfect nature of the social structure.

McGowan argues that there is an illogic in every system, because no structure exists without an inherent failure (McGowan, 2017, p. 31). Inherent paradox is necessary for comedy and therein lies humour's very definition. Thus, every joke reveals the illogic in the structure (McGowan, 2017, p. 31). To explain this inevitable error in every logical system, McGowan introduces the idea of "the barber paradox"³, where a seemingly plausible scenario is revealed as impossible (if the barber is the one who shaves those (and only those) who do not shave themselves, who shaves the barber?). He argues that in fact every comedian uses the idea of the barber paradox in their routine (McGowan, 2017, p. 32), since this inherent paradox is a

³ "In a certain village, there is a barber who shaves all (and only those) villagers, who do not shave themselves – does the barber shave himself? If we assume that the barber does not shave himself, we conclude that he must also shave himself; if we assume that the barber does shave himself, we conclude that he cannot; in both cases, a contradiction is concluded" (Raclavsky, 2014, pp. 271-272).

necessary element in creating comedy. Jokes always point out the inherent illogic in every structure (McGowan, 2017, p. 31). Therefore, comedy often creates discomfort (McGowan, 2017, p. 36), since it disrupts the illusion that the system that dictates our life is based on sound logic.

Summing up these definitions of humour, there are three important observations to be made. One is that comedy necessarily involves some sort of juxtaposition. This juxtaposition can entail the subversion of expectation (Carroll), an inherent paradox (McGowan), or the disruption of accepted practices of a given society (Critchley). Juxtaposition, paired with surprise revelation, is an indispensable element of comedy. Second, it is important to note, that comedy is also considered here as an aesthetic form. Psychoanalytic theories of humour are based on Freud's observations and Freud had an aesthetic, formalist approach to explaining the working of jokes (1905/2002, p. 94). Also, more contemporary thinkers, like John Morreall, discuss humour as an aesthetic experience (Morreall, 2009, p. 70). Third, comedy by its disruptive nature always reveals the illogic of any system and thus inherently expresses social criticism.

This socially critical aspect of humour is also highlighted in the definition of the comedy genre in film studies. Geoff King (2002) writes that comedy in film "works through the disruption of dominant expectations about the ways of the world" (King, 2002, p. 19); and observes that comedy is "often disruptive. It messes things up and undermines 'normal' behaviour and conventions" (2002, p. 19). Because of its disruptive nature, film comedy has social and political implications. For example, Alan Dale argues that "black physical humour found its way into slapstick fairly early on" (Dale, 2000, p. 23) with films like *Good Night, Nurse!* (Roscoe Arbuckle, 1918). That is even early slapstick cinema expressed social criticism with the use of humour. Dale argues that Buster Keaton's character in this film (Keaton appears as a doctor who intends to cure alcoholism by surgery) appearing in a bloody apron, is funny

because it is “shockingly out of place. We can’t take the gore seriously as a fact of medicine, or we’d no longer recognize the movie as slapstick” (Dale, 2000, p. 24). Dale’s argument highlights humour’s incongruity and how it expresses social criticism. Prior to discussing this socially critical aspect of film comedy further, it is necessary to discuss the meaning of comedy itself. First, comedy is discussed as a genre, touching on comic film genres like the slapstick and the screwball comedy. Thereafter, this thesis’s more specific focus is comedy as a mode.

Comedy as a Genre: The Slapstick and the Screwball

There are two different approaches to exploring the relationship between humour and film. The first one considers comedy as a genre, while the second understands comedy as a mode. Discussing film comedy as a genre is a common approach in film theory. Numerous academic texts focus on comic narratives and examine comedy in the context of film genre (Altman 1999; Agee 1958/2000; Barbour 2006; Browne 1998), and this perspective is also common in film history books (e. g. Bohn & Stromgren 1987; Doherty 1999; Austerlitz 2010; Bilton 2013). There are certain film genres, which are associated with comedy, like the slapstick, the romantic comedy and the screwball comedy. The second approach understands comedy as a mode and thus provides an explanation by describing its aesthetic characteristics. For example, Jenkins (1992) and D’Haeyere (2012) write about slapstick aesthetics. Karnick & Jenkins (1995) identify the characteristics of classical Hollywood comedy. Other academic works, which discuss comedy as style, form or aesthetic include for example Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson (1988); and Heath & Mellencamp (1983).

Comedy as a genre is as old as the medium of film itself. “For as long as film has existed as an entertainment medium, so has film comedy” writes Geoff King (2002, p. 1). King identifies *The Waterer Watered* (the Lumière brothers, 1895) as the first “generally acknowledged” fictional work that appeared on screen as a film comedy (2002, p. 1). Despite

its brevity (less than one minute long), this film does tell a funny little story: the starting point is followed by a conflict, which is in turn solved by the end of the film in a climactic funny scene.

The 1920s era of American silent cinema and specifically slapstick comedy is often associated with the origins of film comedy as a genre (Dale 2000; Bilton 2013; Elsaesser 1990; King and Paulus 2010; D'Haeyere 2014). For example, D'Haeyere (2014) argues that the Mack Sennett Comedies studio's slapstick comedies even defined Hollywood in the public's imagination in the 1920s and 30s. The slapstick has multiple characteristics which explain why it is considered to be the original genre of film comedy: it balances the spectacle of gags with moving the story forward, while its spectacular comic performances also have a socially critical function.

The central importance of comic performance is one of the main characteristics of the slapstick genre. Tom Gunning (1990) describes the industry of the silent film era as the "cinema of attractions", arguing that these early films of entertainment were more interested in displaying spectacle than in maintaining narrative coherence. For example, comedians in early silent film comedies often smirk into the camera, "spoiling the realistic illusion of the cinema" (Gunning, 1990, p. 382). The audience at the time had a different relationship with watching films on the screen, since films constantly stimulated the viewer by showing something exciting to look at.

Academic literature emphasizes the importance of performance in slapstick comedy (Kerr 1980; King and Paulus 2010), and Charlie Chaplin and other silent comedy stars are often discussed as characters of clowns or in terms of clowning (Caron 2006; Kerr 1980; Alan 2000). There are certain filmmakers primarily identified as comic directors, like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Mack Sennett, Ernst Lubitsch, Preston Sturges and Jacques Tati (to name a few). Alan Dale in *Comedy Is a Man in Trouble* (2000) also focuses on the importance of

performance in the slapstick genre, examining the works of great comedians like Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers, Preston Sturges and Jerry Lewis. Dale argues that “comedy is about getting a man into and out of trouble” (Dale, 2000, p. 18). This refers to a quote by comedian Jerry Lewis who, according to Dale, describes the premise of comedy as “a man in trouble, the little guy against the big guy” (p. 18). Dale argues that the slapstick genre remains popular because viewers can always relate to small everyday characters. Confronting difficult obstacles, the slapstick protagonist invariably comes out victorious over every calamity in the end and this gives hope to their audience.

Alan Bilton (2013) also presents a chronology of silent film comedy, focusing on the performances of Mack Sennett, Charlie Chaplin, Roscoe Arbuckle, Mabel Normand, Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton and Harry Langdon. Bilton’s approach is psychoanalytic: for example, he investigates the “US’s immigrant unconscious” (in the works of Mack Sennett), or “repetition-compulsion” in the context of the First World War through the works of Harry Langdon. Most importantly, in the chapter “Consumerism and its Discontents” Bilton explores the “anxieties of capitalism” in the films of Harold Lloyd, making an argument for the critique of capitalism through the use of humour, and thus highlighting humour’s critical aspect in early silent film comedy.

Lastly, Donald Crafton in *The Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy in Classical Hollywood Comedy* (1995) discusses how narratively more developed, feature-length slapstick films strike a balance between presenting the pure spectacle of gags and building the film’s narrative. The influence of this advanced slapstick comedy is wide-ranging and appears in a wide variety of contemporary topics in academic literature. For example, Ilsa Bick and Krin Gabbard (1994) write about the “liberal use of slapstick comedy” in *Lolita* (Stanley Kubrick, 1962) and argue that the sadomasochistic scenes in the film are overshadowed by comedy. In their argument, slapstick comedy in the film “diverts attention”

from the seriousness of the topics it represents (1994, p. 14). Meanwhile Jason Borge's article "Replaying Carlitos: Chaplin, Latin American Film Comedy and the Paradigm of Imitation" (2013) examines the relationship of comedies from Hollywood's golden age and from Latin America, analysing the influence of Charlie Chaplin's work and its "wide-ranging treatment" (2013, p. 271). These examples show how the slapstick genre remains popular today. As the first genre of film comedy, it emphasizes important characteristics of the filmic representation of humour: with its socially critical content and standout comic performances, it balances spectacle and storytelling.

The screwball is another popular and typically American film genre associated with comedy (Byrge & Miller 2001; Glitre 2006). Screwball comedy is a type of romantic comedy (on Hollywood romantic comedies see for example Harvey 1987; Evans and Deleyto 1998; Glitre 2006) that flourished in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s and it can also be interpreted as a continuation of the slapstick genre (Dale, 2000, p. 3). Alan Dale argues how the slapstick fell out of fashion and gave way to romantic screwball comedies at the beginning of the sound era, however, screwball comedies "all the same, incorporate physical knockabout" (Dale, 2000, p. 3). Byrge and Miller (2004) write how the screwball comedy combines slapstick with sophistication (p. 2). While the slapstick became less popular in the sound era, its typical characteristics lived on in the next popular comic genre.

Both the slapstick and the screwball comedy are film genres identified with a time of crisis. While the slapstick often reflects on the horrors of the First World War or its aftermath (Bilton, 2013, p. 195), the screwball comedy genre is associated with the Depression Era (Landay, 1998, p. 97). Through their humorous and optimistic tones, these genres offered escapes from reality to the audience during these troubled time periods.

Focusing on romantic comedy's hopeful philosophy, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981) is a seminal work, which presents a reinterpretation

of this classic genre. Stanley Cavell introduces the genre of remarriage, a specialized group of Hollywood comedy after the invention of sound (1934-1949), which he describes as the inheritor of the Shakespearean romantic comedy. Referencing Northrop Frye's differentiation of New and Old Comedy, Cavell describes the genre of remarriage as a transcendence of both comedies' characteristics. Both the New and the Old Comedies are types of romantic comedy that focus on a young couple who have to overcome both personal and social obstacles in order to reconcile and get happily married in the end. New Comedy usually features the struggles of a young man competing against an older rival to win a young woman's heart, whereas Old Comedy focuses on the adventures of the heroine. Cavell describes the comedy of remarriage as a transcendence of the two:

... [with its] emphasis on the heroine, [it is] more intimately related to Old Comedy than New, but it is significantly different from either, indeed it seems to transgress an important feature of both, in casting as its heroine a married woman and the drive of the plot is not to get the central pair together but to get them back together, together again. (Cavell, 1981, pp. 1-2)

The main theme of the films belonging to this genre is the "pursuit of happiness", however, happiness here does not mean satisfaction according to certain expectations, but rather, the realization of how happiness can be achieved by overcoming the pressure of meeting those expectations. The humour in these films originates from the characters' unexpected behaviour, which highlights the incongruities of the traditional expectations of society.

Cavell looks at seven great Hollywood comedies in detail (*The Lady Eve* [Preston Sturges, 1941]; *It Happened One Night* [Frank Capra, 1934]; *Bringing Up Baby* [Howard Hawks, 1938]; *The Philadelphia Story* [George Cukor, 1940]; *His Girl Friday* [Howard Hawks, 1940]; *Adam's Rib* [George Cukor, 1949] and *The Awful Truth* [Leo McCarey, 1937]). The similar plots of these films suggest that it is impossible to marry right the first time. Couples do not actually know what marriage is like and what exactly they are taking on. However, when they decide to remarry (as a solution in these films' typical plotline by the

end), this second time, it is possible for them to honestly believe in the relationship, since now they know what marriage is truly like and they willingly and knowingly choose to commit to it.

Cavell suggests solving the philosophical problem of scepticism by looking at these films, arguing that art allows the audience to believe in the world. In his reading of Cavell, Richard Rushton (2008) argues that herein lies Cavell's importance. Rushton writes: "In short, for someone like Cavell, the thinking of films is profoundly and intimately related to human thought, and that is why films matter" (Rushton, 2008, p. 226). Thus, these comedies can convey meaningful observations about society and the role of the individual in that society through the medium of film.

In order to effectively explain the two opposing approaches to film comedy further (comedy as a genre versus comedy as a mode), it is important to understand the difference between narrative and narration. Edward Branigan (1992) describes the distinction between the two concepts by using the "how?" and "what?" questions. Narration is a perceptual activity, concerning "how an event is presented ... rather than what is presented" (Branigan, 1992, p. 65). Branigan explains narration as a disparity of knowledge maintained by the characters inside the film and the viewer outside the fictional world. Since knowledge in the film is unevenly distributed, narration is partially defined by filmic techniques (like camera angles and editing) and how these techniques construct the viewer's perception in order to transfer knowledge (Branigan, 1992, p. 66). While the narrative describes what happens in the film as a series of events linked by cause and effect, narration explains how these events are presented to the viewer.

Comedy as a Mode: Irony

Having introduced comedy as a genre, the thesis now considers comedy as a mode, a manner of representation (King, 2002, p. 2). Developing Geoff King's concept of comedy as a mode, what follows examines the way in which cinema uses humour as a form of expression, especially as an expression of political resistance with the help of irony. Following James MacDowell's claim in *Irony in Film* (2016), the thesis considers irony as a type of expression and argues that narration itself can pretend to partake in certain filmmaking conventions and thus the film's storytelling itself can be ironic regardless of viewer's interpretation.

Irony is a rhetorical device; however, it can also be defined in terms of literary theory. In its rhetorical use, irony is a figure of speech, where the real meaning that the speaker wants to communicate is disguised as the opposite of the spoken words' literal meaning. Literary theory emphasises inversion as a characteristic of irony. For example, Northrop Frye claims that irony is an overturned comic mode, from the perspective of the main character's power. He writes: "If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the ironic mode" (Frye, 1957, p. 34). The main characteristics that describe irony are inversion (meaning the opposite of the literal meaning) and ambiguity (the listener has to interpret the intended meaning from context).

William Empson writes that ambiguity "occurs, when the two meanings of the word, the two values of ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind" (Empson, 1953, p. 192). As Empson suggests, irony is a type of speech where the words used signify the opposite of what one means. This creates confusion and this ambiguity can be a source of humour. Empson emphasises the ambiguous nature of irony and describes it as a form which "gives room for alternative reactions" (Empson, 1953, p. 3). It is crucial to look at the literary work as a unified

structure. In order to understand the mental quotation marks, the reader needs to see how the ironic element fits into the structure as a whole.

Contemporary critical thinking stresses irony's ambiguity. According to Dan Harries, presently we are living in an age of ambiguity, with

[...] a culture steeped in an ever-increasing level of irony; an era where postmodern activity has become more the norm than any sort of alternative practice. I characterize this as our culture's state of "ironic supersaturation". (Harries, 2000, p. 3)

In the age of this "ironic supersaturation" anything can be read ironically, and this can lead to cultural numbness. Taking everything ironically results in emptiness: when everything becomes ironic that simultaneously means that nothing is ironic anymore. Claire Colebrook describes the contemporary setting for critical thinking similarly to Harries:

Irony can mean as little as saying, "Another day in paradise", when the weather is appalling. It can also refer to the huge problems of postmodernity; our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony. Irony, then, by the very simplicity of its definition becomes curiously indefinable. (Colebrook, 2004, p. 1)

Colebrook writes about the impossibility of defining irony. Also reflecting on the difficulty of this task, Tom Grimwood describes irony as a concept of excess:

... [irony] does not rest happy with typologies, not because of the typological distinctions, but because irony as an operation of language resists objectification. There are always new ironies, and new possibilities of reading ironically. (Grimwood, 2012, p. 3)

Grimwood does not try to define irony as a concept, but instead uses a thematic approach based on the characteristics of ironic communication. He looks at the interpretative discourses that ironic texts themselves produce. Irony is essentially linked to the authorial style of the text (from whose point of view it is written). In order to take irony seriously, one has to investigate how different authorial styles establish a sense of meaning (we have to read between the lines). Thus, Grimwood states that irony is "a concept in excess of itself, which is fundamentally

productive and accountable as an interpretative strategy” (Grimwood, 2012, p. 5). In order for irony to work, the reader has to look at the text as a whole and interpret it ironically.

Since understanding irony requires context, some critics approach the definition of irony from the perspective of audience interpretation. Linda Hutcheon writes:

From the point of view of the interpreter, irony is an interpretive and intentional move: it is the making of inferring of *meaning* in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an *attitude* toward both the said and the unsaid. (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 11, emphasis in original)

Hutcheon reflects on the “miracle of ironic communication”. She writes: “it does seem to me to be some kind of miracle that people ever really understand each other at all, much less when they are communicating in an ironic mode” (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 89). She notes that there is a “special relationship in ironic discourse between the ironist and the interpreter,” where irony requires the listener to create this connection. This means that it is in fact the audience that “enables the irony to happen.” Irony’s essence lies in the question of who can interpret it (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 89). That is, according to Hutcheon, irony is created by audience interpretation; if the audience does not understand the ironic meaning, it does not exist.

It is possible to read Jonathan Swift’s satirical essay *A Modest Proposal* (1729/1969) with a non-ironic attitude. From a non-ironic reader’s point of view, the author’s suggestion that the impoverished Irish should sell their children as food for the rich, is outrageous. Since in its form, an ironic text is no different from a non-ironic text (the text with a serious intention to suggest the same bizarre idea would look exactly the same), irony is created by the reader’s interpretation, involving “the particularities of time and place, of immediate social situation and of general culture” (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 91). That is, in the example of *A Modest Proposal*, the reader must be aware of the cruel handling of the poor in Ireland by the English in the early 18th century in order to understand the text’s ironic meaning.

Different Forms of Ironic Expression: Pastiche, Parody and Satire

There are three different comic modes that can be understood as different forms of ironic expression: pastiche, parody and satire. The first, pastiche, is “a kind of imitation that you are meant to know is an imitation” (Dyer, 2007, p. 1). It is a supposedly blank repetition:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor. (Jameson, 1991, p. 17)

Frederic Jameson defines pastiche as a kind of humourless humour. According to Hutcheon, in order for pastiche to work, the audience must realize that it is an imitation of a previous piece (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 89). In this sense, pastiche is a type of ironic expression, because it requires the audience’s interpretation.

The second form of ironic expression, satire, is a kind of comic mode that has a social or political edge. Hannah Arendt writes that authority always requires respect and that “[t]he greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter” (Arendt, 1970, pp. 41-42). With an openly critical attitude, satire questions established values and institutions (King, 2002, p. 93). Satire can be understood as a form of irony, since it has an “ability to tread in potentially sensitive areas without the risk that might be associated with a straight or more serious treatment (King, 2002, p. 94).⁴ That is, the interpretation of the satiric meaning again depends on the audience’s understanding.

Lastly, parody is also a form of ironic expression. As Geoff King argues, parody requires engagement on two levels: on the level of the parody and on the level of its object. Parodies mock their targets, but while doing so, they also pay tribute to their originals (King,

⁴Northrop Frye differentiates satire and irony stating that the attitude of the author is uncertain in irony, as opposed to satire: “Whenever the ‘other world’ appears in satire, it appears as an ironic counterpart to our own, a reversal of accepted social standards” (Frye, 1957, p. 233).

2002, p. 112). This duality must be recognised by the viewer in order for the parody to successfully mock its target.

Dan Harries takes both etymological roots of the word “parody” into consideration (“counter” or “against”, but also “besides”) and argues that:

[...] parodic textual systems continuously incorporate both roots by emulating texts (“besides”) as well as mocking them (“against”). As a textual system, parody simultaneously says one thing while saying another, always citing an ironic tease. Thus, probably it is more productive to think of parody as a term connoting both closeness and distance as well as the oscillating process that binds both discursive directions. (Harries, 2000, p. 5)

As Harries argues, in the modern age, anything can be read ironically: “any text can be parodically reworked, and it is the status of process that allows for such flexibility” (Harries, 2000, p. 6). Harries does not go as far as introducing a new narrative theory, but he does suggest a more theoretical approach in understanding how parodies work, instead of employing an evaluative critical attitude (whether a parody is good or bad compared to the original). Developing Harries’ argument, I understand parody as a form of ironic expression alongside satire and pastiche.

Exploring irony as a cinematic form of expression, what follows discusses how 1920s Surrealist cinema can be considered an early expression of absurdity with its socially critical content and its characteristically ironic form of expression. While the main films discussed are not surrealist, they share characteristics with the Surrealist filmmaking style. That is, the thesis considers Surrealism an early expression of absurdity compared to contemporary European cinema, since their film representatives share multiple important qualities: they depict death and social taboos with humour (highlighting the “blackness” of the absurd, as explained below) in order to express social criticism (reacting to historical changes Europe was going through at the time), and, inspired by the Freudian unconscious, they also express irrationality in their ironic methods of storytelling.

Surrealist Cinema and the Blackness of the Absurd

I emphasize the characteristics of Surrealism, which are relevant to the discussion of absurdity: the “blackness” of its humour in its representation of death, and how this humour often expresses social criticism with the help of irony. That is, humour does not only play an important part in what these films were about but also in the way they express themselves.

The invention of the phrase “black humour” (or “humour noir”) is attributed to André Breton (Haynes, 2006, p. 25; Critchley, 2002, p. 71). Writing the *Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924, Breton is one of the founders of the 20th century Surrealist avant-garde movement. In *Anthology of Black Humor* (1940/2009), Breton describes black humour as “a superior revolt of the mind” (Breton, 1940/2009, pp. 22-25), highlighting how this type of humour in his reviewed literary works is foremost understood as an act of revolt against prevailing ideology. The anthology’s aim is to explain a type of humour by introducing Surrealism’s most important forerunners and masters, exploring whole centuries of European culture. Starting with Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), who is the source figure in Breton’s opinion of all black humour, and finishing with Jean-Pierre Duprey (1930-1959), Breton lists black humour’s trademark qualities in his reviews. He recognizes that the emergence of this type of humour and its expression in the anthology’s selected literary works can be interpreted as a reaction to the historical changes Europe was going through in the aftermath of the First World War.

In the introduction to Breton’s *Anthology of Black Humor*, Mark Polizotti points out that “black humour is the opposite of joviality, wit or sarcasm. Rather it is a partly macabre, partly ironic and often absurd turn of spirit” (1940/2009, p. vi). Though more of a description than a definition, this statement lists some indispensable characteristics: because of its “macabre nature”, black humour is inseparable from the idea of death; it is “partly ironic”, which highlights the importance of ironic expression; and the “absurd turn of spirit” points to an absurdist worldview, which is necessary in understanding this type of humour.

For Breton, Surrealist humour was foremost an act of revolt against the prevailing ideology. In his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, he writes: “one can understand why Surrealism was not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, of sabotage according to rule (1930/1975, p. 125). In his discussion of Breton, Haynes (2006) emphasizes this neglected social aspect regarding Breton’s anthology. He argues that critics “overlook what seems most compelling about the Anthology: the fact that, behind its Freudian mask, it demonstrates a critique of aesthetic language from a specifically *social* perspective” (Haynes, 2006, p. 26). In Haynes’s interpretation, black humour becomes “the articulation of a kind of ‘social unconscious’” (2006, p. 26). That is to say that black humour is understood here as an aesthetic form that not only explores the unconscious of the individual but is also able to make more complex observations about its contemporary society as a whole. Developing Haynes observation, the social aspect of Breton’s discussion on black humour is just as important as its psychoanalytic implications.

Breton was also greatly influenced by Freud’s observations about the unconscious. In his foreword to the *Anthology of Black Humor*, he references Freud’s 1927 *Humour* essay (Freud, 1927, pp. 1-6), arguing that humour has a “liberating element” (1940/2009, p. xviii) and an “elevating effect” (1940/2009, p. xviii). By presenting a psychoanalytic understanding of humour and also stressing its social function as revolt, Breton’s concept of humour bridges these two approaches. With this introduction of Breton’s understanding of black humour, I emphasize the characteristics of Surrealism, which are relevant to the discussion of absurdity: the “blackness” of its humour in its representation of death, and how this humour often expresses social criticism with the help of irony. That is, humour does not only play an important part in what the Surrealist form of expression (with a special focus on cinema here) was about but also in the way this was articulated.

Ironic Expression

Surrealist artists were fascinated by the working of dreams and, influenced by Freud's psychoanalytic theories, used film as a form of artistic expression to feature both the manifest and latent content of dreams. In his explanation about the working of jokes, Freud relies on his observations in his earlier writing, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). Here Freud differentiates between the manifest and the latent content of dreams, arguing that "... the latent dream-thoughts are not conscious before analysis, but the manifest dream-content emerging from them is consciously remembered" (1899/1997, p. 53), and he describes the latent content as "the thoughts behind the dream" (1899/1997, p. 51.) Using this terminology, Freud claims that jokes use similar techniques to dreams, like condensation and displacement (Freud, 1905/2002, p. 173). In *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905/2002), Freud further hypothesizes that jokes reveal something about our unconscious and that is why most jokes are either hostile or obscene (1905/2002, p. 94). When we laugh at a joke, a certain psychic energy is released that was originally summoned for a different psychological task. Film is an especially important medium for Surrealist artists⁵ because of its suitability to express the non-linear narratives of dreams, and respectively, of jokes.

Freud's psychoanalytic approach was influential in creating what Linda Williams (1981) calls in her analysis of *L'Age d'Or* (Luis Buñuel, 1930), the "revolutionary form" of Surrealist cinema (1981, p. 109). The key logic of Surrealist film works according to the idea that there are no sets of previously decided meanings available for filmmaking; instead these films focus on the enigmatic relations between content and form. The "latent content"

⁵ Salvador Dalí collaborated with Luis Buñuel on both films (*Un chien Andalou* 1929 and *L'Age d'Or* 1930) and is credited as co-scriptwriter. Dalí also famously conceived the design in *Spellbound's* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1945) standout dream sequence, where Hitchcock immortalized the Surrealist movement's fascination with dreams. With their interest in the idea of the dream space and the use of non-linear narratives in their films, contemporary filmmakers like David Lynch and Terry Gilliam can also be considered representatives of this style or at least influenced by the Surrealist movement. David Lynch even presented the documentary *Surrealist Cinema* on the BBC in 1987. He introduces clips from famous Surrealist films and offers insight in the filmmaking style of directors and artists like Jean Cocteau, René Clair and Man Ray.

(Williams, 1981, p. 109) is not “an already existing entity” (Williams, 1981, p. 75), rather the films’ aesthetic solutions invite the viewers to create levels of different meaning. Focusing on two notable examples of early Surrealist cinema, *Un chien Andalou* (1929) and *L’Age d’Or* (1930) by Luis Buñuel, Williams argues that these films express social criticism with the cinematic representation of ironic pretence.

Surrealist artists considered film a suitable medium to visualize the free flow of the unconscious in an artistic format. For example, the French writer and poet Philippe Soupault claims: “I wanted, thanks to the film, to give an impression, neither clear nor precise, but similar to a dream” (Soupault as quoted in Hammond, 1991, p. 9). In *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) Breton writes: “Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought” (p. 26). Instead of a traditional narrative structure, these films were supposed to imitate the structure of dreams.

Breton defines Surrealism itself as a form of narration, imitating the free flow of thoughts:

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern. (Breton, 1924, p. 26)

With its interest in narration (understood as disparity of knowledge, defined by Branigan, 1992, p. 66), Surrealist film draws attention to how film form can create different levels of interpretation. Linda Williams points out how *L’Age d’Or* only pretends to employ traditional narrative diegesis, but its storytelling technique actually confuses the viewer. Williams writes: “the Surrealists proposed to cultivate not the *content* of unconscious desire – as many critics have maintained – but its *form*” (Williams, 1981, p. 14). This means that it is the film’s form which can encourage different levels of interpretation.

In *L’Age d’Or*, there are five different episodes with no narrative connection. The film pretends to partake in the convention of narrative filmmaking (Williams writes about the

“deceptive appearance of conventional diegesis” [1981, p. 110]), whereas the pretended nature of this technique actually undermines the film’s latent content. Thus, the film offers a different interpretation through its form.

What the films do instead is *imitate* a form of discourse – a dream in *Chien*, a myth in *L’Age d’or* – informed by the discoveries of each discipline. Thus, both films portray an interest in dream and myth that *anticipates* the structuralist approach to these phenomena. (Williams, 1981, p. 109, emphasis mine)

Williams highlights two important points regarding how a film can create different levels of meaning through film form. The word “imitate” underlines how film can pretend to employ certain conventions, while the word “anticipates” draws attention to the question of intention regarding filmic expression. Both of these aspects will be central to my discussion of ironic interpretation in film.

Williams also cites Luis Buñuel being disappointed when audiences did not understand (or deliberately misunderstood?) the intended meaning of *Un chien Andalou* and read a certain “avant-garde-ness” into it (Williams, 1981, p. 111), while the artist’s self-proclaimed intention was something entirely different. According to Williams, Buñuel wanted to express murderous desire and thus emphasise the connection between death and eroticism. Williams quotes Buñuel as saying, “What can I do with audiences who find *beautiful* or *poetic* what is really a desperate and passionate call to murder!” (Buñuel as quoted in Williams, 1981, p. 111, emphasis in the original). If we believe this statement to be true, the misinterpretation here becomes a telling example of an audience disregarding the author’s intention.

Many academic articles mention “irony” as a form of expression in their analysis of Surrealist cinema (Cox 2014; Carpio 2017; Hewitson 2012; Méaux 2014; Haynes 2006). Furthermore, contemporary academic works often discuss black humour in connection with Surrealism (Méaux 2014; Cox 2014; Hewitson 2012). For example, Hewitson (2012) describes the Surrealist movement with its “absurdist experiments” (p. 218) during and after the First World War as one of the earliest manifestations of black humour. Cox (2014) explores black

humour in “one of the earliest and most important works of surrealist cinema”, *Un chien Andalou* (p. 15). The use of black humour and irony in Surrealist cinema expresses the differentiation between narrative (the “what”) and narration (the “how”): these films often express themselves ironically, whereas their subject matter relates to the darkness of their humour.

Black humour is most commonly understood as the type of humour that addresses tragic, distressing or even gruesome situations as funny (Hewitson 2012; Berger 1997/2014). Hewitson defines black humour as “humour deriving from the contemplation of suffering or death” (Hewitson, 2012, p. 213). He explains black humour in the context of wartime, as “humour deriving from a confrontation with suffering or death, either as a victim or a perpetrator” (Hewitson, 2012, p. 216). Hewitson also highlights the incongruous nature of such humour, where “[t]he darkness of experience is combined with the lightness of the comic” (Hewitson, 2012, p. 216). Similarly, Berger (1997/2014) defines black humour as “gallows humour” that focuses on “sick jokes” (p. 55). As Berger describes, some of these jokes refer to “specific terrors, others relate more generally to the terror of mortality” (p. 55). Cox (2014) highlights the importance of humour in Surrealist cinema and identifies black humour as a “unifying aesthetic” in *Un chien Andalou* (p. 15), where grotesque elements are juxtaposed with the audience’s expectations, (p. 16). That is, the incongruity of black humour relates to a clash between the traditional expectations of the audience and the shocking subject matter of death and suffering, which is usually considered taboo.

Using shocking imagery, Surrealist films strived to create meaning in unusual ways and psychoanalytic theories provided an important source to express historical traumas in non-standard form (with the help of dream sequences). Traditional filmmaking styles were considered inadequate to express the inexpressible horrors of the war, since a rational interpretation of the world in the aftermath of the First World War seemed impossible.

Discussing black humour in the context of “post-Wall films”, which depict life in post-communist Poland, Rimma Garn (2015) identifies this incongruity between horror and humour. Garn furthermore argues that black humour can express more than reference to contemporary politics and speak about the characters’ inner worlds, showing their “basic humanity” (p. 5). That is, black humour can not only reflect on contemporary politics but can also convey more universal sensibilities. As these definitions show, the blackness of the humour derives from an opposition between the subject matter (death and suffering) and the lightness of humour that is associated with comedy.

Certain nations are famous for their black sense of humour. For example, Olga Reizen (1993) writes, that “black humour does not appeal to every nation”:

It is quite well known that the more rotten something is in any nation, the blacker is its humor. Thus, black humor appears during the crucial moments of the “rotten nation” of history, either during wars, stagnation periods, or revolutions. (Reizen, 1993, p. 94)

According to Reizen, nations that favour black humour must have “certain cultural roots” (1993, p. 94). That is, in Reizen’s argument, black humour requires interpretation, and only audience members familiar with certain cultural backgrounds can appreciate this sense of humour: “For example, even at the most depressing moments of German history, black humour never really took root. Whereas in Spain, it happened to become one of the most popular instruments for preserving a sense of sanity in society” (Reizen, 1993, p. 94). In this regard, interpretation is of central importance: “[i]t is here that the discrepancies between national traditions and between life-styles comes into focus; because what a foreigner sees as ‘black’ and absurd, may for a Soviet citizen happen to be his or her everyday life” (Reizen, 1993, p. 94). According to Reizen, the ironic meaning of black humour can be completely lost on certain members of the audience. Some viewers will look at the film as a metaphor, while others can perceive it as realistic representation.

That is why Reizen considers black humour as a “matter of perspective and distance” (Reizen, 1993, p. 95). This observation highlights that this type of humour often relies on ironic expression (“a matter of perspective and distance”), presupposing a critical position and creating a space of ambiguity. While certain audience members will understand the metaphorical meaning, irony will be lost on others. Reizen uses the film *Blue Mountains* (1984) as an example, claiming that in its depiction of an office space as a “microcosm of destruction” (with earthquakes, floods, corruption taking place) an “average foreign viewer” sees a metaphor, as opposed to a Soviet citizen, for whom this image speaks about everyday life: “maybe a little bit far fetched [sic] but still depicted in a realistic manner” (Reizen, 1993, p. 94). Reizen’s example highlights the importance of the audience’s interpretation in regard to irony. That is, it seems to suggest, the understanding of black humour requires shared culture.

Geoff King (2002) notes that comedy is closely connected to the societies where it is produced and consumed. Many forms of comedy relate to certain societies; specific times and spaces can give them context for understanding (King, 2002, p. 17). According to King, particular kinds of comedy might relate to certain sociocultural issues and, furthermore, they might even help to explain why these issues exist in the first place. For example, some forms of British comedy might help us to understand something about British identity (King, 2002, p. 17). Similarly, Simon Critchley also claims that jokes can have a critical function regarding society. When talking about reactionary humour, he argues that this type of humour reveals important truths about who we are (Critchley, 2002, p. 12). There are countries that seem to be in favour of absurd black humour by their nature⁶. It is not surprising that Geoff King’s first

⁶ In April 2019, a comedian with no political experience won the first round of presidential elections. Volodymyr Zelensky, who plays a president in a Ukrainian TV show, received twice as many votes as the current leader Petro Poroshenko (BBC News, 2019). The Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party, which was set up in 2006 as a joke, was registered as an official political party in 2014. The party’s promises include eternal life, two sunsets a day, a network of express buses which stop nowhere and flooding the streets with beer on holidays. During the campaign period of the 2018 parliamentary elections in Hungary, one of the party members dressed as a chicken appeared on national television clucking incoherently in response to political questions for the full five-minute screen time (secured for each candidate). The only word the chicken kept repeating was “kotkodács” (“cluck”) – the sound chickens make in Hungarian – while the presenter was intently listening and nodding as if he was stating the

example about national comedy relates to British territory. The United Kingdom is well-known for its absurd sense of humour.⁷

Certain countries seem to have a penchant for black humour because of shared national history. Black humour is popular in countries where people experienced the repression of censorship, and irony was the only way to express themselves. Film audiences in countries with a troubled history were forced to be able to read between the lines. Yugoslavia even had a “Black Wave” of films in the 1960s and 1970s, which included socially critical films that used black humour expressed in non-traditional filmmaking formats. At the end of the 60s Yugoslav film culture was similar to that of western European New Waves and its representatives expected openness from their audiences towards their radical political views and eroticism. After ‘68 more severe restrictions were implemented in the film industry and critics named the movement “Black Wave” because of its films’ alleged nihilism and defeatism.

In Hungary, Péter Bacsó’s *The Witness* (1969) was banned for more than a decade because of its harsh criticism of the post-Second World War communist regime. At the time of the film’s creation in the early 50’s, criticising the regime was strict taboo. Thanks to the pressure on communist authorities after the film’s success at foreign film festivals, it was eventually allowed to be released in its home country too, and it remains one of the most popular films in Hungary today. The film depicts the brutality of the Rákosi era (modelled after the Stalin regime) through the story of an ordinary man gaining higher and higher social and

party’s political agenda (Youtube, 2018). Hungarians also recently “let off steam” in a silly walk parade marking April fool’s day (Euronews, 2019). Hundreds of Hungarians marched in Budapest imitating a Monty Python television sketch, where British comedian John Cleese flamboyantly walks to the “Ministry of Silly Walks”. One of the organizers claimed that the event provided an opportunity for people to forget about their daily struggles.

⁷ In 2014, the Monty Python song, “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” immortalized in *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979), was claimed to be the most popular song at British funerals, which certainly speaks volumes about the British national spirit that King is referring to. According to a *Telegraph* article, members of the baby boomer generation (the age group that was young in the “swinging sixties”) like to die as they lived; they are replacing classic traditions with Monty Python (Silverman, 2014).

political status in his new-found careers, while being utterly baffled and clueless about what he is actually doing. His tribulations – like having to testify at a mock trial against his friend and awaiting death by hanging for telling the truth – are depicted with dark humour.

Greece is another excellent example, where the Greek Weird Wave, with Yorgos Lanthimos' cinema as its most prominent representative, is considered to be “the product of Greece's economic turmoil” (Psaras, 2016, p. 4). As a magazine article from *The Guardian* suggests, it is not a coincidence that the “brilliantly strange” films of the wave (like Athina Rachel Tsangari's *Attenberg* [2010] and Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* [2009]) were released in the “the world's most messed up country” (Rose, 2011). These films reflect (in a direct or less direct way) on the Greek financial crisis and how the young Greek generation is forced to deal with its troubled legacy. Developing this claim, my argument is that European films are not only symptoms of social problems but can also aspire to transform and change society. Film can thus be an important form of cultural intervention.

Defining European Cinema

The difficulty of defining European cinema starts with the problem of outlining the meaning of Europe. Geographically Europe is a continent separated from Asia by the Ural Mountains on the east, bordered by the Arctic Ocean on the north, the Mediterranean Sea on the South and the Atlantic Ocean on the West. More specific definitions however become problematic, because Europe is not only considered a geographical territory, but also implies a shared past, which relates to European history, politics and culture. It is possible to define Europe politically, as an establishment of fifty sovereign nation states, including Russia. The Council of Europe was founded in 1949 including 47 member states that defines itself as an international human rights organization. Out of these 47 member states 28⁸ are part of the

⁸ This thesis was written while the United Kingdom was still part of the European Union.

European Union, which is both a political and economic union between the member states (COE, 2019). Culturally, Europe conveys different meanings when defined from the point of view of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution or Modernism.

Because of this multitude of approaches to defining Europe, pinning down the meaning of its cinema faces similar problems. In *European Identity in Cinema* (2005), Wendy Everett claims that despite historical differences among its various countries, a highly important common feature of European cinema is a concern over current social issues. According to Everett, European cinema constantly explores and critiques contemporary social problems, such as exile, poverty, exclusion and marginalization (Everett, 2005, p. 25). An overview of contemporary academic works proves Everett's point. Academic literature often focuses on how certain social problems (like integration, migration and refugees, terrorism, perception of motherhood and female subjectivity) are represented in European cinema (often in the context of war or other conflicts). For example, Randall (2015) explores the absence of the "rubble films" genre in the post-Second World War time period in Austria, arguing that critics and scholars have failed to identify Austrian-produced films "about ordinary Austrians coping with life in the rubble – with the infrastructural, psychological, social, political, and economic aftermath of total war" and thus requesting a "more nuanced understanding" of how films can articulate the aftermath of fascist dictatorship (p. 257). In the case of Germany, Kathrin Bower (2014) writes about "integration as inside joke" in the comedies of Kaya Yanar and Bülent Ceylan. Stephanie Bird (2016) examines the relationship between comedy and trauma in Germany and Austria after 1945. Katherine Stone (2016) writes about contemporary German comedy series and their representation of motherhood, while Malte Hagener (2018) focuses on the depiction of transnationality, exploring the topic of migration and refugees in German cinema. Catherine Portuges (2007) provides a rereading of Ildikó Enyedi's *My Twentieth Century* (1989) through the prism of psychoanalysis and feminism "at a moment when Hungary

rejoins the European Community” (p. 526). The author argues that Enyedi’s filmmaking style portrays a “particularly Hungarian sense of marginalization and powerlessness in the face of dominant powers and ideologies” (p. 528). Discussing French cinema, Handyside (2019) explores how the depiction of private intimacy can stand as a metaphor for broader social change. Based on Stanley Cavell’s *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981), the author argues how the films of Eric Rohmer and Mia Hansen-Løve use “Cavellian techniques” in order to explore feminine subjectivity “in a society which allows women legal and social freedom but still subjects them to patriarchal expectations” (p. 5). As the variety of these examples suggests, interest in the representation of social issues does seem to be a key characteristic of European cinema.

However, in order to complicate this idea that European cinema has specialized and easily definable interests and subjects, this thesis also introduces Benedict Anderson’s cultural interpretation of Europe, where it becomes an imagined community. According to Anderson’s argument, European identity is created by invention, where a community conceives of sustainable stereotypes, narratives and stories (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). Developing these ideas, the thesis aspires to engage with European film as a broader indicator of European sentiment (Jones, 2016, p. 153), while also keeping in mind the inherent dangers of oversimplification or essentialization of concepts like Europe and European cinema.

Reflecting on the problematic nature of outlining European cinema, Everett also highlights the impossibility of constructively defining identity. She argues that “identity is seen as fluid, fragmented and multiple: an unstable mix of contradictions and ambiguities. Identity is an open-ended process of becoming rather than a finite state; a construct rather than a given” (Everett, 2010, p. 2). That is, the concept of identity itself has undergone radical transformation and it is no longer understood as unitary. This is why conveying a unified image of European identity in cinema is doubly difficult. Everett writes:

It thus follows that the filmic narratives and filmic images we watch are important not merely in helping us to explore and reassess former identities but also in actively shaping new ones, through their power to involve us imaginatively and emotionally, as well as intellectually, in the issues they articulate. Once we recognise that European films are thus both a mirror and a creator of European identities, we begin to glimpse their crucial importance. (Everett, 2010, p. 2)

Everett considers European cinema as both a “mirror” and a “creator” of European identities. Since identity itself is not a unitary concept, and the shared imaginary of Europe is equally difficult to pin down, it follows that European cinema reflects these problematics in its cinematic representations.

The definition of European cinema raises further difficulties: do we consider it a film industry that combines national filmmaking from various countries, or does it constitute some form of shared history? Dimitris Eleftheriotis poses this question more eloquently in *Popular Cinemas of Europe* (2002): “should we understand European films as expressions of a shared set of aesthetic, moral, philosophical and cultural values and attitudes or, conversely, as expressions of the diversity of such values across Europe?” (Eleftheriotis, 2002, p. 9). European cinema is often defined as a negation of characteristics cultivated by the Hollywood filmmaking style. However, this traditional opposition between European cinema as art and American cinema as popular entertainment leads to an oversimplification of what European and American cultural identities mean, disregarding the historical and cultural interconnectedness of the two.

To avoid this oversimplification, Eleftheriotis suggests investigating national cinemas in specific historical moments. He writes:

One way of studying national cinemas without reducing the complex and contradictory nature of the object of study is the investigation of statements made about the nationhood, national identity and national cinema in specific historical moments and in specific nation states. (Eleftheriotis, 2002, p. 35)

An overview of contemporary academic articles suggests that a European approach to film studies can successfully be implemented. For example, focusing on the 1980s and 1990s, Varga

(2017) analyses four Central European popular film series, arguing that “sequelization” is a global trend of 1980s cinema and thus the analysis of these series offers the possibility to look at national cinemas in international context. This article explores the ways in which these Central European films “presented and narrativized the experiences of political transitions” (p. 15). Papadimitriou (2018) writes about the “Europeanisation” of Greek cinema arguing that European influences changed contemporary Greek cinema’s “form, content and mode of address” (p. 215). Jones (2016) discusses the cultural and economic implications of European co-productions in the context of the United Kingdom. Ponzanesi and Berger (2016) examine the narration and aesthetics of “postcolonial cinema” in Europe, depicting issues of inclusion, exclusion and pluri-ethnicity. What these articles have in common is that they all illustrate that it is possible to make valid arguments in film studies about European cinema without reducing the complex and contradictory connotations of the concept of Europe.

It is possible to explore the characteristics of European cinema, if we establish a specific framework. The following examples introduce studies that effectively apply a framework in order to explore shared characteristics of multiple countries. Examining historical examples where humour is used as a tool for political propaganda, Lesley Milne (2015) argues how the First World War was “fought” in the leading satirical journals of Britain, France and Germany (p. 59). She describes humour as an “excellent vehicle” for governmental propagandas, since their main objective was to chase away fear during the war (Milne, 2015, p. 62). Milne argues that different nationalities show different characteristics in their attitude, for example she writes about the “stoical acceptance” of the British and how they jokingly “diminished” serious war threats in their journals (Milne, 2015, p. 64). Milne’s observations depend upon the underlying assumption that some form of national humour does exist, and it varies in different countries. In her comparative analysis Milne looks at three different countries in the very specific historical framework of the First World War and argues that the humour that these countries

express in their satirical journals is determined by their nation's culture; that is, humour in these journals is nationalistic. For example, French journals use sexual and scatological humour ("mockery of the enemy's sexual performance" p. 66), whereas the humour in the British journals focuses on class differences expressed for example in sport metaphors.

Milne admits that laughter does depend on different circumstances, however, humour is also determined by national characteristics. This is why the interpretation of humour varies in countries with different cultures: "a joke that is a jeer from one side can be the ironic stoicism of gallows humour on the other" (Milne, 2015, p. 76). She concludes that the journals do use diverse metaphors and convey different approaches to humour, "but taken together they express a commonality of experience during the first of the 20th century's great traumas" (Milne, 2015, p. 76). That is, by using a specific framework for analysis and by comparing specific examples, one can also make more complex observations about the subjects' shared characteristics.

Jared Diamond (2019) also implements a specific framework in order to investigate the shared experience of multiple nations. Diamond introduces the framework of crisis and argues that nations deal with national crisis in a similar way to individuals in case of a personal trauma (2019, p. 5). He defines national identity as follows: "National identity means the features of language, culture, and history that make a nation unique among the world's nations, that contribute to national pride, and that a nation's citizens view themselves as sharing" (Diamond, 2019, p. 52). National identity can be defined according to the experience of shared culture and the understanding of humour often requires common experience.

Developing these approaches, in the thesis, the framework of the absurd is used to offer critical analysis and comparison of the selected works of contemporary European cinema. Presenting criticism of prevalent neoliberal thinking, European film conveys an untraditional approach to politics and invites alternative readings. In this specific framework, the thesis understands the expression of absurdity in European cinema as an allegory of crisis.

Crisis as Critique of Capitalism

Crisis can refer to either a psychological or a political breakdown. In the films discussed here, individual existential crises often point to social problems. The depicted individuals experience problematic situations in a reflected manner that can potentially have grave consequences and serve as a metaphor for their society as a whole. Developing this idea, I argue that crisis in European film does not necessarily mean breakdown, but rather, it is a metaphor for the normal functioning of the system.

The rapid development of global economic and its neoliberal politics and culture are often cited as the cause of contemporary crises (Aitkin, 2005, p. 79). Ian Aitkin writes:

Globalization, the development of global economic, political, and ideological culture, is frequently cited as a primary cause of contemporary crises within established conceptions of national identity. It has been argued that the increasing inclusion of nations within capitalist economic and political relations, and liberal ideological paradigms, has been responsible for the three most important events in recent European history: the revolutions of 1989, the fall of Communism, and the implementation of the single European market. (Aitkin, 2005, p. 79)

Rather than understanding crisis as a breakdown, I emphasize how it relates to the normal functioning mode of the capitalist system. Crisis is no longer an extraordinary event that requires immediate solution but is a necessary part of the system's working.

Crisis provides a framework in order to describe political change in certain countries in Jared Diamond's comparative study (2019). Diamond describes crisis as "a moment of truth: a turning point, when conditions before and after that 'moment' are 'much more' different from one another than before and after 'most' other moments" (Diamond, 2019, p. 7). Crises are caused by internal or external pressures and in order to successfully deal with trauma, the individual needs to implement the method of selective change (instead of complete personality change, which is unrealistic) (Diamond, 2019, p. 6). Selective change means that the traumatized person has to identify ineffective methods for coping and then come up with new

practices, which can be successfully applied. Diamond hypothesizes that nations deal with crisis in a similar way to individuals confronting personal trauma. Thus, crisis in Diamond's interpretation represents a metaphor, "[a] turning point [that] represents a challenge" (2019, p. 7). This means that nations, just like individuals, have to come up with new coping methods when they are faced with a traumatic event.

Developing the idea of crisis as metaphor further, I explore the stylistic expression of crisis in the films of European cinema. David Joselit (2000) argues that abstraction can be approached from two different theoretical positions in the twentieth century. On the one hand, there is the condemnation of abstraction "as an effect of [...] social relations under capitalism". Here "arbitrary symbolic form" conveys the idea of universal alienation (Joselit, 2000, p. 23). The other approach associates abstraction with the liberating method of the "translation of imagination, or the unconscious, into colour and shape" (Joselit, 2000, p. 23) – with surrealism being a notable example. Thus, these two approaches understand abstraction from the respective perspectives of alienation and liberation (Joselit, 2000, p. 23). Inspired by this idea, I argue that in its expression of absurdity, European cinema combines these two approaches.

These two perspectives of alienation and liberation echo Razmig Keucheyan's (2013) observations, who differentiates between the hegemonic struggles of the twentieth century as fights of alienation and emancipation. Keucheyan claims that alienation caused a transformation in the second half of the twentieth century, since as activists turned to art, culture and politics developed a distinct relationship (2013, p. 36). The different fields of human rights struggles (feminist and LGBTQ movements, fighting for national liberation) were all perceived as anti-capitalist actions, and this weakened the centrality of economic oppression. According to Keucheyan, this indicated the need for a more inclusive concept that expressed more than "exploitation" (Keucheyan, 2013, p. 36). Culture has become an all-important field, which then began a discourse with politics. It was the experience of alienation

that made it possible, Keucheyan argues, to think about the various hegemonic struggles as a whole (2013, p. 37). He writes:

[...] the concept of “alienation” served as a “coagulant” making it possible to think the unity of these various struggles. If, in the economic sense of the word, these new social subjects cannot be called “exploited” since exploitation as a rule concerns the working class), all can be said to be “alienated” in one respect or another. (Keucheyan, 2013, p. 37)

Keucheyan contrasts the struggles of “alienation” of the second half of the twentieth century with the fight against Marxist “exploitation” of the first half (2013, p. 36). In the Marxism of alienation (inspired by Althusser and Gramsci) capitalism is characterized as alienating. This idea of Marxism is in contrast with the Marxism of emancipation, which followed (for example) the Russian revolution and is characterized by exploitation. Alienation was the typical experience of the 1945 – 75 period. It was different from the traditional Marxism based upon the concept of exploitation (Keucheyan, 2013, pp. 35-36). Implementing both of these approaches, absurd humour in the films of European cinema combines concepts of emancipation and alienation. Alienation is expressed through ironic detachment, while emancipation is conveyed through the liberating act of laughing with the other. That is, absurdity in the films of European cinema is expressed in these two types of laughter. The scornful laughter of irony addresses the blackness of absurd humour, while the more positive, awkward laughter, offers a more optimistic, shared experience. European cinema uses these two types of laughter as a mode of social critique: what follows examines the subject of this criticism.

Neoliberalism and the Absurd

In order to explain what European cinema’s criticism entails, it is important to examine the idea of neoliberalism and its relationship to absurdity. Neoliberalism is a concept that primarily

refers to “an economic model”, which gained importance in the 1980s (Steger and Roy, 2010, p. 11). David Harvey (2005) defines it as follows:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (Harvey, 2005, p. 2)

Neoliberalism is based on the idea of the “self-regulating market” (Steger and Roy, 2010, p. 11). As Steger and Roy argue, neoliberalism can be conceptualized as “an ideology”, “a mode of governance” and “a policy package” and these are intertwined rather than separate definitions (2010, p. 11). The thesis focuses on its first manifestation and considers neoliberalism as an ideology, moreover, the prominent ideology of contemporary capitalism.

Slavoj Žižek (2008b) claims that ideology is a necessary part of functioning as a human being in the world and that, as long as all political struggles are dominated by capital, the oppositions will always remain unresolved. There is an “irreducible plurality of particular struggles”; different social groups fight for different political freedoms (for example, ecologists against the exploitation of nature, feminists for equal rights), however, as long as all of these relations are dominated by capital, these struggles will not be resolved, since “there will always be a threat of global war, there will always be a danger that political and social freedoms will be suspended, nature itself will always remain an object of ruthless exploitation...” (Žižek, 2008b, p. 4). Žižek argues that antagonism is unavoidable. Instead of refusing the inherent antagonism in our system, the only possible solution is to embrace it. Since it is only an illusion that we can live in full harmony with the world, instead of trying to eliminate these antagonisms – which are inherent and therefore impossible to eliminate – we should accept them.

Mark Fisher and Naomi Klein both point out logical contradictions of the capitalist system in their respective definitions of crisis in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2013) and *The Shock Doctrine* (2008). In Klein’s description, crisis (i.e., any type of natural or social disaster) is a symptom of the defective neoliberal system and its dominance over the

free market (Klein, 2008, p. 19); and in Fisher's argument, the capitalist system is dysfunctional based on the inherent flaw that if all the debts are paid, there is no capitalism (Fisher, 2013, p. 90). Anthropologist David Graeber redefines the idea of this unpayable debt and claims that every system of authority – religion, morality, politics or economics – is a different fraudulent way to calculate what is impossible to calculate. These political theories are relevant to my thesis, since they all highlight a logical contradiction of the capitalist system.

Expanding on the idea of inherent antagonism further, the thesis also explores Todd McGowan's theory (2015) about the destructive power of desire and its relation to capitalist ideology. Following a Lacanian understanding of desire, McGowan claims that we are desiring humans. However, desire is linked to our own self-destruction, because it is in our nature that we self-destroy through desiring (McGowan, 2015, p. 46). We constantly sustain our desire by self-sabotaging our own every effort, creating an endless circle of desiring and failing to obtain the object of desire. What humans really enjoy is desiring itself, which is linked to repeating failure and loss (McGowan, 2015, p. 45). We also organize our society around this paradox and that is why there is an inherent antagonism between the individual and the social order, and this opposition means that society can never function truly successfully (McGowan, 2017, p. 15). McGowan uses the same argument to explain the workings of capitalist ideology. We never desire the object of our desire but the act of wanting itself, since a desire is only a desire as long as it is not satisfied. Capitalism is a suitable system to satisfy the human need for constant desiring, since it encourages our everlasting need for dissatisfaction. It is a system that is built on the promise of satisfaction that is forever unattainable (McGowan, 2016, p. 30). This is why neoliberalism is such a powerful ideology, since its working imitates the functioning of the human psyche.

Rosalind Galt (2013) defines neoliberalism as a "political philosophy" that describes [...] the form of global capitalism that has, since the early 1970s, privatized state agencies, deregulated financial markets, inserted the logic of the free market into ever

more aspects of life, reduced democratic agency and expropriated wealth to the very richest at an unprecedented rate. (Galt, 2013, p. 63)

This newly global nature of neoliberalism is one of the aspects which differentiates it from previous forms of capitalism. Neoliberalism advocates complete freedom around the exchange of goods, arguing that everything is easily exchangeable without judgement. Since this argument does not consider the exchange of anything (whether it is drugs or someone's body) as controversial, neoliberalist society can be understood as a symptom of capitalism, the pure exchange of goods without moral values. Based on this idea, the thesis discusses problems with easily calculable exchange (from the point of view of sexism for example) and highlights the controversial aspect of neoliberal thinking (like the problematic concept of debt). According to the main argument, the selected films of contemporary European cinema question the prevalent ideology of capitalism, through the lens of absurd humour. Neoliberal politics is based on rational reason (everything can be exchanged for a set price), however, the absurd remains outside of capitalist reason by drawing attention to the Existentialist idea of the "lack of fit" (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 108). Following an Existentialist understanding of the absurd, there is a clash between the desire for a rational (neoliberal) society and the brute reality of our world, which does not quite fit into the neoliberal model. Thus, crisis is a result of the absurd, the representation of this clash between the rational and the irrational.

Absurd humour in film is often associated with counter-cinema (see for example Vogel, 1974; Rushton, 2019), however, I argue that the absurd means more than going against the prevalent ideology. Since the absurd refuses to fit into the neoliberal model, it does not only represent an "anti" or "against to" politics, but rather, it exists in an altogether different world and thus presents an alternative. With this argument the thesis expresses a similar critique to that of political modernism.

In *The Crisis of Political Modernism* (1988/1994), David Rodowick reformulates political modernism's main concerns that was characteristic of 60-70s film theory. Here

Rodowick argues that debates around modernism transformed thinking about cinema and he sketches out the political problems of the kind of theory that only sees political power in the cinema of displeasure. That is, films that do not conform to the stylistic expectations of the cinema of displeasure can still effectively convey political implications.

Building on Rodowick's theory, in *The Politics of Hollywood Cinema* (2013), Richard Rushton offers an alternative reading to political modernism. Rushton does not believe that films necessarily have to be part of the "anti-cinema" movement in order to convey meaningful observations about society or to engage in political discourse (Rushton, 2013, p. 34). Rushton's focus in this book is classical Hollywood cinema and his examples are from films, which are generally considered traditional and reactionary, however, in his analysis it becomes clear how these Hollywood films are often ironic in their styles and thus represent the very different politics of what Rushton calls "democratic individualism" (Rushton, 2013, p. 57). Developing these ideas, the films under discussion in this thesis are not only symptoms of social problems but, through the lens of absurd humour, can also aspire to bring change by offering alternative ways of thinking about our contemporary world as opposed to the dominant ideology.

Cinema can serve as an agency by initiating change. Hamish Ford argues that many scholars and reviewers saw the new wave films of 1960s European cinema (that of Godard, Bergman and Antonioni) as a formal challenge to the unity and transparency of traditional filmmaking. However, Ford claims that the aim of these films was not necessarily to remake, but to *respond* to reality (Ford, 2012, p. 96). He writes:

[...] in the 1960s, Godard, Resnais, Antonioni, Bergman and other European filmmakers were seen by many critics and viewers as mounting serious formal challenges to the unity, order and transparency of feature-film cinema – not so as to destroy it, but to remake it as more honestly responding to reality. (Ford, 2012, p. 96)

In line with this argument, contemporary European cinema can be read as evidence of as well as a response to today's cultural and political developments. Films are not only symptoms of social problems but can also aspire to transform and change society.

Amos Vogel (1974) argues that the medium of film is a subversive art form. According to Vogel, subversion is an aesthetic innovation, which “liberated” (p. 15) 1960s modernist cinema (influenced by new literature and modern theatre) from the constraints of traditional filmmaking. Instead of the compulsory narrative coherence favoured by realism, subversive cinema embraces ambiguity, elliptic structures and complexity.

Rosalind Galt identifies a similar type of counter cinema, which she calls the “cinema of refusal” (2013, 2014, 2015). She describes it as a film form that defines itself against contemporary neoliberalist politics, refusing to see the world within its capitalist framework. She writes “[t]his refusal thwarts the smooth operation of neoliberal cinema and defaults on the coerced promises of capitalist form and value” (Galt, 2014, p. 97). For example, she argues that the films of Claire Denis are “obvious” direct reflections on contemporary social/political issues, “but at the same time these films bring into visibility intimate forms of social relations that escape such easy narration” (Galt, 2015, p. 275). In the analysis of the film *Bastards* (Claire Denis, 2013), Galt argues that it is the film’s “threatening mise-en-scène” that “evokes the hostile condition of contemporary capitalism in its articulation of time, space and affect” (Galt, 2015, p. 275). Thus, it is not just in their content but also through film form that the films under discussion present a critique of contemporary neoliberal politics.

Richard Rushton (2019) understands Galt’s position of refusal (against neoliberal hegemony) as a “reiteration of what was once called ‘counter-cinema’, that is, cinematic alternatives that directly aim to counter dominant ideologies and forms” (Rushton, 2019, p. 219). Rushton writes that he “remains unconvinced by such counter-strategies” (Rushton, 2019, pp. 219-220) that identify themselves as an opposition to a system. Instead, through the analysis of the film *Chevalier* (Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2015), Rushton proposes a “rethinking” rather than refusing as an approach:

This sort of approach requires, not a refusal, but a renegotiation and reconceptualisation of how things came to be the way they are... The kind of political

approach I foster is one in which negation or refusal is not paramount. (Rushton, 2019, p. 220)

Instead of a cinema of refusal (or counter cinema) Rushton argues for a renegotiation of the rules in order to decide what is possible for communities and individuals, and claims that the film *Chevalier* presents an example of how political gestures can be interpreted on a personal level (Rushton, 2019, p. 230). However, regarding the film's style, Rushton dismisses the film's "surrealist and absurdist characteristics" as a typical characteristic of counter cinema and argues that the film manages to express a different kind of politics *despite* these formal characteristics. He writes:

Chevalier, even as it exhibits some of the surrealist or absurdist characteristics associated with the Greek weird wave, does not advocate a politics of refusal. Reading into the politics of the film entails seeking a version of politics that is constructive rather than destructive. (Rushton, 2019, p. 230)

I argue that the absurd worldview ("surrealist and absurdist characteristics") in the films of European cinema can also be constructive rather than destructive. The absurd here is more than "mere" expression of counter cinema; it does not only present a critique of capitalism by purely refusing its values, but the absurd entirely stays out of its order. Absurd laughter can be constructive, since it not only highlights the illogic of the system, but it also entirely exists outside of capitalist logic. In this way, absurdity in the films of European cinema becomes a cinematic expression of "rethinking" rather than "refusing". The thesis explores how the films of European cinema reflect on the world's irrationality in their narratives and, furthermore, how absurdity is also expressed in their different ways of storytelling.

Summary of Chapters

The thesis is an exploration of the ways in which absurd humour is used as a method to express social and political criticism in contemporary European cinema. Each chapter introduces a different aspect of absurdity. Chapter 1 on "Absurd Sexuality" focuses on irony in Paolo

Sorrentino's films, arguing that *The Great Beauty* (2013) and *Youth* (2015) propose a critique of the traditionally sexist representation of relationships between men and women. The depiction of women as objects of male desire, to the point of absurdity, challenges the prevailing tenet of sexism by instead morphing into humorous subversion.

This chapter has three specific claims. The first is that humour and irony are indispensable elements in Sorrentino's films. Narration is always inflected by Sorrentino's ironic style and this excessive film style brings to the fore the non-transparent nature of narration. Focusing on different stylistic solutions such as acting and editing, I argue that Sorrentino's film style in *The Great Beauty* (2013) and *Youth* (2015) offers the possibility of an ironic interpretation.

While the depiction of women in Sorrentino's films remains largely trapped in the discussion of female representation, my aim is to offer an alternative interpretation. The depiction of women as objects of male desire to the point of absurdity undermines sexist representation and is instead a humorous subversion. The films parody the "male sex deficit" (Hakim, 2011), the simplistic view of an unbalanced relationship based on sexual desire between men and women.

My final argument in this chapter is that the films' protagonists have an ironic outlook, while the secondary characters are magical. I use Simon Critchley's description of the absurd body, explaining how human beings experience an existentialist gap between being and having a body. In *The Young Pope* (2016)⁹, Sorrentino merges these two opposing positions in one character.

Chapter 2 discusses the relationship between cinema and politics through the film example of *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017). In Yorgos Lanthimos' absurd world, magic can be understood as ritualized religious practice, and this becomes analogous with

⁹ Sorrentino's 2018 feature film *Loro* was released after the writing of this chapter had been completed.

contemporary political practice. The emergence of the supernatural in the film becomes a metaphor for the impossibility of contemporary political action.

In this chapter, entitled “Absurd Politics”, I argue that ironic living can be interpreted as a symptom of our contemporary existential anxiety. *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* offers a highly pessimistic vision of politics, where only fantasy can trigger action. Yorgos Lanthimos’ film presents a world that has now become absurd. How do we behave in an absurd world, where our accustomed social and political norms are suspended? The film’s darkly humorous ironic tone is the expression of an abstract relationship to the world that prevents sincere and immediate experience. I understand the emergence of the supernatural in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* as a metaphor of a hopeless political situation, where only magic can subvert ironic living.

In this absurd world the process of making decisions obtains a mystical approach, since magic offers a contrast to irony. Politics no longer means getting involved in mass action, but functions instead as a means of communication with ancient gods (as the title of the film refers to the mythological story of Iphigenia). The ideas of power and ritual work in a similar structural fashion, as they are part of the real politics of a particular community (Lévi-Strauss, 1963/2007). In Lanthimos’ absurd world the only access to power is through the supernatural. Thus, ritualized religious practice (magic) becomes analogous with contemporary political practice.

Chapter 3 further examines why we humans feel simultaneous identification with and alienation from our bodies. Simon Critchley (2002) defines the constitutive gap of absurd humour from a bodily perspective and argues that what is funny is either the elevation of animal to human or the degradation of human to animal. Developing Critchley’s idea, this chapter on “Absurd Identity” explores the constitutive gap of absurd humour from the perspective of the mind-body problem.

Absurdity here is uncovered by a comparison of two films, Nicolette Krebitz's *Wild* (2016) and Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016). These two films offer two different illustrations of the mind-body problem. *Raw* depicts identification between human and animal, whereas *Wild*'s focus is their alienation from each other. *Raw* is thus a representation of monist thinking, showing that without the mind, humans are reduced to pure animality. On the other hand, *Wild* expresses duality, where the idea of consciousness is strictly linked to humans. Following Todd McGowan's psychoanalytic theory of comedy (2017), I argue that the narrative and stylistic excesses in these films are expressions of the two different ways of thinking about ourselves, as either being identical with or completely different from animals.

Chapter 4 explores the cinematic representation of dying in contemporary European cinema. More specifically, "Absurd Death" presents an Existentialist reading of the motif of suicide in Jessica Hausner's *Amour Fou* (2014) and Ildikó Enyedi's *On Body and Soul* (2018). With a focus on authenticity, this chapter introduces three different categories of suicide films and then explains how *Amour Fou* and *On Body and Soul* fit or transgress these categories.

The representation of suicide as an authentic choice has a long history in European (and American) cinema and while Enyedi's film exhibits what Michele Aaron (2014) calls the mainstream cinematic language of dying, (at least partially) affirming this Hollywood tradition, Hausner's film offers an ironic reinterpretation. With the help of alienating filmmaking techniques (like unusual camera angles and the use of ellipses), in *Amor Fou* narration itself becomes ironic. On the other hand, while Enyedi's film is influenced by the mainstream cinematic language in its depiction of dying, it also displays a phenomenological filmmaking style, and in this way the film also transgresses classical Hollywood representation.

Drawing inspiration from Albert Camus's discussion of suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955/1991), this chapter interrogates whether the absurd dictates death. Camus considers suicide a logical but inadequate reaction to the world's meaninglessness, and introduces

Sisyphus as a rebellious hero in order to illustrate how it is possible to embrace absurdity. Developing Camus's idea, absurdity here again is uncovered by the comparison of two films. The absurd is a gap, a constant oscillation between the two different ways of thinking about ourselves and our world, and this makes the viewer recognize that the realization of our desires are either unsatisfactory; or, that happiness is possible but only in the realm of fantasy.

The conclusion brings together three main topics of discussion (humour, politics and absurdity) in the analysis of a final film, *Toni Erdmann* (Maren Ade, 2016). Absurdity in this film is expressed through the relationship of the protagonists. These main characters symbolize the two opposing worldviews of two different generations. The clash of their perspectives is expressed in the film through their different attitudes towards humour.

This chapter re-evaluates the meaning of comedy with the analysis of *Toni Erdmann*, a film that according to its director is “*about* humour” (Romney, 2017). First, the chapter discusses comedy as a genre, showing how classic American popular genres (like the comedian comedy, the slapstick and the screwball comedy) influenced an award-winning contemporary European film. The chapter's more specific focus however is comedy as mode, identifying the film's comic mode as awkwardness.

In this final chapter, I argue that Maren Ade's three feature films express three different modes of awkwardness, with *Toni Erdmann* representing the most radically awkward among them. Revisiting three established theories of humour, this chapter introduces recognition theory (with the example of awkwardness) as the fourth possible approach in understanding the meaning of humour. My contention is that awkward laughter expresses another way of reacting to life's absurdity as opposed to irony. Since awkwardness requires recognition from the viewer, it establishes a shared experience. In this fashion, awkward laughter articulates a more hopeful and optimistic reaction to the world's meaninglessness.

In order to invite socio-political critique, the films of European cinema highlight irrationality not only in their narratives (what their stories are about) but also in their different forms of narration (the way they present these stories to the viewer). The thesis starts by looking at Paolo Sorrentino's Academy Award nominated films, where the director found his trademark form of expression in irony.

CHAPTER 1

Absurd Sexuality: Irony, Sexism and Magic in Paolo Sorrentino's *The Great Beauty* (2013) and *Youth* (2015)

“When I start to write a movie, my first priority is that I want it to be funny... I want to make people laugh. On my way to doing that, I often wind up creating something that is also sad.” (Sorrentino cited by Rosen, 2015)

Scathing humour is at the centre of Paolo Sorrentino's oeuvre. His films poke fun at political leaders (*Il Divo*, 2008), mock burnt out celebrities (*This Must Be the Place*, 2011), satirize the Roman elite (*The Great Beauty*, 2013) and parody the way men look at women (*Youth*, 2015). However, humour in Sorrentino's films is always ambiguous. As a director, he often makes it impossible for the viewer to decide what is meant to be funny and what is meant to be serious. Simon Critchley describes this type of humour as the mirthless laugh, “the laugh laughing at the laugh.” When the laughter sticks in our throats, we realise that the object of the laughter is actually the subject, who is laughing: we are laughing at ourselves (Critchley, 2002, p. 49). The ingenuity of this humour is that first it makes us laugh and then it makes us question whether we were supposed to laugh at all. In humour, this reflected understanding allows irony to happen by presupposing a critical position and creating a space of ambiguity.

Irony generally signifies the opposite of the literal meaning for humorous effect, thus it is a form of expression with ambiguity at its heart. According to my first argument in this chapter, irony is a key ingredient in *The Great Beauty* (2013) and *Youth* (2015) and humour's ambiguous nature in these films can be grasped through narration. Borrowing David Bordwell's concept of film style, I argue that these two films are expressions of irony by presenting style as pure narration. Narration can be interpreted as a disparity of knowledge possessed by the characters inside the story and the viewer outside the fictional world. It develops as knowledge and is unevenly distributed among the characters and the viewer (if the viewer and all the characters were all-knowing, narration would be unnecessary). It is partially

defined by technical criteria (like camera positions and editing) and how these techniques construct the viewer's perception in order to transfer knowledge (Branigan, 1992, p. 66). The viewer experiences ambiguity through accentuated film style displaying film specific technical solutions, like camera movement, editing and acting.

The Great Beauty won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2014, while *Youth* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures in 2016 and thus they can be regarded as mature works where the director has found his trademark form of expression. I selected the director's last two films, because both films are critically acclaimed works. While humour is a crucial element in every Sorrentino film, these two works not only present unproblematic examples of humour (verbal jokes in the dialogue that are clearly included with a humorous intention), but they also feature an excessive style that creates room for ambiguity and thus makes an ironic interpretation possible.

Before analysing irony as style in greater detail, I refer back to Geoff King's argument about the comic mode (King, 2002, p. 2) as discussed in the introduction. This idea is particularly useful, since I examine the way the two films use irony as a form of expression. Using Edward Branigan's definition of narration and narrative comprehension as disparities of knowledge (Branigan, 1992, pp. 65-72), I define the accentuated style used by Sorrentino as pure narration.

Numerous books written about the topic of humour and film start by stating that humour is a very popular subject despite its indefinable nature (King 2002; Critchley 2002; Zupančič 2008; Harrod 2015). Everybody knows what she or he finds funny, however, it seems to be an extremely challenging task to define what humour means and theoreticians struggle to come up with an overarching definition. For instance, Henderson (1978) and Palmer (1994) note that comic genres are generally considered light-hearted and therefore humorous works of art are

usually considered secondary or lower status compared to more serious, higher forms of art like tragedy (similarly to Kerr 1980; Palmer 1987; Neale and Krutnik 1990; King 2002; Harrod 2015). In his book on film comedy, Geoff King writes that “comedy is often taken to be the epitome of light relief or ‘just entertainment’ on film ... Comedy, by definition, is not actually taken entirely seriously” (King, 2002, p. 2). To be clearly defined as comedy a film should be dominated to a substantial extent by a comic dimension.

Various works contemplate comedy as a genre, but to sidestep this problem of definitions, I took comedy to be a mode of presentation. Instead of defining film comedy as a genre, King introduces comedy as a mode, a manner of representation:

Comedy in film, generally, is probably best understood as a mode, rather than as a genre, if these various different degrees of comedy are to be taken into account. Comedy is a mode – a manner of representation – in which a variety of different materials can be approached, rather than any relatively more fixed or localised quantity. Any genre might be treated as a subject for comedy. (King, 2002, p. 2)

To explain the comic mode, King refers to Rick Altman, who differentiates between genre used as an adjective or as a noun (Altman, 1999, p. 51). The adjective form refers to the mode the main genre is presented in, whereas the noun form refers to the major genre qualifications. Comedy is a mode that can be applied to any genre. In Sorrentino’s films its adjectival qualification manifests as an expression of irony. I explain this ironic expression by defining it as accentuated film style (borrowing David Bordwell’s concept): through its technical solutions (including camera movement, editing and acting) it becomes a form of pure narration.

While Sorrentino’s films are sometimes accused of being crassly sexist, I argue in this chapter that his use of comic irony undermines the apparent sexism of his films. Academic literature does offer a feminist critique of these films (Badt 2007; Hipkins 2008) and film reviews often point out the humorous tone of Sorrentino’s work (Romney 2007; Romney 2015; Weissberg 2008; Weissberg 2015; Mayersberg 2012; Abrams 2013; Atkinson 2013; Bradshaw 2013; Bradshaw 2016; Calhoun 2013; Crowds 2014), but my purpose is to highlight the

ambiguous nature of humour in these films and shift the attention from (the exploitation of) women to (the weakness of) men. The depiction of women as objects of male desire to the point of absurdity undermines sexist representation and works instead as a humorous subversion. *The Great Beauty* and *Youth* parody a certain kind of objectification and desire and I argue that the object of Sorrentino's criticism is the "male sex deficit" (Hakim, 2011, p. 178). In her controversial book, *Honey Money* (2011), Catherine Hakim merges neoliberalism with sexuality by advocating complete freedom around the exchange of goods, including one's own body. By male sex deficit she means substantial differences regarding sexual desire and behaviour that persist in the 21st century among men and women, namely that men's sexual desire for women always exceeds women's desire. However, neoliberal feminist scholars like Catherine Rottenberg pointed out the problematic nature of such an easily calculable exchange. Following this criticism, I argue that through ironic presentation Sorrentino parodies this simplistic view of an unbalanced relationship between men and women. As the examples in my following analysis will show, these two films create room for an ironic interpretation through their excessive stylistic solutions and offer a parody of men's stereotypical obsession with women.

Irony

To read Sorrentino's films ironically, I rely on the concept of cinematic excess. Kristin Thompson argues that when analysing a film, we should look beyond its narrative. Often there is a conflict between the materiality of the film and its unifying structures and by concentrating on the elements of excess we could offer an alternative interpretation (Thompson, 1977, p. 63). Her approach could enable us to concentrate on what effect narration – and not just the narrative – has on the viewer's understanding.

Edward Branigan defines narration as a perceptual activity, concerning “how an event is presented ... rather than what is presented” (Branigan, 1992, p. 65). He underscores the distinction between narration and narrative with the difference between the “how?” and “what?” questions. Film specific technical solutions have the potential “to make something tangible” (Carroll, 2008, p. 41) and filmmakers use the divergence between the “filmic mediation” of their subject and its normal perception to highlight the expressiveness of their viewpoints. Consequently, Sorrentino’s style highlights a contrast between content and representation.

The Great Beauty opens with Jep Gambardella’s (Toni Servillo) 65th birthday party. We first encounter Jep in a circle of women; he is kissing and flirting with them with a weird smirk on his face. Suddenly the image turns upside down and this striking visual element is a clue for the viewer. The film offers structures of information, one on the level of the narrative, while the other one is a stylistic system (Bordwell, 1985, p. 33). A narrative film creates cues and patterns for the viewer to put together a coherent story, with this introduction however the emphasis falls on how the story is presented. The viewer brings expectations and hypotheses born from everyday experience and the artwork sets triggers and constraints to test and retest these hypotheses (Bordwell, 1985, p. 32). Turning the image upside down is such a surprising visual clue that it calls the viewer’s attention to the importance of narration over narrative. It tests the viewer’s expectations by creating space for ambiguity and therefore it becomes an expression of the ironic comic mode. This striking visual element emphasizes how Sorrentino’s excessive use of film style techniques creates irony.



Figure 1: Paolo Sorrentino's *The Great Beauty* (2013): Excessive Use of Film Style

The eccentric camera movement emphasizes the mode of representation; it is not the story, but the way the story is told that is important. The meaning of the upside-down image is uncertain. It may invoke ideas around Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque where the usual social rules and restrictions are temporarily suspended (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 200-201), or it could simply point to Jep's drunken state. The viewer cannot easily interpret this image, because it is not part of the standard continuity of film grammar. Therefore, the most important aspect of the image is that it calls the viewer's attention to how the story is told; the object of the viewer's attention is the representation itself. This is an example of what Bordwell calls "style": pure narration without narrative (Bordwell, 1985, pp. 49-50). It demonstrates how it is possible for a film director to create meaning through style; how he or she chooses to present the subject matter can generate different levels of meaning.

It is not only the camera movement that is extravagant; but other elements of film style are also accentuated. In addition, the films' episodic structures draw attention to the narration, since instead of coherent storytelling the films are built up of only loosely connected long sequences that highlight the cinematic nature of the image. The stylistic elements do not only

emphasize the narration but are often crucial to the understanding of the joke. Much of the humour builds on contrast and culminates in visual punchlines.

Youth meticulously builds up a visual joke about Paul Dano's character, Jimmy. An actor by profession, he makes various references to a historic role he rehearses and will later shoot in Germany. It is only revealed later in the film that he plays Hitler. This episode has no particular relevance to the film's story as a whole, it is only included for its comic and visual potential. The director keeps the character's identity secret for a long time and Jimmy's earlier references to his future role work as jokes in retrospect after his persona is revealed. First the viewer sees Jimmy getting ready for playing the role; he receives a complete makeover with a haircut, makeup and costumes. However, when he is transformed, the images only reveal his back and the viewer is still uncertain about the character's identity. He encounters a little girl on his way, but he still faces away from the camera. The viewer sees the girl's surprised reaction before the character is finally revealed in a reverse shot.

When a joke is followed by a pause of hesitation, it becomes ambiguous. In one of the most absurd scenes of *The Great Beauty*, we see a parody of a contemporary art performance. Jep is sitting in the audience in the grass at the foot of a Roman viaduct and looking at a naked woman on stage. Suddenly she runs towards the viaduct, gaining enough momentum to bump her head into the stone wall with enormous power. The stunt has the audience hold its breath in shock as people are wondering if her bleeding head is part of the performance or if she is seriously injured. She dizzily stumbles back in front of the small crowd and cites a few lines. After a short pause, a shy clapping breaks the silence and this presentation creates space for hesitation. The director parodies the non-sensical nature of contemporary art performances by using this stereotype and making fun of it at the same time. This ironically expressed ambiguity is the main characteristic of the films' humour.



Figure 2: Paolo Sorrentino's *The Great Beauty* (2013): Ironically Expressed Ambiguity

Sorrentino's work is often dismissed as banal or described as overtly beautiful (Clarke 2013; Romney 2015). Even positive reviews emphasize the films' "exuberant visuals" (Clarke, 2013). Jonathan Romney writes that "there are two main accusations that often get leveled at Sorrentino – one, that he too often indulges banality, the other that he doesn't know when to stop. In *Youth*, he's guilty of both sins" (Romney, 2015). Similarly, Dave Calhoun notes that "in his stories, the far-too-beautiful rub up against the overly grotesque" (Calhoun, 2013). As opposed to these criticisms, I argue that narration in these films is always excessive and Sorrentino's aesthetically pleasing images are an expression of irony. With their "exuberant" and "far-too-beautiful" images, *The Great Beauty* and *Youth* emphasize narration. The narration is never a transparent window into the narrative as it is always inflected by Sorrentino's ironic style.

The Great Beauty and *Youth* place narration over narrative by highlighting the main actors' performances, thus Sorrentino's accentuated style also includes acting. *Youth* is a Sorrentino version of Steve Seidman's "comedian comedy", highlighting the protagonists' "extrafictional features". Seidman argues that "comedians very often 'step out' of their fictional characters and/or comment on the fictional situations of the films" (Seidman, 1981, p. 59). In

her contemporary analysis of the comedian comedy genre, Lisa Trahair (2007) also emphasizes the importance of the comic performance over the narrative, where the protagonist adopts “a performance strategy that derives from his or her simultaneous status as a character within the narrative and as an extradiegetic (extrafictional) persona” (Trahair, 2007, p. 4) outside the narrative, thus defying conventions of classical Hollywood realism. The comic actor is a performer first and a character in the film only second. His or her performance is so arresting that it does not always fit into the film’s diegetic world and therefore the performance dominates the narrative.

Sorrentino’s *Youth* is a contemporary version of this comedian comedy, since its episodic structure is constructed as a series of jokes and the narrative is dominated by the comic performances of its two ageing male protagonists (Michael Caine and Harvey Keitel). The scenes themselves (including dialogue and visual puns) have the structure of jokes, they are building up towards a punchline delivered at the end of each sequence. From a purely narrative point of view, certain scenes in *Youth* are excessive and do not contribute to a coherent story, instead they draw attention to the film’s narration and accentuate acting for humorous effect. To examine humour’s ambiguous nature in Sorrentino’s films, I use Simon Critchley’s description of the absurd body.

Being and Having a Body

Critchley explains how human beings experience an existentialist gap between being and having a body. Absurd humour highlights a “lack of fit” between our human desire for rationality and the world’s irrationality (Wartenberg, 2008, pp. 114-115). Being and having a body emphasizes the absurd existential experience through closeness and distance, simultaneous identification with and alienation from our “corporeal housing” (Critchley, 2002, p. 60). This dichotomy described by Critchley appears on multiple levels of representation in

the films as the director contrasts the old with the young, the experience of being and having and irony and nostalgia.

The absurd existential experience is highlighted in *Youth* through focusing on the experiences of its physically declining protagonists. The film's title is an ironic wink; the two elderly men spend their time in a Swiss spa resort where they undergo various reinvigorating treatments in order to feel young again. Comic dialogue describing bodily processes dominate; Fred Ballinger, a retired composer (Michael Caine) and Mick Boyle, an outmoded film director (Harvey Keitel) constantly reflect on the experience of growing old. The characters distance themselves from their bodies and reflect on them critically with humour. While they share memories of their youth, they are painfully aware of their ageing bodies.

Critchley argues that absurd humour requires a sense of detachment, and he explains this from a bodily perspective: "everything becomes laughably absurd when I begin to detach myself from my body, when I imagine myself, my ego, my soul in distinction from its corporeal housing" (Critchley, 2002, p. 60). We think of ourselves as thinking and feeling human beings, but at the same time, we are also defined by our physicality, which can be comically absurd when we look at it from a critical distance. This means that there is gap between the physical and the metaphysical; for example, when we experience illness, or pain, we try to distance ourselves from our bodies. Critchley claims that humour takes place in this gap between being and having a body.

We not only laugh with our bodies, but often also about the fact that we have a body. As Critchley explains, the close description of bodily affairs can arouse sensual disgust through a play of distance and proximity. That is an excessively detailed description of the sensuous can highlight all the imperfections of the flesh and thus can emphasize the having aspect of the body. In scatological humour, we laugh at the fact that we have a body. When we focus on the materiality of the body, it becomes laughable, because its sheer materiality is so in contrast

with our thinking and feeling self. Here what makes us laugh is the return of the most physical facts of our bodies into the spiritual seclusion of the soul and mind. In this case the being returns to having a body (Critchley, 2002, pp. 44-47). In *Youth*, Mick and Fred constantly reflect on the different experience of being a body and having a body. They poke fun at what it feels like to be betrayed by their bodies, for example not being able to urinate is a re-occurring joke. “Did you take a piss today?” asks Fred. “Twice” answers Mick. He then continues: “Four drops. You?” “Same. More or less,” answers Fred. “More? Or less?” asks Mick again with raised eyebrows. “Less,” confesses Fred. As they are getting old, they experience a distance from their own bodies through their failing health. They maintain a critical attitude toward their sheer physicality and thus they emphasize the distance between being and having a body through humour.

Humour highlights the gap between being and having a body by provoking laughter when the physical returns to the metaphysical. This gap however is not a real distinction, but an expression of irony. Both relations, being and having, happen simultaneously, even though they are contradictory. *Youth* showcases a physical comedy performance by the “South-American”¹⁰ (Roly Serrano), whose character embodies this dichotomy. He is old and young at the same time, because he is both enormous but at the same time physically dexterous. His comic representation highlights the gap between being and having a body and the simultaneous but contradictory evocation of irony and nostalgia. Since his character is a caricature of the retired Argentine professional football player, Diego Maradona, his physical traits are exaggerated to make him look ridiculous. Through his contradictory physical characteristics, he embodies Critchley’s distinction of being and having a body.

Sorrentino’s great predecessor, Fellini was famously fascinated by the circus milieu and its characters frequently figured in his films (Fellini, 1996, p. 115). In 1970 Fellini directed

¹⁰ Name of the character as listed on imdb.

a documentary (infused with fictional elements) about the now dead performance art. *The Clowns* (1970) strikes a tragic tone. Fellini interviews white clowns and Augustes, who were acclaimed artists during the golden age of the circus, but now are bitter old men with a nostalgic attachment to the past. Sorrentino repeatedly references Fellini films in his own work and Maradona's clown figure is similar to those of Fellini's (clowns famously featured in the director's films from *Variety Lights* [1951] to *8½* [1963], but perhaps most famously in Giulietta Masina's performance as the sad-eyed but lively Gelsomina in *La Strada* [1954]): they are grotesquely funny and tragically moving. In his physicality, the "South-American" is old and obese, can hardly walk and needs to be helped by his wife, who often pulls an oxygen tank after him. However, he is still a skilled sportsman, therefore he also embodies his younger self through his skill. He breathes heavily and he struggles to do sport, but he kicks the tennis ball high in the air over and over again. He does not kick the ball with ease, but he does not let it drop and there is still grace in his movements. He embodies the physical and the metaphysical simultaneously. He is awkwardly comical through his exaggerated and contradictory physical traits, which make him an easy target for ridicule, however, he is also ambiguous, since he has a visible disconnection with his body through his skilfulness. Just like Fellini's clowns, his effort is an act of nostalgia, a desperate attempt to relive the past.

The being and having a body distinction is also apparent in how the films depict men's relationships with women. I argue that Sorrentino's criticism is a simplistic view about certain men's obsession with women and that he parodies a certain type of objectification and desire. In her book, *Honey Money*, Catherine Hakim coined the term "male sex deficit" (Hakim, 2011, p. 178), arguing that male sexual desire always exceeds women's. This oversimplified and easily calculable exchange however is problematic and through its stereotypical nature it serves the jokes of Sorrentino's parody.

Parody is an important comedy tool used by Sorrentino in these films and I understand this type of comedy as a form of ironic ambiguity. As Geoff King argues, parody requires engagement on two levels: on the level of the parody and its object. This duality must be recognized by the viewer to work as a parody. Parodies mock their targets, but while doing so, they also pay tribute to their originals (King, 2002, 112.) In order for parody to work, the reader/viewer must be familiar with the original, because it presupposes previous knowledge and interaction from the viewer.

The Maradona character's wife (Loredana Cannata) is a servant-like figure, she pulls his oxygen tank after him, she massages his tired feet and she helps him to get out of the pool. Her portrayal however has humour in it and through its ambiguity it becomes ironic. She is a parody of a stereotype (a rich man having a wife to take care of his domestic needs) and her character parodies the way men can take ownership of the female body. On the other hand, her representation is also based on a visual joke of contrast, when the "South American" falls ill in the swimming pool the wife has to rescue him. A fragile and thin woman has to pull an enormous body out of the pool. With its emphasis on physical humour this scene is also reminiscent of the slapstick and the film uses this stereotype but at the same time it also makes fun of it.

Sexism

The Great Beauty and *Youth* offer a parody of how men look at women and feminist scholars have reflected on the dynamics of these relations represented in Sorrentino's films. Danielle Hipkins writes that the female in his films is merely a fetish object for the narration of male desire (Hipkins, 2008, pp. 213-214). While also numerous critics have pointed to the films' sexism. "The unreconstructed sexism of Sorrentino's films can sometimes be, at a stretch, semi-excused by locating it in a certain Italian cinematic tradition of objectifying goddess

figures” (Romney, 2015). As a director, he “tells his recurring story of ridiculous men and beautiful women” (Romney, 2007). According to Jonathan Romney, Sorrentino has “a tendency to objectify female beauty [...] there’s also a genuine obsessiveness in his interest in female beauty pushed to idealisation, especially when contrasted with mortal male weakness” (Romney, 2007). Such accusations disregard the comic representation in the films’ images. These critics use terms of feminist film theory (such as fetishism and objectification) and it is clear from their examples that sexuality and the dynamics of male-female relationships are central themes in Sorrentino’s films. I argue that the representation of sexuality can be ironic in these films and that it can be linked to the ridiculousness of human nature.

Rosalind Galt criticises feminist film theory for rejecting the decorative image as a site of pleasure. According to Galt, the pretty image that belongs to the territory of the feminine, immediately invokes negative connotations and is always regarded as artificial and misleading in film theory. A feminized image is considered incapable of carrying serious meaning. Certain sorts of feminist film theory seem to exclude images that are overly visual or defined as cosmetic (Galt, 2011, p. 13). For Galt however, the pretty is a site of excess, pleasure and masquerade that should be embraced for its potential to express serious meaning. She sees a possibility in the pretty to express the subversive or even the radical, because by emphasizing narration it highlights the potential of the cinematic image (Galt, 2011, p. 250). Following her argument, it is important to underline the ambiguity and the comic potential of such images in an attempt to shift the attention from the exploitation of women to the weakness of men.

The object of Sorrentino’s criticism is the “male sex deficit” (Hakim, 2011, p. 178). Infamous for her controversial ideas, Hakim embraces the belief in an easily calculable and unevenly structured relationship between men and women based on sexual desire. Neoliberal feminist scholars however pointed out the problematic nature of this in their critique. Catherine Rottenberg’s neoliberal feminism is an example of being a body, where women are

transforming themselves into human capital (Rottenberg, 2017, p. 331). She argues that neoliberal feminism produces “an individuated feminist subject whose identity is problematic because it is formed by a cost-benefit calculus” (Rottenberg, 2017, p. 331). Highly achieving women are encouraged to become human capital, to self-invest and enhance their market value first and think about bearing children later. Taking her starting point from the neoliberalist idea of human capital, Hakim coined the term “erotic capital” to refer to the “combination of beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation and social skills – a combination of physical and social attractiveness” (Hakim, 2011, p. 1). For Hakim, it is perfectly acceptable for women lacking other (intellectual or financial) advantages to exploit their physical and social attractiveness and women should exploit the weakness of men (Hakim, 2011, p. 178). By male sex deficit she means substantial differences regarding sexual desire and behaviour that, according to her, persist in the 21st century among men and women, namely that men’s sexual desire for women always exceeds supply. Because of its simplistic and stereotypical nature this view offers fertile ground for parody. Sorrentino’s films joke about such male weakness described by Hakim through their ironic representation.

In order to understand the female representation in these films as ironic, I use two theories that highlight the artificial nature of femininity. Roland Barthes (1972) argues that eroticism is a product of cultural norms with a description of a strip-tease as an un-erotic act, while Joan Riviere (1929) points out that natural femininity does not exist, because womanliness can be worn as a mask. In Barthes’s description, the undressing during a strip-tease is non-erotic, the eroticism at the strip-tease is not in nudity. The rituals of the supposedly erotic dance only seem to evoke the idea of sex, but through the artificiality of the décor and the set, they negate the excitement of the original provocation. He writes: the “woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked” (Barthes, 1972, p. 84). Barthes suggests that during the strip-tease the woman becomes an “object in disguise”; the

performance's constructed nature creates a feeling of artificiality as opposed to a natural excitement of getting undressed. Through the strip-tease the woman becomes clothed in her nakedness.

Joan Riviere argues that women wishing for masculinity but fearing retribution from men can put on "a mask of womanliness" (Riviere, 1929, p. 303). Therefore, she concludes that womanliness in general is an artificial concept and it can be assumed and worn as a mask. She writes:

The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the "masquerade". My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing. (Riviere, 1929, p. 306)

Both Barthes's and Riviere's arguments underline the idea of having a body as opposed to being. The artificial nature of femininity again highlights this gap. By putting on a mask of womanliness or performing the (un)erotic act of the strip-tease, women are not their own bodies, but they have those bodies.

Sorrentino's images are the site of excess and masquerade, highlighting the artificial nature of femininity. His films parody the way men look at women by both using femininity as an artificial concept and by emphasizing the stereotypical nature of men's obsession with female attractiveness with the help of excessive film style. By drawing the viewer's attention to narration, the films present a humorous subversion of how men look at women with the help of the shot/reverse shot editing technique and the use of overdetermination.

Emphasized narration in *Youth* offers a humorous subversion of a stereotypical male fantasy about a woman with the help of editing. A veiled Arab woman is a guest at the Swiss spa hotel, where the retired composer protagonist, Fred (Michael Caine) is spending his holiday. When going up to their rooms one evening, they reach the elevator in the lobby at the same time. Fred being a gentleman, opens the elevator door for her. The woman's face is framed in the elevator's window, like a round painting. Her two-dimensionality is further

emphasized in the next, wider shot. In a medium close-up, we see her in her long black cloak standing in front of the patterned wall of the elevator – again just like a framed painting. The framing here emphasizes her two-dimensionality that can be interpreted as a parody of objectification as if she only existed as a painting, a pleasurable sight for men to look at. She is wearing a battoulah, a traditional mask worn by Arab women in the states of the Persian Gulf. Fred is looking at her, then he shyly looks away. When he looks at her again, her mask disappeared, and the picture reveals the face of a beautiful woman. The reverse shot shows Fred smiling and looking in the woman’s direction. This scene reveals a stereotypical male fantasy with the help of emphasized narration; the editing makes it possible for Fred to make the woman’s cover disappear (an extensive amount of academic work has been written about veils and eroticism, see for example DelPlato and Codell 2017 or Zahedi 2007). With the help of a film specific technique the woman’s mask is removed and her beauty is displayed for the man’s enjoyment.

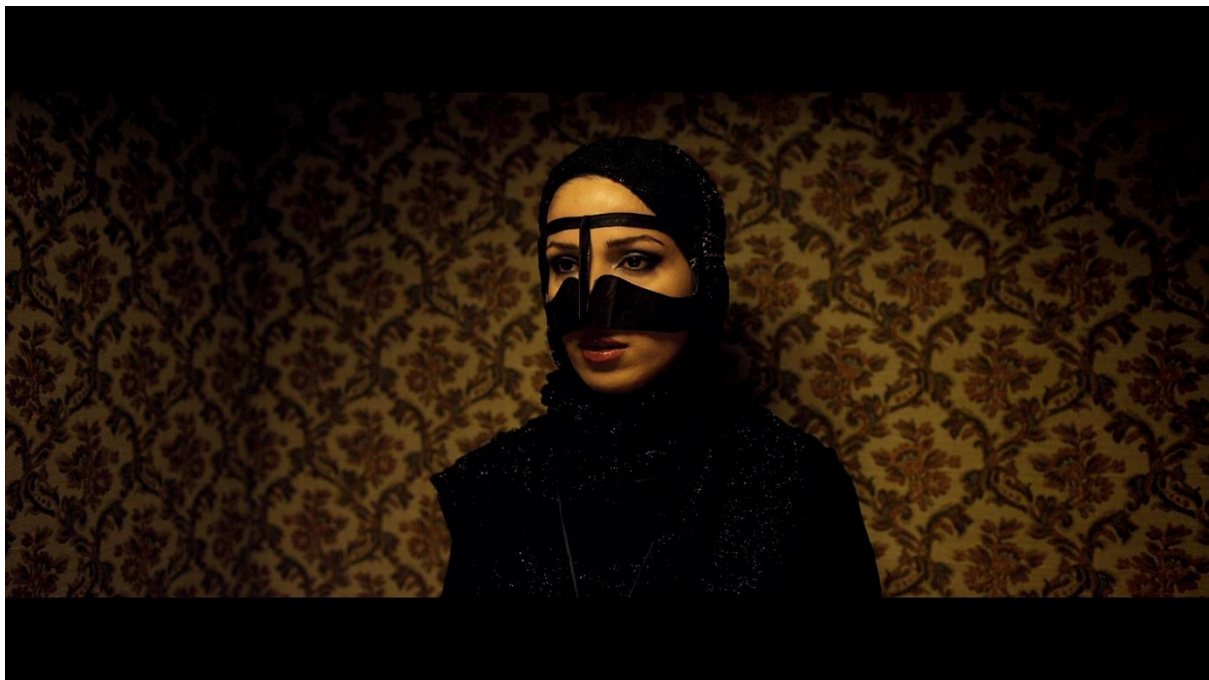


Figure 3: Paolo Sorrentino’s *Youth* (2015): A Parody of Objectification

The film provides another good example with one of its pivotal scenes, Miss Universe's naked pool entrance. Miss Universe (Madalina Diana Ghenea) steps naked into a pool, while two old men (Harvey Keitel and Michael Caine) watch her in awe, stunned by her beauty. Here, the editing technique creates the viewer's interpretation according to the character's perception. Following the viewer's interpretation process as described by Branigan (Branigan, 1992, p. 76), his or her understanding is created by identifying with the point of view of the men here through the editing. Here the viewer's look is constructed in accordance with the male characters.

In a shot/reverse shot order we first see the men looking, and then the woman's body as the object (what they are looking at). The traditional shot/reverse shot editing calls the viewer to identify with the look as he or she is sutured into the film's fictional world. However, Sorrentino here parodies this particular kind of editing and pokes fun of the way the men (and through them the viewer) looks at the idealized woman. Humour prevents the audience from complete identification and it provides distance for detachment by creating an ironic space with a room for laughter. The film does present an idealized female figure, however through this stylistic technique it also parodies the way men look at women. It creates ambiguity through this humorous subversion. Thus, the feminine figure is not only idealized, but is also part of the joke. The attention is shifted from the objectification of women to the weakness of men.

When Miss Universe approaches the pool, she blinks towards the camera, she is aware of being looked at. As she enters the pool, the viewer sees her naked figure from behind, while the two old men already sitting in the pool also become visible in the background. Then the viewer gets a close-up of the men, stunned by her beauty. "Who is she?" – asks Fred in astonishment. "God" – replies Mick musingly. A short pause is followed, after which Mick explains that the apparition is Miss Universe embodied. Fred protests "but she looks so different." While we continue to listen to the men's conversation, we see a close-up of her

figure. Her features are glistening in the sunshine. Looking at her, Fred continues to whisper “unrecognizable.” “She’s been transformed ...” comments Mick ... “from watching all those robot movies.” Mick’s joke refers to an earlier scene where they met Miss Universe. However, here the accentuated film style presents her as a figure of extreme beauty instead of a real character and that is why Mick does not recognize her. Miss Universe’s immaculate naked beauty is revealed in the transparent water in a full body frame. Extreme physical attractiveness is presented in a dreamlike set up. The overdetermined style portrays her as the ideal female body. Previously, Fred did not take notice of Miss Universe, but here – through the accentuated film style – she has been transformed. The excessive style of overdetermination creates sensual desire, while at the same time this excessiveness also draws attention to the artificial nature of female beauty and accompanied by the characters’ joke it becomes a humorous subversion.



Figure 4: Paolo Sorrentino’s *Youth* (2015): “unrecognizable.” “She’s been transformed ...”

To represent female beauty ironically, Sorrentino uses overdetermination; the effect is determined by more than one cause, but any of the determining causes would have resulted in the same effect on its own (Jaworski, 2011, p. 240). The director overdetermines the object of desire for parodic purposes: she is not only a beautiful and naked woman, but Miss Universe. The setting is also impeccable; the pool is in the spa of a luxurious Swiss resort in the Alps.

The sun is shining and the water is pristine. It is the film's excessive style that creates this effect with its emphasized visuals, choreographed camera movement, structured shot/reverse shot editing and carefully designed mise-en-scène. This excessive style also draws attention to narration and distances the viewer. This distanced critical position allows a reflected understanding and the overdetermined representation of female beauty becomes a parody.

Sorrentino also uses overdetermination for parodic purposes at the end of *The Great Beauty*. When Jep realises that “the great beauty” he was looking for was his love for Elisa (Annaluisa Capasa), he is able to create art again and he starts writing a novel about this revelation. Thanks to the final scene's overtly stylized representation, this revelation also becomes ridiculously absurd.

When Jep remembers Elisa, the viewer sees the memory in a flashback. The importance of this scene was prepared in a previous sequence. Jep had tried to tell Ramona (Sabrina Ferilli) about his first love, but had been so overwhelmed with emotion by remembering it that he was unable to go through with it. Jep says to Ramona: “at the lighthouse at night ... she took a step back and said ...” Jep says this twice, but cannot finish the sentence. The viewer only sees the beginning of the flashback, but not the end. Now, at the end of the film, the director reveals the full flashback.

Because of its extreme stylistic emphasis, the flashback serves as the film's climax but also as a parody. In the flashback, Jep sees himself as a young man getting close to Elisa for the first time. In this scene, Elisa seduces Jep (this is the answer to the “what?” question on the level of the narrative), but how it is presented is overtly stylized and heavy with symbolism, therefore the narration is again heavily emphasized. In the moonlit summer night, Jep and Elisa are walking towards a lighthouse on the beach. Their faces gleam in the moon's radiance. The moon – a stereotypically obvious symbol of femininity – is the light of revelation for Jep. Everything turned upside down in his life when Elisa showed him her breasts. The feminine

symbolism is also accentuated by the sea. Jep sees Elisa as a mother figure, as the ideal woman, the mother of the whole universe. This memory scene reveals that Jep was so overwhelmed with female beauty that the writer inside him died. The ambiguity of this scene again leaves room for hesitation and creates space for an ironic interpretation. The cause of the protagonist's writing block is revealed as being overwhelmed by the physical attractiveness of an idealized woman. It becomes a parody of men's obsession with female beauty.

Magic

There are magical characters in every Sorrentino film. As opposed to ironic characters, they lack ironic distance and they mean everything literally. They take up an absolute non-ironic position. In *Youth*, a rumour circulates among the hotel guests about a monk (Dorji Wangchuk), who is able to levitate. The story about his supernatural abilities is mentioned multiple times in the film. At the beginning, Fred's daughter, Lena (Rachel Weisz) looks outside the balcony of their room and tells her father, "That guy who levitates is out here." Fred answers, "I have been coming here for years; he has never levitated." In a revelatory sequence, we first see a close-up of the monk's head with a gorgeous mountain scenery in the background. The shot is just as mysterious as it is picturesque. The camera floats slowly backwards and the frame slowly reveals his shoulders. Then his back becomes visible too and the viewer can affirm that his body is covered by his long cloak. Next the camera sweeps the entirety of the cloak before it lets us glimpse its edge and the viewer can see that the cloak does not touch the ground. The monk is indeed levitating. Sorrentino meticulously builds up this joke with an articulated visual punchline. In the most common kind of joke, we laugh because of our disappointed expectation, we expect one thing, but another thing happens. Here, Sorrentino does the opposite: our expectation is not disappointed, but unexpectedly affirmed. The monk really is magical.

Magical characters in the films are often spiritual or religious figures. In both *The Great Beauty* and *Youth*, there is a yearning for spirituality. The films' excessive narration opens up the possibility to the viewer for a non-ironic enjoyment with the help of the secondary characters. The monk in *Youth* can actually levitate and Sister Maria (Giusi Merli) in *The Great Beauty* can actually blow the flamingos away. However, non-ironic enjoyment eventually proves to be impossible since the viewer occupies the ironic position of the respective protagonists. Jep Gambardella and Fred Ballinger look at the world around them with critical distance. The characters who represent the possibility of magic (Sister Maria in *The Great Beauty* or the monk in *Youth*) are beyond the pretensions of the world but this also makes them inaccessible, since it is difficult to identify with them. They represent an idealistic position that clashes with reality.

In *The Great Beauty* and *Youth*, secondary characters represent magic, whereas the protagonists (and through them the viewer) occupy an ironic position. However, *The Young Pope* (2016) complicates this relationship, since it merges the non-ironic outlook of the protagonists with the spiritual attraction of the secondary characters into one persona. The Pope (Jude Law) has ironic distance, but at the same time he is also magical. He is the absurd body, he embodies being and having a materiality simultaneously.

On the one hand, the Pope occupies an extreme ironic position. He confesses to one of his priests that he does not believe in God. The priest is outraged by the idea of an irreligious leader of the Roman Catholic Church, but he is bound by the secrecy of the confession. When the Pope sees that the priest is overwhelmed by bitter fury, he says: "I was just joking. Wasn't it obvious?" The priest is relieved, but the viewer has doubts after having witnessed the Pope's arrogant and narcissistic behaviour in the Vatican. We cannot get rid of the feeling that it was not a joke at all. Sorrentino creates a radically ironic space here, a sort of double irony, the irony of irony. This extreme ironic position seems to be in stark contrast with the spiritual

yearning of magical characters. However, in Sorrentino's work even ironic characters can yearn for spirituality. The Pope is arrogant and cynical but he is magical, he is able to perform miracles.

The main characteristic of Sorrentino's humour is this yearning irony. He creates a pope who does not believe in God but is capable of performing miracles. His adopted mother, Sister Mary (Diane Keaton) believes that he healed an incurably(?) ill child by prayer. Later in the series the audience can witness the pope performing miracles. He is able to tame a wild kangaroo (arriving to the Vatican as a gift from Australia) just by looking at it and releases it as an exotic pet to run freely in the Vatican's gardens. When they stare at each other the viewer has the feeling that the Pope can truly speak the language of animals. He also helps an infertile woman, who is desperate to have a child. After she receives the Pope's blessing, she miraculously becomes pregnant. These miracles are presented as divine interventions; however, Sorrentino's depiction is also extremely ironic. The Pope confesses his shaky belief in God multiple times, but it is never clear to the viewer if he is actually struggling with doubts about his own religiousness or if he is being cynical. His miracles are also ambiguous and leave room for an ironic interpretation. They can be seen as visions or illusions that are wishful projections of the faithful around him, who want to see the Pope as a real saint.

The contradictory but simultaneous experience of being and having is displayed through accentuated style, emphasizing pure narration. In *The Great Beauty*, Jep encounters a magician in the middle of performing a magic trick at the Colosseum, who wants to make a giraffe disappear. He asks him: "Can you make me vanish too?", whereas the magician answers: "It's just a trick." The scene stresses the difference between trickery and genuine magic through film style. The viewer actually witnesses the disappearance of the giraffe; however, the real magician is cinema. It is the film itself executing the trick with the help of a cinematic technique. The film closes with Jep's voice over saying: "Beyond there is what lies

beyond. I don't deal with what lies beyond. Therefore ... let this novel begin. After all it's just a trick. Yes, it's just a trick." The film can make the giraffe disappear. The editing performs the magic trick. Cinema is the medium of magic.

Humour is a key element in Sorrentino's films, however, the nature of this humour is always ambiguous. Using David Bordwell's concept of film style and Edward Branigan's narration definition, I argued that *The Great Beauty* (2013) and *Youth* (2015) are expressions of irony. The films' excessive style emphasizes narration over narrative by highlighting different filmic solutions like acting and editing.

While Sorrentino's films are sometimes accused of being sexist, I argue in this chapter that his use of comic irony undermines the apparent sexism of his films. The films' accentuated styles create room for an ironic interpretation and this permits them to undermine their own representations of sexism, since the distanced critical position allows a reflected understanding. The director overdetermines the object of desire for parodic purposes with the help of excessive film style and thus the "sexist" presentation of female beauty becomes a humorous subversion. This ironically expressed ambiguity is the main characteristic of Sorrentino's humour. To examine humour's ambiguous nature in *The Great Beauty* and *Youth*, I introduced Simon Critchley's description of the absurd body, explaining how human beings experience an existentialist gap between being and having a body. This dichotomy described by Critchley appears on multiple levels of representation in the films as the director contrasts the old with the young, the experience of being and having and irony and nostalgia.

Finally, my last argument focused on magic as a contrast to irony. The films' protagonists are defined by an ironic outlook, whereas the secondary characters are magical. As opposed to ironic characters, magical characters lack ironic distance and yearn for spirituality. However, even ironic characters can become magical. *The Young Pope* (2016) creates a protagonist that merges the ironic and the magical outlook and thus bringing these

two seemingly contradictory aspects together, he represents a yearning irony. The Pope embodies the absurd body as described by Critchley; he has ironic distance (having), while at the same time he is also magical by being able to perform miracles (being). The director's latest work brings together my three points; it merges irony, sexism and magic. *The Young Pope* television series contains all the typical Sorrentino ingredients: excessive visuals, scathing humour and a yearning for spirituality. While Chapter 1 described how excessive film style can call attention to the non-transparent nature of narration and how it can be used to parody the way men look at women, Chapter 2 focuses on ironic narration as a metaphor for political commentary.

CHAPTER 2

Absurd Politics: Crisis and Magic as Subversive Political Engagement in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017) and other Yorgos Lanthimos Films

Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* invites the viewer to enter an absurd world. According to an Existentialist understanding of the absurd, human beings desperately want the world around them to make sense, however the world in its cruel reality remains highly irrational. Lanthimos' world looks similar to our own contemporary European present¹¹; however, two things are different: the characters only express themselves in a completely unaffected, monotonous tone and the fact that the wrath of gods can be appeased by human sacrifice.

Because of these two differences, the film only pretends to partake in traditional storytelling, but in reality, it maintains critical distance resulting in ironic ambiguity. This way *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* becomes a metaphor for a hopeless political situation. The stylistic rule breaking in Lanthimos' cinema is an expression of breakdown, which becomes a metaphor for the represented political and economic crisis described by Mark Fisher (2009) and Naomi Klein (2008). In Fisher's argument the capitalist system is dysfunctional based on an inherent flaw, and in Klein's description, crisis is a symptom of the defected neoliberal system and its dominance over of the free market.

Developing Fisher's idea, the irony of capitalism is that if all the debts are paid, there is no capitalism. Anthropologist, David Graeber (2014) writes about the moral confusion that is linked to the notion of debt, pointing out the ambiguity surrounding it, moreover, stating that

¹¹ Even though *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* features famous American actors and was mostly shot in Cincinnati, I consider the film a representative of European cinema. Blending the American environment with European sensibilities in its display of characteristics of the Greek weird wave filmmaking style, I read this film as a culmination of Yorgos Lanthimos' absurd cinema at the time of writing. The director's last feature film, *The Favourite* (2018), was released after this chapter was completed.

this confusion is the very basis of its power and its propensity for violence. Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* illustrates this idea of the unaffordable debt leading to an infinite cycle of violent revenge. The magic in the film creates a new system of reference and in Lanthimos' pessimistic vision, only the fantastic has any political power.

Films not only express social criticism but can also be read as evidence of and response to political or social crisis. However, can a European film still propagate unity and democracy as opposed to fragmentation and alienation? Crisis in Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* does not only mean breakdown, but rather, it is a metaphor for the normal functioning of the system, as expressed through the film's ironic style.

Ironic Pretence

Definitions of irony generally point to its ambiguous nature (Empson 1953; Hutcheon 1994; Grimwood 2012; MacDowell 2016) and state how the ironic meaning indicates the opposite of the literal meaning and how the former is implied through context. There is however a difference in how this ambiguity is approached: it can be related to the artist's intention (e.g. Grimwood), to the audience's interpretation (e.g. Empson, Hutcheon) or to the reading of the actual text or film itself (e.g. MacDowell). Since the understanding of irony requires context, some critics approach the definition of irony from audience interpretation. Linda Hutcheon argues that a work itself cannot be ironic, because irony depends entirely on the viewer's interpretation. This draws attention to the issue of evaluation, since this explanation implies that there is always a correct interpretation. There will always be audience members who understand the ironic meaning of the work (that is, who are understanding the work correctly), while irony remains unrecognized by others. The latter case means that irony simply does not "happen" (Hutcheon, 1994, pp. 2-6). Thus, in Hutcheon's interpretation, irony does not only oscillate between the said and the unsaid (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 39), but it also involves evaluative

judgments and emotional responses. According to Hutcheon's analysis, a work of art is never ironic in itself, but its ironic quality is always created by the audience's interpretation.

Contrary to Hutcheon, James MacDowell argues that works can in themselves be ironic, regardless of viewer interpretation. Developing MacDowell's argument, I intend to show how ironic interpretation can be created through film style. However, Hutcheon has invaluable insight regarding irony's "edge". She argues that even though irony is prone to misinterpretation, its importance lies in its ability to construct historical consciousness, since ironic distance creates a possibility for reflection on our past and connection to our present. The power of irony lies in its ability for self-reflection. This observation will be crucial for my own argument.

A film can create ironic distance by pretending to participate in certain styles or genre conventions, whereas in reality it actually maintains ironic distance by highlighting incongruities. This ironic pretence is what MacDowell calls communicative irony. He argues that films are able to make a show of having a naïve or put-on point of view. Films can pretend to employ certain styles or genre conventions in a straightforward manner, when in reality they maintain a distanced attitude towards them (MacDowell, 2016, p. 64). Since narration itself can pretend to partake in certain genre conventions, the film's storytelling can be ironic. This means that a film can have ironic qualities even if the audience does not understand or misunderstands the double meaning. The ironic quality of the work is still present, even if it does not reach its audience (MacDowell, 2016, p. 199). In this interpretation, audiences can even resist the ironic meaning of the text and intentionally disregard the context or other qualities present in the text in order to embrace their favoured reading (MacDowell, 2016, p. 200). According to MacDowell, by analysing the characteristics of the film itself, it is possible to make valid arguments about its intentions. This is a crucial part of analysing irony in film: by looking at film-specific solutions, we can detect and interpret the film's ironies. Since

certain film-specific technical solutions can create ironic meaning, irony becomes a mode of representation, which means that the film itself can be ironic, regardless of the viewer's interpretation or of artistic intention.

Narrator and narration ideas have their own limits, which is why Daniel Frampton introduces the concepts of "filmmind" and "film-thinking" (Frampton, 2006, p. 7). He does not intend to make a direct analogy between human thought and film but emphasises that films are both subjective and objective in action and form: "there is a functional analogy: film's constant, never-ending 'intent' and attitude to its characters and spaces is here conceptualised as a (new kind of) 'thinking'" (Frampton, 2006, p. 7). From a film-philosophical point of view, "form is not an appendix to content, but simply more content itself (just of a different nature)" (Frampton, 2006, p. 8). The film's style is not just an addition to how we think about film, but an integral part of the film's thinking. Film style in this new interpretation is "the dramatic intention of the film itself" (Frampton, 2006, p. 8). This idea, similarly to MacDowell's, suggests that the film itself can have an intention; the film itself can have internal characteristics, regardless of the creator's motives or the audience's interpretation.

Absurd Word

In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, a surgeon, Steven (Colin Farrell) drunkenly commits a medical error and kills a young boy, Martin's (Barry Keoghan) father. To avenge his father's death, Martin presents Steven with an ultimatum: he has to kill one of his own family members, otherwise they will all fall ill and eventually die. Alternatively, Steven can leave his own family behind and substitute the life he has taken by becoming Martin's new father. How can one human life be exchanged for another? Can a human sacrifice for a fatal failure settle the debt?

The film's setting looks familiar to our present, however the world Lanthimos invites the viewer to enter is an absurd world. The absurd means a "lack of fit" between our human desire for rationality and the world's irrationality (Wartenberg, 2008, pp. 114-115). The film highlights the issue of how to behave in a world where relationships have broken down, and the dilemma of how to act in a time of crisis. In this absurd world, politics no longer means getting involved in mass action: the only access to power is through the supernatural. The emergence of the supernatural in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* is a metaphor for a hopeless political situation, where only magic can serve as a weapon for action.

Lanthimos' world looks similar to our own, however two things are different. The characters have an absurd relationship to the world, which is represented in the film's ironic style. The most characteristic Lanthimos stylistic solution is the actors' deadpan delivery: the characters talk about menstruation, body hair, lemon tarts and watchstraps with the same monotone and flat, unaffected tone. The other striking difference is that in this world, ancient rituals seem to work, and the wrath of gods can be appeased with human sacrifice. The ideas of power and ritual work in a similar structural fashion, as they are part of the real politics of the community. In Lanthimos' absurd world, magic can be understood as ritualized religious practice, which becomes analogous with contemporary political practice in the film.

"Don't You understand? It's a Metaphor"

Metaphor and irony are both rhetorical tropes that challenge literal meaning. In both cases, the literal meaning of a certain word or expression is used to express figurative meaning (Chandler, 2002, p. 123). According to Daniel Chandler's semantic definition:

[...] the signifier of the ironic sign seems to signify one thing, but we know from another signifier that it actually signifies something very different. Where it means the opposite of what it says (as it usually does) it is based on binary opposition. Irony may thus reflect the opposite of the thoughts or feelings of the speaker or writer. (Chandler, 2002, p. 134)

What makes it difficult to identify irony is that it is unmarked, that is, “the marker of the ironic status is beyond the literal sign” (Chandler, 2002, p. 134). This means that a written ironic sentence looks exactly the same as a non-ironic sentence, while a spoken ironic sentence (unless a sarcastic tone is involved) also sounds exactly the same as a non-ironic sentence. If irony is unmarked, how is it possible to identify ironic meaning? Comprehension requires that we make a distinction between what is said and what is meant, and irony in this sense requires double signs (Chandler, 2002, p. 135). Dual meaning highlights the question of interpretation. The concept of the double signs underlines that there is a marker that signals the ironic meaning. However, it cannot be found in the sentence, but in the surrounding situation. This means that the double sign has two vectors: one literal and the other contextual. The double sign creates room for a position outside of the socio-political context. In the case of Lanthimos, the context established in this other position leads to a breakdown of style that is expressed by the emergence of the supernatural. The stylistic rule breaking in Lanthimos’ cinema is the expression of crisis, which becomes a metaphor for the political.

The Killing of a Sacred Deer directly reflects on the critical distance necessary to grasp metaphorical or ironic meaning. When Martin’s prophecy turns to painful reality and Steven becomes truly desperate under the pressure of the cruel ultimatum, he kidnaps Martin, beats him and ties him to a chair in his basement. When Steven hits him, we see a close up of Martin’s bruised face as blood is dripping from his mouth. He says: “I just want to show you an example. That’s all. Just one little example to show you what I mean.” At this point he violently bites into Steven’s arm. He continues: “Should I apologize? No. Should I stroke your wound? Actually, that would probably hurt even more, touching an open wound. There is only one way to make you and me both feel better.” We see another close up of Martin’s face as he bites into his own arm, even more violently. His bruised face is distorted from the pain and effort as the blood starts flowing from his gaping wound. He bites a whole piece of flesh out

of his own arm and spits it on the floor. The brutality of the animalistic ripping of the flesh is further emphasized by an eerie sound effect. Steven looks on in horror and disgust. With a gruesome, blood stained face Martin says: “Don’t you understand? It’s metaphorical. My example is a metaphor. It’s symbolic.”



Figure 5: Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017): “Don’t you understand? It’s metaphorical.”

When a character warns another character to open his eyes to metaphorical meaning, this should trigger suspicion in the viewer. With this hint, the film pretends to partake in the conventions of classic storytelling (one character talking to another about their conflict), however at the same time it is also an obvious hint for the viewer not to take everything she sees at face value. The ironic tone requests a critical distance: through its ironic storytelling, the film asks the viewer to interpret the depicted ambiguities and reflect not only on the literal but also on the figurative meaning.

This is what I called the film’s ironic style. The depicted world looks very similar to our own, but since some things are different, this allows the viewer to maintain a critical distance and make observations of not only the film’s but also on our own realities. The actors’

deadpan delivery and the magical ritual of the human sacrifice create a space for irony and allow the viewer to take a step back and realize the film's irrationalities. Furthermore, this critical distance also creates space for reflections on our own world's absurdities, which are expressed in the film through the notions of debt and the critique of capitalism. Irony becomes a tool that can provide this critical distance to reflect on and question established values and institutions. The film's irony can thus be interpreted as a symptom of crisis, while the film also endeavours to shape society by calling attention to certain issues.

Crisis in Greek Cinema

The year 2009 serves as a crisis point in Greek history. Maria Chalkou (2012) writes about a new cinema of emancipation:

[...] the new generation of Greek films has already articulated its emancipation from deep-rooted conventions in the domestic film culture and from international stereotypes of Greek film. (Chalkou, 2012, p. 259)

While various factors contributed to this emancipation – like the prosperity of the Greek commercial audio-visual industry, the development of new technologies and forms of distribution – the Greek financial crisis ironically put Greek cinema at the centre of international attention (Chalkou, 2012, pp. 243-259). 2009 marks the year of the financial crisis and a watershed for cinematic history in Greece. It signals the success of Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* (2009); the film was not only critically acclaimed but was also nominated for a Best Foreign Language Film of the Year Academy Award, ending a 34-year hiatus for Greece. This film serves as the starting point of a series of other films that shared a similar style and festival success abroad, which reviewers called the new "weird wave" of Greek cinema (Papadimitriou, 2014, pp. 1–19). This new cinematic trend was a new form of cultural expression and these films assumed a radical political position under the changing political climate. With their unconventional narratives, they renegotiated the conventional patterns of national cinema,

radically criticizing the traditional Greek family model, which is the core institution of Greek society (Psaras, 2016, pp. 23-24). The Greek Weird Wave and Yorgos Lanthimos' cinema is generally considered to be "the product of Greece's economic turmoil" (Psaras, 2016, p. 4). Similarly to the director's previous films, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* challenges the traditional patriarchal narrative and can be read as a metaphor for the nation's struggles (Psaras, 2016, p. 28), while at the same time the film's style disrupts traditional storytelling norms. The film criticises the traditional autocratic structure of family and nation, which "produces regimes of recognition that render some lives valuable and/or grievable, and others disposable (Psaras, 2016, p. 28).

The Unaffordable Debt

When Martin tells his prophecy to Steven about how his family members will all perish if he does not kill one of them, he says that they need to "balance things out": "Just like you killed a member of my family, now you've gotta kill a member of your family to balance things out, understand?". This shocking sentence summarizes the premise of the film, which becomes a metaphor for the concept of the unpayable debt. It is not possible to pay for the loss of one human life by taking another. The viewer is presented with problematic exchanges throughout the film, highlighting how the very concept of debt is inherently flawed. In order to explore the ambiguous interpretations around the idea of debt, the thesis introduces David Graeber's anthropological study (2014). The dubious notion of debt is also present in the original story, which inspired the film.

The title refers to a Greek mythological story, where king Agamemnon accidentally kills a Greek god's sacred deer. In exchange, Artemis orders Agamemnon to sacrifice his own daughter Iphigenia, otherwise she will not let his ships sail from Troy. Thus, this original Greek myth that inspired *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* contemplates a question about appropriate

price. In the introduction of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, George E. Dimock summarizes the play with the following questions:

Why would anyone sacrifice his daughter's life *as the price* of waging a punitive war?... What sort of military victory *is worth* the destruction of youth, of progeny, of the future of the race, which such a war as the Trojan War brings upon both victors and vanquished? (Dimock, 1978, p. 4, emphasis mine)

After Steven accidentally kills Martin's father, he spends a lot of time with the boy and gives him presents. However, Steven's gifts or his time cannot pay for his mistake. He cannot settle the debt this way, because Martin would like to exchange his now dead father for a new living father. The film starts with a conversation between Steven and his anaesthetist Matthew (Bill Camp) about a watch. Following Matthew's recommendation, Steven buys a watch and in a later scene we see him giving it to Martin as a present. The present is imperfect: Martin is not happy with the strap and later exchanges it. This present also symbolizes the inequality of the exchange between them. Steven has to pay a bigger price for the mistake he made, however, he is unwilling to pay the debt with his own life and instead decides to sacrifice a family member.

The film represents the difficulty of equal exchange and the controversy around the idea of the repayment of debt. Marcel Mauss explains the idea of gift giving from an anthropological point of view. He claims that in certain civilizations, exchanges and social contracts occur in the form of presents. Theoretically these presents are voluntary, however in reality, the reciprocation of gifts is considered compulsory (Mauss, 1954/2002, p. 3). Mauss writes:

[...] everything – food, women, children, property, talismans, land, labour services, priestly functions, and ranks – is there for passing on, and for balancing accounts. Everything passes to and fro as if there were a constant exchange of a spiritual matter, including things and men, between clans and individuals, distributed between social ranks, the sexes, and the generations. (Mauss, 1954/2002, p. 18)

Mauss describes the "potlatch" as the system for the exchange of gifts among the indigenous nations in the Pacific North West (Mauss, 1954/2002, pp. 6-7), where, according to the rule, each gift is part of a large value system and where reciprocity is always compulsory (Mauss,

1954/2002, p. 45). It works according to a rule of “competitive” giving, which means that one always has to return more than what was given (Mauss, 1954/2002, p. 28). Every present always has to be reciprocated, otherwise the gift receiver will be considered as someone, who does not pay his debts.

Critique of Capitalism

The Killing of a Sacred Deer can be understood as a critique of capitalism, illustrating a fundamental flaw in the system: unequal exchange and unpayable debt. David Graeber (2014) writes about the “moral confusion” linked to the notion of debt, pointing out the ambiguity surrounding it. He claims that fair exchange is impossible and the debt that one has to pay is always unaffordable or impossible to pay. Graeber argues that since moral obligations are regarded as debt, our sense of justice is reduced to the parameters of a business deal (Graeber, 2014, p. 13). What makes a debt different from a moral obligation is that it can be precisely quantified: that is why debts are regarded as cold, impersonal and easily transferable exchanges. The problem of transferring moral obligations into business deals is precisely what the dilemma presented in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* is about. Graeber argues that this kind of mathematical exchange transfers moral obligations into “impersonal arithmetic” and thus is able to “justify things that would otherwise seem outrageous or obscene” (Graeber, 2014, p. 14). Graeber claims that we are trapped in two contradictory notions of our world regarding debt. The first one is an idealistic vision, where the value of possessions is easily calculable, and things can easily be exchanged for one another and therefore debt is not even an issue. On the other hand and in reality, every human relation is based on the concept of debt. Since the value of human relationships is impossible to calculate, the question of “who really owes what to whom?” permanently lingers. This intrinsically links every human relation and responsibility to crime and sin, which is not an appealing interpretation.

Graeber offers a third option, which he calls human economies. Here every person has a unique value because every human being is defined by his or her relationships with others. This does not mean the selling or bartering of one human life for another is possible, but precisely the opposite: how it is impossible to pay for one human with another, because everybody is part of a huge web of entangled relationships and this makes one's price incalculable and the exchange impossible. Graeber also emphasizes that there are breakdowns in this system – slave trade and kidnapping people in a war – however, each of these breakdowns is always connected to violence (Graeber, 2014, pp. 207-208). Thus, Graeber highlights the ambiguity around the concept of debt and states that this very confusion is the basis of its power:

[...] there's no better way to justify relations founded on violence, to make such relations seem moral, than by reframing them in the language of debt – above all, because it immediately makes it seem that it's the victim who's doing something wrong. (Graeber, 2014, p. 5)

Besides cold quantification, the other defining characteristic of debt is that it is strongly connected to violence (Graeber, 2014, p. 14). Graeber writes: “the very principle of exchange emerged largely as an effect of violence – that the real origins of money are to be found in crime and recompense, war and slavery, honor, debt, and redemption” (Graeber, 2014, p. 19). *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* provides an example of this: Steven has to murder one of his own family members in order to be able to pay for the life he has accidentally taken.

The Myth of Nationalism

The payment of unaffordable debt looks less outrageous through the lens of primordial debt theory, which considers debt as an essential part of society. Its theorists argue that monetary policy is inseparable from social policy, which means that governments enforce taxes in order to create money. Governments are thus perceived as “guardians of the debt that all citizens have to one another” (Graeber, 2014, p. 56). This theory is expressed through religion; in the

earliest known historical writings on debt, the concept was synonymous with guilt and sin, and death often featured in these writings as a protagonist. Human life itself was defined as a form of debt. Graeber writes:

To be in debt was to have a weight placed on you by Death. To be under any sort of unfulfilled obligation, any unkept promise, to gods or to men, was to live in the shadow of Death... human existence is itself a form of debt. (Graeber, 2014, p. 56)

However, as Graeber points out, the problem with this theory is that if debt can be measured in the form of human life, then that leads to annihilation and the debt can never actually be paid (Graeber, 2014, p. 57). In this interpretation, any human being is constantly paying back an existential debt to the gods, however if this is formulated as a form of social obligation, it becomes less terrifying. In this way, the debt that we owe to the gods becomes the debt that we owe to society, and tax becomes a measure of this debt to society (Graeber, 2014, p. 58-59). However, how is it possible to turn a moral obligation into a specific sum of money? How is it possible to pay back humanity?

Graeber claims that the idea of paying back humanity is “patently ridiculous”, since human beings do not have anything to offer that can be valuable to the gods, who already have everything. Exchange has to imply equality and when one deals with cosmic forces or gods, this is impossible from the start (Graeber, 2014, p. 63). Conflating the idea of existential debt with the debt that we owe to society leads to the conclusion that we necessarily owe something to the state. This is why the idea of primordial debt becomes the ultimate nationalist myth in Graeber’s interpretation:

Once we owed our lives to the gods that created us, paid interest in the form of animal sacrifice, and ultimately paid back the principal with our lives. Now we owe it to the Nation that formed us, pay interest in the form of taxes, and when it comes time to defend the nation against its enemies, offer to pay it with our lives. (Graeber, 2014, p. 71)

As Graeber argues, freeing oneself from debt does not literally mean the repayment of debt, but rather showing that those debts were impossible in the first place. He claims that every

system of authority – religion, morality, politics or economics – is a different fraudulent way to calculate what is impossible to calculate. With its ambiguous ending, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*'s last scene echoes Graeber's claim. Steven in the end does present a human sacrifice, however it is not clear whether he was granted redemption. In the final scene of the film, the family of now three encounters Martin again.



Figure 6: Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017): How Is It Possible to Pay Back Humanity?

This last scene creates ambiguity by the construction of looks. First, Martin walks in through the front door and only the character of the mother, Anna (Nicole Kidman) shoots a glance at him. However, when Martin looks back at her, she turns her head away. This could indicate that while she does feel compassion towards him, she cannot relate to him after what happened. When Martin walks by, Steven slightly turns his head after him, but is afraid to directly confront him. The girl, Martin's former love interest, does keep her eyes on Martin, however her stare conveys defiance. She proceeds to put ketchup on her fries in front of her and starts eating them. Before Steven's sacrifice, she was unable to eat, so this act confirms that the wrath of gods can indeed be appeased by human sacrifice. As an acknowledgment of

this, Anna looks lovingly at Steven, which indicates that she has accepted the necessity of the sacrifice and forgiven him. One by one, the family members stand up and leave. Steven exits the restaurant without a glance in Martin's direction, since he considers his debt paid. However, the film ends on Martin looking at the family, so in the end the viewer's perspective is constructed in accordance with his. He keeps on staring, which indicates that on his part, the issue is not resolved, since the debt can never actually be repaid. Thus, the film's ambiguous ending can be understood as an illustration of David Graeber's claim that every system of authority is based on a faulty logic. The film is not only about crisis, but crisis is also formally expressed with the help of irony.

As this last scene illustrates, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* presents the idea of ironic politics and the unaffordable debt, which constitute that inherent structural problem of capitalism. The magic in the film creates a new system of reference; in Lanthimos' pessimistic vision only the fantastic has any political power. The film's representation of magic provides a critical reading for capitalism. First, Martin appears powerless against what happened to him, but later his magical powers grant him a possibility for revenge.

The Ironies of Capitalist Realism and Disaster Capitalism

In the film, crisis is represented as a series of unequal exchanges, which highlight "the systemic consequences of a logic of Capital" (Fisher, 2009, p. 47). Crisis not only refers to intense difficulty or danger from a financial or sociological point of view, but also to the reactions of certain catastrophic events that lead to a "widespread exhaustion" with ideologies like neoliberalism, consumerism, religion or communism and have thus exposed the "radical failure" of popular values in the contemporary world (Backman Rogers, 2015, p. 2). The film's ironic style highlights the inherent paradox of capitalism.

Mark Fisher coins the term capitalist realism to describe contemporary ideology, arguing how today capitalism is the only functional economic system imaginable. Capitalist realism is an abstract term that would not exist without the participation of society. Fisher claims that we would like to think that we live in a post-ideological society. The irony of this situation is that believing that we moved beyond ideology is also ideological. Our cynicism ensures the necessary circumstances for capitalism to prosper and this engenders capitalist realism. The current ideology is not an illusion masking reality, but rather a fantasy through which we make ourselves believe that we structure our own social reality:

[...] cynical distance is just one way to blind ourselves to the structural power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them. (Fisher, 2009, p. 19)

Fisher describes capitalist realism using irony. Capitalist realism poses the very threat that it pretends to offer society a shield from. In his opinion, capitalism is the only functioning system imaginable, since it constantly recreates its own inherent conditions, the circumstances needed for its continuous existence.

Similarly to *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, Lanthimos' earlier films were also critical regarding established systems and institutions. Rosa Barotsi (2016) describes Lanthimos' earlier film *Dogtooth* (2009) in terms of how it presents a capitalist criticism, emphasizing its ideological aspect. In the film a husband and a wife keep their own children completely locked off from the outside world. Barotsi points out how after the older daughter's escape, equilibrium is very quickly re-established at the household. Barotsi writes: "Just as the reproduction of capital only safeguards itself, despite its proclamations, so the father protects – not the family, nor the children – but his own power over both" (Barotsi, 2016, p. 179). She makes a parallel between how the reproduction of capital only feeds capital and how the family maintains its own ideology.

This echoes Mark Fisher's criticism: the reproduction of capital constantly recreates its own inherent conditions, the circumstances needed for its continuous existence. Similarly in the film *Dogtooth*, what is important is not really the protection of the children (since after the daughter's escape nobody actually cares what happens to her), but rather the constant preservation and maintenance of the ideology. The family has to continue its project of saving the children from the outside world. However, in reality, the only thing that is really maintained is the father's power over them.

The idea of capitalist realism draws attention to the inherent flaw of capitalism, claiming that the system is only seemingly functional; in reality, it does not actually function because of an internal problem (Fisher, 2013, p. 90). This idea emphasises the fundamental dysfunction of the capitalist system, marking the "realism" in Fisher's capitalist realism. The irony of capitalism is that if all the debts were to be paid, there would be no capitalism. The original idea of capitalism is that everything can be valued and then exchanged fairly. Thus, capitalism presupposes an equal starting point for everyone. However, this is inherently a logical problem. Exchanges in capitalism can never be entirely fair, since the members of its system do not start from the same position. The very existence of capitalism requires an unpaid debt that a system of debt can be built on. However, the truth is that there is no ideal shared starting point. This means that the *normal* function of capital is breakdown: the creation of profit always equals crisis, because it always includes this inequality.

Naomi Klein's disaster capitalism (2008) is an exaggerated example of how crisis is the normal functioning mode of the capitalist system. In her description, the exploitation of natural disasters creates an opportunity for greater profit. However, not only natural disasters, but every opportunity for creating profit equals a small crisis, since the exchange will always be unequal. This way, any type of profit-making is the sign of crisis.

According to Naomi Klein, social problems occur because they are symptoms of the inherent flaw of neoliberal politics and enforcement of the free market – the capitalist system uses disaster to implement its policies. Similarly to Mark Fisher’s criticism, this argument points to the system’s defect and also emphasizes how it is closely linked to violence. Klein writes that neoliberalism belongs among belief systems, which are

[...] closed, fundamentalist doctrines that cannot coexist with other belief systems; their followers deplore diversity and demand an absolute free hand to implement their perfect system. The world as it is must be erased to make way for their purist invention. Rooted in biblical fantasies of great floods and great fires, it is a logic that leads ineluctably toward violence. (Klein, 2008, p. 19)

Klein argues that throughout history, capitalism was always most successfully implemented when it was preceded by crisis. Capitalism in her opinion is therefore not the product of democracy but that of corporatism. In her opinion, in time of crisis – whether imagined or real, caused by natural disaster or terrorism – societies are prone to losing touch with their principles because of anxiety and fear, and thus becoming more accepting of greater change. In a state of collective regression, members of society do not protest against changes that they would normally resist in times of peace. She writes:

An economic system that requires constant growth, while bucking almost all serious attempts at environmental regulation, generates a steady stream of disasters all on its own, whether military, ecological or financial. The appetite for easy, short term profits offered by purely speculative investment has turned the stock, currency and real estate markets into crisis-creation machines, as the Asian financial crisis, the Mexican peso crisis and the dot-com collapse all demonstrate. (Klein, 2008, p. 426)

She argues that politicians in favour of capitalist systems feed on crises, since they can achieve their political goals most successfully during these times. She draws a parallel between the tactics of the shock doctrine and that of torture, since both aspire to having the subject (whether it be an individual or a nation) reach a clean state of mind, a tabula rasa that new principles can be engraved on (Klein, 2008, p. 31). Klein demonstrates how creating the free market economy in certain countries was inevitably linked to violence. She uses torture as a metaphor and makes

a parallel between the physical tormenting of individuals and the shock doctrine, a brainwashing technique for whole societies.

Klein explains that economic “shock treatment” occurs when governments impose sweeping free-market programs in the wake of a crisis, exploiting the “atmosphere of panic” (Klein, 2008, p. 8). By the time society realizes what the consequences of these changes are, reforms imposed by shock treatment have already become permanent (Klein, 2008, p. 7). The most intriguing element of her analysis is that she draws a parallel between economic shock (the free-market programs imposed on societies in the wake of a crisis) and individual shock, that is literal torture, imposed on certain people who do not wish to conform with the imposed rules. She argues for example that during the Pinochet regime in Latin America many “saw a direct connection between the economic shocks that impoverished millions and the epidemic of torture that punished hundreds of thousands of people who believed in a different kind of society” (Klein, 2008, p. 7). Klein describes “using moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering” (Klein, 2008, p. 8) as a perfected method to achieve capitalist goals.

Slavoj Žižek describes capitalist ideology similarly. He claims that one cannot exist in the world without being part of an ideology, which is the very fact of our existence, a necessary part of functioning as a human being in the world. We need ideology in order to imagine our world as functional; it is not possible to think without an ideology. Quoting Althusser, he writes: “the thesis that the idea of the possible end of ideology is an ideological idea *par excellence* (Althusser as quoted by Žižek, 2008b, p. xxiv, emphasis in the original). Identification is the process through which the ideological field is constituted (Žižek, 2008b, p. xi). Thus, in Žižek’s interpretation ideology is both philosophical and political. He writes:

The point is not just that we must unmask the structural mechanism which is producing the effect of subject as ideological misrecognition, but that we must at the same time fully acknowledge this misrecognition as unavoidable – that is, we must

accept a certain delusion as a condition of our historical activity, of assuming a role as agent of the historical process. (Žižek, 2008b, p. 2)

There is an “irreducible plurality of particular struggles”; different social groups are fighting for different political freedoms. However as long as all of these relations are dominated by capital, these oppositions and struggles will always remain unresolved, that is, “there will always be a threat of global war, there will always be a danger that political and social freedoms will be suspended, nature itself will always remain an object of ruthless exploitation...” (Žižek, 2008b, p. 4). Žižek argues that antagonism is unavoidable. He writes: “All ‘culture’ is in a way a reaction-formation, an attempt to limit, canalize – to *cultivate* this imbalance, this traumatic kernel, this radical antagonism” (Žižek, 2008b, p. 5). Instead of refusing the inherent antagonism of these struggles, the only possible solution is to embrace it.

In Žižek’s description, democracy works with the same inherent antagonism. He argues that corruption is always an inherent risk in democracy, but when governments try to eliminate this and strive to restore “real democracy” that usually leads to the very end of equality, namely totalitarianism. Žižek refers to a term coined by Laclau and Mouffe, “radical democracy” that highlights this paradox: it is radical in the sense that we can only create democracy if we accept that it is impossible: “We can save democracy only by taking into account its own radical impossibility” (Žižek, 2008b, p. 6). This inherent paradox highlights the ironic nature of democracy.

According to Žižek, we just have to accept and embrace this inherent logical flaw in our systems. We can never reach the perfect state of democracy, since if everybody had a say in every possible decision, a never-ending circle of decision-making would arise. This extreme representation would lead to an infinite reduction. *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* illustrates this inherent problem of the system that can never be solved completely. Fair exchange is impossible, and debt is always unaffordable to pay, so the only form of action is via the supernatural.

The Sorcerer's Magic

There is a transition in Lanthimos films towards the realm of the fantastic. *Dogtooth* (2009) is an enactment of false consciousness ideology. In the film, thanks to their parents' systematically oppressive activities, the children are unable to gain knowledge about their real social situation. *Alps* (2011) marks a transition in the relationship between reality and magic. The title refers to a group of self-appointed volunteers, who help people deal with bereavement by substituting deceased loved ones. This film still takes place in the real world, but the characters occupy a ghost-like state; they are alive but exist in place of the dead. *The Lobster* (2015) transitions towards the fantastic, however, it still remains ambiguous whether people are turned into animals or not and how this procedure is executed. In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), however ambiguous, magic actually occurs. The representation of a physical illness – the paralysis of Steven's children as the realization of Martin's prophecy – marks the point of transition from reality to magic. Crisis is a breakdown in function and the crisis-images (Backman Rogers, 2015, p. 4) in the film are: paralysis of the legs, inability to eat and bleeding from the eyes, followed by death. Lanthimos' films gravitate gradually from reality towards magic. This development follows Tzvetan Todorov's genre categorization. Todorov (1975) differentiates between three modes regarding how films can interact with the supernatural: the marvellous (this introduces a world where magic really exists), the uncanny (a world that could be magical, but the magic turns out to be a trick) and the fantastic. The latter refers to the constant hesitation between magic and trick – the viewer remains in a suspended, uncertain state about the supernatural. *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* is in the realm of the fantastic but teeters on the edge of the marvellous: the film keeps the viewer in suspended hesitation.

Supernatural Politics

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology (1963/2007), people are governed by the structure of their own minds. One similarity that every culture shares is the need to reconcile the notions of birth and death. When people are faced with two irreconcilable systems of reference, magical thinking is summoned to provide them with a new system of reference. In this world, where our customary social and political norms are suspended, magic needs to be summoned as the only possible means of communication.

Lévi-Strauss argues that belief in the magical powers of the sorcerer is socially constructed and maintained. Not only the healer and the patient have to believe in magic, but the whole community. Thus, a sorcerer does not become a sorcerer because he can heal people, but he heals people because he has become a sorcerer. One gains magical powers because the community believes in one's magical powers. According to Lévi-Strauss, the sorcerer only becomes a sorcerer after an initial crisis, which is followed by a revelation. In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, Martin becomes a real sorcerer because the community around him, the family, believes him. He is not a god-like figure, but rather a messenger of ancient gods. He receives supernatural powers because of Steven's guilt. This guilt is so powerful, because Steven accidentally killed a patient when operating under the influence of alcohol. Where rational thinking cannot provide answers for a given situation, pathological thought can fill in the gaps of an imperfect reality (Lévi-Strauss, 1963/2007, p. 181). Pathological thought is defined by an excess of meaning and thus can substitute normal thinking that falls short of providing explanations. In shamanic rituals, a balance is established between the two ways of thinking. When normal thinking cannot process certain ideas, pathological thinking takes over. The sorcerer, patient and audience all have a role to play in the structure – the group as a whole has to partake in creating new meanings. The whole group's existence is reconstructed in this new system. Magical behaviour is a response to an emotional situation. In an absurd world, where

we can no longer create meaning, magic is established as a new system of reference in order to make sense of the world's irrationalities.

The magic described by Lévi-Strauss is the same as Todorov's definition for the uncanny; it looks like magic, but it is in fact a trick. The sorcerer pretends to perform magic in order to provide protection against the world's irrationalities. Magic here is a response to the irrationalities that we have no control over and through the sorcerer's power, we can imagine gaining control again. Since crisis is built in the normal working of the system, only magic can serve as a weapon against capitalism. This is the ultimate absurdity; the only possible weapon is imaginary and therefore not a weapon at all. Chapter 3 develops this idea of absurdity further, arguing that the absurd is a gap, a constant oscillation between the two different ways of thinking about ourselves, expressed through the dilemma of the mind-body problem.

CHAPTER 3

Absurd Identity: Excessive Human, Lacking Animal in Nicolette Krebitz's *Wild* (2016) and Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016)

“But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational [world] and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world.” (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 7)

Absurd comedy highlights a gap between the brute irrationality of the world and the order that humans imagine informs that world. This chapter investigates what constitutes this gap from the perspective of the mind-body problem and tries to answer the question of why we humans feel simultaneous identification with and alienation from our bodies. I argue that the absurdity of this situation lies in the constant oscillation between the two different ways of thinking about ourselves: on the one hand and from a monist approach, we are purely defined by our physicality, whereas from a dualist perspective, we also think of ourselves as a combination of body and mind.

Simon Critchley defines this constitutive gap of absurd humour from a bodily perspective and introduces the concepts of “being” and “having” a body (Critchley, 2002, p. 42). He argues that what is funny is either the elevation of animal to human or the degradation of human to animal. The two selected films illustrate the mind-body problem through identification/differentiation between human and animal. In Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016), the body is associated with animality, while in Nicolette Krebitz's *Wild* (2016), the consciousness of the subject is linked to the human. “Being” a body means pure physicality, in this case we are only looking at ourselves as bodies, and *Raw* illustrates how, without the mind, humans are reduced to pure animality. The absurdity of *Raw* is the ridiculousness of the human condition, the hubris of thinking about ourselves as superior to, and different from, animals.

On the other hand, the dualist approach is apparent in *Wild*, where we see the elevation of animal to human. Todd McGowan argues that humans are “desiring” beings (McGowan, 2015, p. 23), and this is what makes them different from animals (McGowan, 2018, p. 179). We want to appear similar to animals, however this only reveals our fundamental difference from them. This difference can be grasped through the Lacanian concept of desire: in McGowan’s reading of it, humans are defined by excess, while animals are creatures of pleasure. Following this idea, in *Wild*, the protagonist goes back to being an animal of pure pleasure instead of existing as a human of excessive enjoyment. I present the selected two films as metaphors for the two ways of thinking about ourselves, with the absurd constituting the gap between them. Since the two cannot be true at the same time, they have to exist in two separate worlds and in two separate films.

In *Raw*, we will see the degradation of human into animal as Justine (Garance Marillier), an avowed vegetarian, leaves home for veterinary school. During a hazing ritual, she is forced to crawl on the floor on all fours and eat raw animal meat, because in this world, humans behave exactly like animals. In *Wild*, Ania (Lilith Stangenberg) falls in love with a wolf, wandering improbably around a park in contemporary Berlin, and brings the wild animal into her house. The film shows the impossible desire for a connection between human and animal, since the two are depicted as truly distinct.

Both selected films have strong bodily perspectives, and in conveying this physical approach, both use excessive film styles¹² – borrowing David Bordwell’s concept, I define style as narration without narrative (Bordwell, 1985, pp. 49-50), which means that narration in these films becomes more important than their narratives. Relying on strong stylistic traditions, *Raw*

¹² I am using the same definition here of “excessive film style” as I did in Chapter 1: a style that creates room for ambiguity and thus makes an ironic interpretation possible, with the help of film technical solutions.

displays an aesthetic that Martine Beugnet (2007) describes as the aesthetics of sensation, while Nicolette Krebitz's style in *Wild* was influenced by the Berlin Film School.¹³

Raw's creator, Julia Ducournau, is a French writer-director¹⁴, who acknowledges the influence of David Cronenberg's body horrors on her work. *Raw* was the film that famously made some members of the Toronto Film Festival audience faint in 2016 (Siegel, 2016); while another sensationalist news piece describes how "custom-made barf bags" were handed out to audience members who attended the film at a Los Angeles screening (Dry, 2017). These news articles purport to show how the film made a huge impact on its audience, and this effect can be attributed to its focus on depicting physical transformations of the body. A *Sight & Sound* magazine article describes *Raw* as follows:

In this acutely *physical film*, for which David Cronenberg is an acknowledged influence, Justine's transformation is *shown tangibly, carnally*, as moral and mental processes *are inscribed on the body*. Ducournau scrutinizes *skin rashes, brain matter, bones, hair and blood* with cold, scientific detachment. (Sélavy, 2017, p. 52, emphasis mine)

Various magazine reviews refer to the film as a body-horror or describe *Raw* by emphasizing its focus on the body or bodily functions and sensations: "a gut twisting work of classic body horror" (Foster, 2016); [featuring] "themes of young women's body image and the violence of peer pressure" (Romney, 2016); "as she [Justine] gets more unkempt and wild-eyed, not to mention consumed by some mysterious rash, she also becomes liberated from norms" (Rapold, 2016, p. 8); "[the] film's visceral, bloody celebration of the body and its appetites" (Roddick,

¹³ The Berlin Film School was first associated with filmmakers like Angela Schanelec, Christian Petzold and Thomas Arslan, but now the term includes a wider group of filmmakers, including Maren Ade, Valeska Grisebach and Ulrich Köhler. This new generation of directors is interested in the depiction of contemporary life in post-wall Germany and Europe in general.

¹⁴ Both *Wild* and *Raw* are directed by young female directors, featuring strong female protagonists. Julia Ducournau's short film *Junior* won a major prize at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival. *Raw* is her feature film debut, with the same actress, Garance Marillier, in the lead. Nicolette Krebitz is an Austrian actress turned filmmaker. She previously acted in films such as Katja von Garnier's *Bandits* (1997) and in her own film, *Jeans* (2001). *Wild* (2016) is her third feature film as director after the aforementioned *Jeans* (2001) and *The Heart Is a Dark Forest* (2007), for which she also wrote the script. *Sight & Sound* author Catherine Wheatley describes Krebitz's *Wild* as an "overlooked 2016 masterpiece" (Wheatley, 2018, p. 15).

2017); “explicitly juxtaposes Justine’s refusal to conform to body stereotypes with a violent, cannibalistic outburst” (Roddick, 2017); “Justine’s own obsession with flesh, blood, and human meat, along with her post-adolescent reevaluation of her own body... Justine self-observes as she experiences a carnal awakening that is just as physical, painful, and essentially transformative” (Barton-Fumo, 2017, p. 44); “In terms of the female-body politic, it’s an art-horror dirty bomb” (Fear, 2017); “It’s also a complex drama of adulthood, sex, conformity, hazing, body image and lust” (Bradshaw, 2016). *Raw* depicts the protagonist’s transformation through the changes of her body, and – expressed in the film’s accentuated film style – these create sensual disgust.

Martine Beugnet writes about the cinema of sensation as a style where “[t]he film exists first and foremost as an affective, sensory experience and its material form is the foundation as well as the vector of its signification” (Beugnet, 2007, p. 47). She describes it as follows:

Beyond the needs of narrative clarity, the cinema of sensation thus plays on the material qualities of the medium to construct a space that encourages a relation of intimacy or proximity with the object of the gaze, privileging primary identification with the film as event, rather than identification with characters caught in plot developments. (Beugnet, 2007, p. 68)

Instead of conventional storytelling (where the viewer primarily attains knowledge from what is presented on the screen), here the viewer is encouraged to give up the “sense of visual control for the possibility of a sensuous encounter with the film” (Beugnet, 2007, p. 68). Narration (the “how?” instead of the “what?”) is of crucial importance in the film.

Wild achieves a similar effect in its depiction of a human-animal relationship, focusing on the physical functions of the body (like sexual intercourse, eating, excretion) expressed through sensations in the film’s accentuated style. Nicolette Krebitz is connected to the Berlin School of contemporary directors, known for its interest in film form and observational aesthetics over traditional storytelling. Both *Wild* and *Raw* belong to stylistic traditions that

favour narration over narrative, using film style in order to convey the physical experiences of their young female protagonists.

Wild is about a lonely and introverted young woman, who is caught up in the mundane routine of everyday life. One day she accidentally notices a wolf in the park close to her home and this encounter changes her. Wild wolves approaching inhabited neighbourhoods has been a recent common occurrence in Germany. As news articles (Kaste 2018; Schultheis 2019; AFP 2019) report, the re-emergence of wolves in Germany is a source of recent political concern. A century ago wolves were almost extinct in the area; however, since the unification of Germany in 1990 they have been making a slow comeback. The wolf has recently been described in the local media as “Germany’s most politicized animal” (AFP, 2019). While environmentalists welcome the reappearance of wolves, right-wing political parties have capitalized on the fear of wolf attacks. What is intriguing in these news articles is that they often talk about the wild animals as if they were humans. For example, the far-right *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) party, known for its anti-immigration policies, is actively campaigning against the welcoming of wolves back to Germany, requesting an “upper limit” for the wolf population. With this use of terminology, their campaign language echoes the rhetoric used in its anti-immigration slogans against humans. This is a contemporary example showing how we humans often think about ourselves as similar to animals. The film *Wild* reflects on the problematics of this kind of thinking, which can be understood with the help of a dualist approach.

The Absurd as the Gap Between “Being” and “Having” a Body

Mind and body theories focus on the different ways the relationship between mental and physical phenomena can be understood, and they can be divided into two major groups: monist and dualist. Monist theories argue that there is only one type of phenomenon, while dualistic

thinking claims that there are two types of phenomena determining the mind and body relationship. One monist theory, physicalism, states that everything can be explained by the laws of physics; while on the other hand, mental monism or idealism, holds that everything can be described by mentalistic concepts such as belief, desire and feeling (Jaworski, 2011, p. 5). Even though these are opposing theories, they focus on one type of phenomenon.

In contrast with monist theories, dualist theories deny that there is only one type of phenomenon and instead argue that there are at least two types. That is, according to dualist theories, things can have two different kinds of characteristics. Dualist thinking is subdivided into two further groups, themselves defined by the kinds of entities that can have these two properties. Dual-attribute theories hold that the same individual can have both mental and physical characteristics; while according to substance dualist theories, the same individual can only have mental or physical properties (Jaworski, 2011, p. 5). The selected two films, *Raw* and *Wild*, are metaphors for these two ways of thinking.

In the world of *Raw*, humans are ruled solely by their animalistic urges and thus humans are equal to animals; whereas in the world of *Wild*, humans and animals are radically different. While there is a desire for communication between the two, the attempt for connection is doomed to failure, since transcendence between the two is impossible. The two films represent two radically different worlds, which illustrates how the two different ways of thinking about ourselves cannot exist in the same realm. Since the two films cannot be held to the same logic, their comparison uncovers the absurd, which can be defined as the gap, a logical contradiction.

Being a Body: The Hubris of Human Animal in *Raw*

Simon Critchley explains the constitutive gap of absurd humour by making a distinction between “being” and “having” a human body, since this emphasizes the simultaneous identification with and alienation from our bodies, our “corporeal housing” (Critchley, 2002,

p. 60). “Being” a body testifies to monist thinking, and can be identified with physicalism (claiming that there is only a body that is somehow affected by the mind); while “having” a body indicates substance dualism (arguing that persons and bodies are distinct). According to substance dualism, humans are purely mental beings without physical properties, which is the characteristic of bodies, purely physical entities.

We not only laugh with our bodies, but often also about the fact that we have a body (Critchley, 2002, pp. 44-45). When we experience illness, or have pain, we try to distance ourselves from our bodies, or when we think of closely described bodily affairs, it can even create distance by arousing sensual disgust (Critchley, 2002, p. 45). When we focus on the materiality of the body, it suddenly becomes laughably absurd. For example, in scatological humour we laugh at the fact that we have a body.

According to Critchley, humour takes place in this unbridgeable gap (Critchley, 2002, p. 44), since we think of ourselves as rational, thinking creatures but in reality, we are very much defined by our biological bodies. The body is “irrational” here because it is not subject to individual will but only to its own internal physical rules. Thus, it is not that the body functions in unpredictable ways, but rather that it cannot be placed under the full control of its subject. In this sense, the body is associated with animality while the consciousness of the subject is linked to the human. The two different ways of thinking are represented by the two separate films: *Raw* is a metaphor for “being” a body (since here humans are only defined by physicality), and *Wild* represents the dualist thinking of “having” a body (since humans also have a mind that is separate from that body). Thus, the simultaneous identification with and alienation from our bodies – as described by Critchley – can be grasped through the comparison of these two films.

Critchley describes the human as a “dynamic process” in continual flux between identification with the animal and alienation from it; and humour addresses this constantly changing borderline between human and animal territories. Critchley writes:

Humour is precisely the exploration of the break between nature and culture, which reveals the human to be not so much a category by itself as a negotiation between categories. [...] Thus, what makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal or the elevation of the animal to the human. (Critchley, 2002, p. 29)

Following Critchley’s definition, *Raw* is an example of the reduction of human to animals. Here the absurdity lies in the protagonist’s self-assured sense of superiority, protesting that she is not animal. Justine’s pretension is funny, because she is in denial of the fact that the human is already reduced to animal and humans and animals are exactly the same.

Raw’s primary focus on the body is obvious, and the director Julia Ducournau herself spoke about this perspective in an online magazine interview: “we all have suffering and desiring bodies, this is what makes us equal” (Build series, 2017). Many magazine reviews point out the film’s focus on animality and how humans in the film behave like animals: “people are reduced to acting (and suffering) like animals” (Newman, 2017); “the film’s complex examination of animal impulses and moral choices, brutal norms and individual principles, probes the primal, savage vein that runs through human nature” (Sélavy, 2017, p. 52); “it transforms Justine’s unquenched sexual urges into an appetite for flesh, whether animal or human” (Mintzer, 2016); “the animal nature that seems to take hold of all these budding young vets” (Prot, 2016).

Raw reveals the animal in the human, or more precisely, humans looking at themselves as purely animal, only defined by physicality. Next to the human protagonists, animals (dogs, horses, rabbits) inhabit almost every frame in the film – which takes place almost entirely inside the walls of a veterinary school – and animals are also often mentioned in the dialogue. One of the most prominent scenes in the film revolves around a pig, and this animal will become an important symbol of interchangeability.

In *Raw*, there is a direct reference to the symbol of the pig, claiming that pigs and humans are equal. When Justine and Adrien (Rabah Nait Oufella) sneak out of the veterinary school to eat a kebab at a gas station, they have a peculiar discussion with a truck driver. In this bizarre encounter, the driver insists that pigs are exactly like humans, to the point where they can swap blood with each other. While he is saying this, he keeps rubbing Adrian's ears as if he were a pet. He says:

TRUCK DRIVER: I came down here once with my pig, he had the flu.
Flu is bad for pigs. But he is better now.

ADRIEN: You have a pig in your truck?

TRUCK DRIVER: Yeah, we all do. To swap our boozier blood. Pigs are almost like humans. Have you learned that yet? Genetically or something.

With this bizarre conversation the film makes it clear that we are in the realm of the fantastic. While the world looks exactly like our own, this conversation highlights an incongruous, supernatural element; and as a result, the viewer remains in a state of hesitation about the reality of the surroundings. Here the film presents animals and humans as interchangeable, since apparently humans are able to swap blood with pigs, and with this episode the film clearly enters a fantasy world.

According to Stallybrass and White's analysis (1986), the pig can be interpreted as a symbol showing that there is no clear separation between the human and the animal. Stallybrass and White cite Paul Bouissac's (1976) description of a circus act, where an August clown pretends to be a mother with a baby. They write:

In the act, the "August" (a clown, who is normally tramp-like, "ill shaven, ill combed, ill behaved... inarticulate" [Bouissac 1976: 164]), puts on "grotesque" female clothes with huge artificial bosoms and enters carrying a "baby" in a blanket. The "baby" starts screaming and a vast bottle of milk is brought in with a rubber pipe connected to it, through which the infant rapidly sucks all the milk. When the baby cries again, August picks it up and the audience suddenly discovers that the baby is actually a piglet. (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 58)

This sudden discovery allows the audience to reflect and laugh at "what it had always 'known' but found difficult to acknowledge except in moments of frustration: that there is no clear

separation of the human from the animal” (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 59). In this interpretation, humans are associated with animality through pure physicality, and the symbol of the pig emphasizes the human-animal interchangeability.

There is another prominent animal dialogue in the film about monkeys and physical abuse, where Justine clearly identifies humans and animals as the same:

JUSTINE: I bet a raped monkey suffers like a woman.
GIRL AT CAFETERIA: So a raped woman, raped monkey, same thing?
JUSTINE: Yeah.

Here it becomes clear that Justine thinks about the human body as the same as that of an animal. The concrete statement in this scene, that humans and animals are the same, raises the question of free will. Assuming the premise that animals cannot have free will, humans here are not free, but entirely driven by animal nature. If humans think of themselves as purely animal that means they are only bodies without souls, so ethics or morality do not concern them. According to this model, the act of cannibalism becomes the ultimate expression of animality, and the film treats the human entirely as body, entirely as animal. When Justine discovers her craving for human flesh, cannibalism becomes the ultimate metaphor for animalistic urges.

In a *Sight & Sound* interview, director Julia Ducournau describes how, in her opinion, the film is a deliberation about free will. She talks about the aforementioned scene where Justine identifies animals the same as humans. Ducournau says:

Even though, of course, she’s [Justine] correct in saying that animals have rights, essentially what she’s implying in that conversation is that she doesn’t have free will. For me, the difference between humans and animals is that animals cannot make ethical choices. The film is a moral tale, it shows the birth of a moral entity...
(Ducournau as cited in Sélavy, 2017, p. 54)

However, whether we really witness the “birth of a moral entity” is uncertain. In my interpretation, Justine cannot become a moral entity, since by the end of the film she is still a cannibal and still very much governed by her animalistic urges. She does become more aware of her responsibilities; still, her behaviour points to human hubris: they think they are superior

to animals, whereas in reality, they are very much governed by animal urges. The absurdity of the protagonist's situation revolves around the paradox that, on the one hand, she does realize that humans and animals are the same, while on the other hand, she also rebels against this discovery and acts as if she were superior.

Sisyphus Is A Happy Animal

As opposed to Justine, who is in denial about her true nature, her sister Alexia (Ella Rumpf) embraces her own animality. She revels in carnal and carnivorous pleasures; and her behaviour speaks of a kind of happiness as opposed to pretension. She accepts that by their nature, both humans and animals are condemned to do the same thing over and over again and, in this way, her cannibalism is a metaphor for this endless and self-feeding physical urge. She understands that as a human, she is stuck with animality and accepts her place in the world; she even perfects a method of killing humans in a way that camouflages her murders as accidents. When she recognizes that Justine is also consumed by the craving for human flesh, she wants to help her younger sister. This is when the film's ambiguous opening scene becomes clear to the viewer.

In this opening scene, the viewer witnesses a car crash that at first looks like an accident. We see the events from far away, in a long shot. After the crash, the victim stands up, dusts off her clothes and casually walks over to the destroyed car. When this scene is repeated in the middle of the film – now from a closer shot and from the two sisters' point of view – it becomes clear that the “victim” is the actual perpetrator and Alexia deliberately jumps in front of cars. When the driver jerks the steering wheel in an attempt not to hit her and crashes the car into the trees alongside the road, she feeds on the flesh of the dead bodies.

Alexia's behaviour speaks to a kind of Sisyphian happiness as described by Camus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955/1991), Camus claims that life itself is absurd and our desire to make sense of the world around us is predestined to fail. However, he still argues that we must

imagine Sisyphus happy. He regards Sisyphus as the emblem of absurd life itself – he has to roll a huge rock to the top of a hill, yet the second he reaches the top, the rock always falls back to the bottom and he has to start this arduous task all over again – yet Sisyphus is happy because he scorns the gods for this impractical punishment. According to Camus, it is always possible to overcome every destiny by choice. His expression of scorn against the gods allows Sisyphus to find freedom in his punishment, because even Zeus has been unable to break his mind.

Sisyphus's scorn is based on the fact that he can never successfully complete his task, yet he is able to free himself from the feeling of failure and obtain intellectual superiority. This is what Camus calls living the absurd. Developing Camus's idea, Thomas E Wartenberg claims that if someone accepts her destiny and is able to look at it with scorn, she can reach the only kind of happiness achievable in a world that for human beings is absurd (Wartenberg, 2008, pp. 113-120). In *Raw*, it is Alexia, the older sister, who accepts that she is stuck with animality and that human behaviour means the endless circle of eating and feeding off each other.

On the other hand, the character of Alexia can also be interpreted as an addict as described by Todd McGowan. The addict dares to indulge in excess and, since our social structure only allows humans to enjoy excess in moderation, society necessarily must condemn the addict (McGowan, 2017, p. 20). The stability of social existence depends on keeping excess separate from everyday life (McGowan, 2017, p. 21). Alexia is a character of excessive enjoyment and thus society necessarily has to punish her behaviour, which is why she ends up in prison. In contrast, Alexia's younger sister, Justine, still wants to remain an accepted member of society and tries to fight her insatiable urges. The characters' excessive enjoyment is also emphasized physically in the representation of their bodies: the self-sabotaging nature of desire results in angry rashes, painful bruises, deep scars and loss of body parts.



Figure 7: Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016): The Self-sabotaging Nature of Desire

When in the opening scene a girl jumps in front of a car on a deserted road, the viewer is prompted to ask the question “who is this girl?” and “why is she jumping in front of a car?”. It is only later that we find out that the girl is the protagonist’s sister, which suggests that Justine will find her identity in her family lineage. The motif of inheritance by blood is highlighted in the film’s ending, when Justine visits her sister in prison: the two girls’ faces become one in the reflection of the glass that separates them. Throughout the film, the two girls communicate without words, and with the help of their physical bodies, expressing their bond through their injuries. At the end of the film Alexia gestures to Justine with the half-missing finger that her younger sister had previously bitten off. In return, Justine lets Alexia kiss the scar she had left on her face by biting out a piece of her flesh.

Having a Body: The Excessive Human in *Wild*

Diverging from *Raw*, *Wild* illustrates the elevation of the animal to human. Through the impossible relationship between a young woman and a wolf, the film adopts a dualist viewpoint and exemplifies the experience of Simon Critchley’s “having” a body. Ania, the film’s protagonist, experiences mind and body as distinct. There is a clear desire here to bridge the

gap between human and animal; however, the film depicts how a real transformation from one to the other is impossible. The source of absurd humour is again – similarly to *Raw* – based on pretension. Ania pretends to be a wolf: she crawls on all fours, slurps water from a pond and sleeps on the ground. Even though she does build some semblance of a relationship with the wolf, her transformation cannot be entirely successful, because she cannot shed her own body.

After Ania catches a glimpse of the wolf, she becomes obsessed with the wild animal. She captures and brings the wolf into her own house and hammers a hole in the wall, so she can watch it from the proximity of the adjacent room. First, she feeds the wolf raw meat, then she cooks him breakfast. First, she approaches the wild animal only in protective gear and then she gradually wears less and less clothing. In the scene where Ania cooks the wolf breakfast, she talks to the animal as if it were a human: “Do you think I am fat? Well for you that doesn’t matter at all”, she says; and there are multiple lines in the dialogue where she refers to the wolf as if it were a human lover :“I met someone”...“What does he do?”... “Nothing.”



Figure 8: Nicolette Krebitz’s *Wild* (2016): Excessive Human, Lacking Animal

When, naturally, the wolf remains a wolf, Ania tries to become animal. However, and of course, this attempt is doomed to failure, because even if she behaves like an animal, she

cannot truly become one. The ending shows how real transformation is impossible; there can be no synthesis between the purely biological and the purely social being. The wolf tears down the walls in Ania's home and the house becomes a place that visually embodies ruin, isolation and emptiness, thus becoming a representation of Todd McGowan's theory about the destructive power of desire.

McGowan argues that humans are neither purely biological nor cultural beings, but instead are defined by desire (McGowan, 2015, p. 23). According to McGowan, there are two opposing explanations about human identity in the contemporary world, both of which are false. Scientists approach identity from the point of view of evolution, arguing that our behaviour is coded in the structure of our DNA and that humans are simply animals driven by the force of nature (McGowan, 2015, p. 23). As I have discussed in the previous section, this is the viewpoint that *Raw* adopts: humans are simply animals. The second point of view is that culture makes us really human (McGowan, 2015, p. 23). According to this view, humans are clearly distinct from animals and what makes them different is that their lives are governed by social rules.

In *Wild*, we see a rebellion against these social rules. Ania has no family or rather, she is on the verge of being left behind by all of her remaining family members. She has no parents; her sister is moving out to live with her boyfriend, and her grandfather is dying in hospital. She feels alienated from her surroundings, because she recognizes that her goals are not achievable in our socially governed world. Once she falls in love with the wolf, she leaves all human contact behind and decides to live a different life. Violating social norms is satisfying for the absurd, because this way the person living according to absurd freedom "distinguishes himself [herself] from the herd" (Shaw, 2017, p. 126). Ania chooses this absurd freedom through her decision to leave civilization.

According to McGowan's psychoanalytic reading, the two aspects of defining humans (as either purely biological or merely social beings) cannot exist in synthesis and that is why psychoanalysis rejects both of these explanations and instead approaches the definition of human identity from the point of view of desire (McGowan, 2015, p. 23). Since humans are neither purely biological nor merely cultural, there is no synthesis but rather a violent collision between these two entities, which means that there is always an inherent antagonism between the two sides (McGowan, 2015, p. 24). Following a Lacanian understanding of desire, McGowan claims that we are desiring humans; however, desire is linked to our own self-destruction because it is in our nature to self-destroy through desire (McGowan, 2015, p. 46). We constantly sustain our desire by self-sabotaging our own efforts, creating an endless cycle of desiring and failing to obtain the object of desire. Desire can never be satisfied because then it is no longer a desire. It is not the object of desire that we really want, but the sustaining of the process of desiring, which can only be achieved by constantly failing at obtaining the (falsely identified) object of desire. What humans really enjoy is desiring itself, which is linked to repeating failure and loss (McGowan, 2015, p. 45). This means that we do not desire the object of desire, but the (presence of the) obstacle that creates it. This is the main point of McGowan's theory: it is the self-sabotaging nature of human behaviour that constantly sustains this endless circle. He argues that we not only cherish our failures but also organize our whole existence around them and the irony of this situation is that we can only succeed if we embrace the inevitability of failing (McGowan, 2015, p. 45). We also organize our society around this paradox, which is why there is an inherent antagonism between the individual and the social order. This disunity means that society can never function successfully (McGowan, 2017, p. 15). In *Wild*, Ania recognizes that human beings are defined by desire and instead chooses the pure pleasure of being an animal. In this sense, she chooses the absurd as described by Camus

and decides to live life with passionate intensity (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 19). She chooses the pure pleasure of being an animal as opposed to the excessive enjoyment of being human.

Pleasure and Enjoyment

The absurdity of desire is that humans do not actually desire the object of their desire, but the obstacle that prevents them attaining it. McGowan's theory calls attention to the difference between enjoyment and pleasure, where pleasure signals a positive experience and enjoyment means painful pleasure (McGowan, 2017, p. 73). Pleasure is always an end point, since it means the end of an excessive stimulation, whereas enjoyment means too much pleasure, an inherent excessiveness that equals suffering (McGowan, 2015, p. 55). McGowan describes a significant turning point in Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, which is found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Here Freud argues that the death drive overrules the pleasure principle, which means that humans ultimately seek suffering instead of pleasure (McGowan, 2017, pp. 73-74). In this way, the theory of excessive desire shares the Existentialist idea that life is essentially meaningless. Since life has no ultimate purpose, humans find a substitute purpose in pleasure. However, the concept of pleasure is problematic, because humans are only able to enjoy pleasure in excess, and excess is always created by loss, thus enjoyment in excess ultimately always leads to suffering.

Lack and Excess

McGowan bases his theory of comedy on these psychoanalytic concepts of lack and excess. Comedy occurs when we suddenly discover a connection between seemingly unconnected elements and this discovery takes us by surprise, which means that the comic moment happens at the intersection of lack and excess. The surprise is the punchline of a joke or the climax of a funny scene (McGowan, 2017, p. 9). Everyday life hides comedy and when comedy takes us

by surprise, this shakes us (McGowan, 2017, p. 11). Comedy reveals the connections that our everyday life hides and this means that this revelation is always traumatic.

The excessive nature of our enjoyment makes it clear that excess comes into existence through lack. Even though they are necessarily opposed, excess is always born out of lack (McGowan, 2017, p. 23). This is why every lack is always excessive, and every excess is necessarily lacking (McGowan, 2017, p. 13). The sites of lack and sites of excess are always at a distance from each other (e.g. the rich live far from the poor). We do not notice this in our everyday life, but comedy makes it apparent (McGowan, 2017, p. 15). Since we are desiring beings, we can only enjoy desiring what we do not have, and comedy makes us see that lack and excess are always inherently linked (McGowan, 2017, p. 17). I argue that the comparison of the two films, *Raw* and *Wild*, makes this link between lack and excess visible.

In an article titled “Like an Animal: A Simile Instead of a Subject”, McGowan writes about the human-animal identification/differentiation problem from a perspective opposite to that of *Raw*. He argues that we only pretend to be animals and that the more we want to appear similar to them, the more we expose our fundamental difference (McGowan, 2018, p. 179). Humans and animals are the same only at first glance. Indulging in excess is characteristic only of humans and cannot be found in the animal world (McGowan, 2018, p. 179). Using animal similes as an example, McGowan argues that the excessiveness of the animal simile – where we compare humans to animals, like “brave as a lion” – actually highlights a lack. Through the comparison to animals, we imagine a lost connection to nature that we never had. The difference between animals and humans (the “speaking subject”) is that we have excess. When subjects begin to speak, they must relate to their animality indirectly:

In one sense, there is no doubt that the human is an animal. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the emergence of subjectivity causes human animality to undergo a radical transformation. A rupture occurs when the human animal acquires the ability to speak and thus to become a subject. The speaking subject is no longer directly an animal but must relate to its animality indirectly. It is not simply ideology or human narcissism that has led to the insistence on the subject’s exceptionality. The

exceptional status of the speaking subject in relation to the animal world constantly confronts one when witnessing subjects acting in ways that animals do not. It is not that subjects can surpass animals in their intellectual achievements or cultural accomplishments but that they indulge in excesses that one cannot find in the animal world. (McGowan, 2018, p. 179)

Wild is an illustration of how humans relate to their animality. As McGowan argues, we express our own isolation from the world by comparing ourselves to animals. Stuck in a position of alienation, we use animal terms to describe ourselves in order to take up the direct relation to the world we imagine that animals have. The animal has an imaginary immediacy that subjects believe themselves to have lost, and the animal simile is an effort to recapture this lost immediacy, which we never actually had (McGowan, 2018, p. 184). We place our excessive relation to the world in animal terms in order to simultaneously indicate and obscure its excessiveness (McGowan, 2018, p. 184). What really makes us different from animals is that we engage in activities that are excessive. Since humans are ultimately defined by desire, they can only enjoy without restraint, a trait which is, according to McGowan, absent from the animal world (McGowan, 2018, p. 179). This means that the animal only has pleasure, whereas what makes humans different from animals is that they are only able to enjoy desiring what they do not have and that is why they only enjoy too much and therefore painful pleasure.

A scene in *Wild* in Ania's office introduces this relationship between lack and excess. Ania walks into the office where two men are cleaning. They tell her that she is too beautiful to work there. She answers that they are too beautiful to clean there. She sits on the top of the table and the two men start kissing her. The boss walks in and says: "I am going to go out and walk in one more time". The humour here comes from the repetition. The excessiveness of the sexual partners ultimately speaks of the lack. Humans are only able to experience pleasure in excess and too much pleasure is always destructive (after this encounter she sets the office on fire). There is no real connection here between the human characters. The excessiveness shows

how the protagonist is completely uninterested in developing human relationships. This repetition can be understood as the repetition of constant loss and failure.

In this scene, lack and excess coincide, and the collision reveals the self-deceptive nature of humans. However, the protagonist's transformation cannot be fully successful, because she cannot shed her human body. Tanja Prokić describes Ania's transformation in a Deleuzian way, writing:

[...] she also does not become antisocial or leave civilization entirely behind. Rather, she makes the choice to embrace ongoing change, something that should be considered not as following the call of the wild but as following a call of becoming-wolf, which means facing a question beyond answering: how not to be governed in a neoliberal world. (Prokić, 2017, p. 134)

Ania's behaviour can be interpreted as rebellion against life in a neoliberal world. The film presents a critique of capitalism through the depiction of the character's relationship to clothes. Ania wears an unattractive, simple outfit: scruffy jeans with a shabby coat. She goes to a garment factory with her boss, where huge piles of valueless and disposable clothes flow on massive conveyor belts. The excessive amount of clothing exposes the failure of capitalism, that is, how it only encourages wastefulness instead of useful spending. McGowan writes:

Unlike useful spending, wasteful spending – acts of pure sacrifice of money – have no future prospect of abundance. Spending on war will never result in abundance because the demand is infinite. One can keep fighting wars until there is no one left to fight – and, even then, one can continue to produce useless weapons by imagining the emergence of future enemies. In the same way, investment in gold mining wastes resources without any prospect of cutting into demand. The appeal of wasteful spending lies in its inability to satiate a demand and thus in its infinite status. It puts people to work without the prospect of their work eliminating its own utility through overproduction. (McGowan, 2016, p. 104)

McGowan uses the same argument here to explain the workings of capitalist ideology. Since we are desiring beings, we never desire the object of our desire but the act of desiring. A desire is only a desire as long as it is not satisfied. Capitalism is a system that takes advantage of the human psyche, since it encourages our inherent dissatisfaction. It is a system that is built on the promise of satisfaction that is forever unattainable (McGowan, 2016, p. 30). Subjects in a

capitalist system do not realize that their satisfaction is the constant failure and repetition of dissatisfaction. Every time we buy a new product, it only offers pleasure temporarily, but then we desire the next product, which presents us with the promise of even greater satisfaction (McGowan, 2016, p. 42). Capitalism is a fitting system for creating this illusion of desire, since it offers constant possibilities for us to find what we want to desire. It is built on a fantasy, so we can live in this perpetual illusion.

Slavoj Žižek describes the ideology of capitalism with the example of a chocolate laxative: “‘Do you have constipation? Eat more of this chocolate!’ In other words, eat the very thing that causes the constipation in the order to be cured of it” (Žižek, 2008a, p. 18). The thing itself is the remedy against the very threat it poses (Žižek, 2008a, p. 18). This provides a psychoanalytical explanation of why capitalist ideology works so effectively even though it is flawed in theory and why we live in a permanent state of crisis.

This is why the animal world where Ania and the wolf escape to at the end of the film is a world of simple pleasures. They leave the city, go through the forest, and end up in an isolated, rocky desert. It seems like they have arrived at a place that is either the end or the beginning of the world: a place of utopia, where there is nothing, but just enough to eat, drink and enjoy the sunshine. *Wild* ends with a close up of Ania’s face. She is happily smiling because she has left the world of desire behind.



Figure 9: Nicolette Krebitz's *Wild* (2016): She Has Left the World of Desire Behind

Krebitz's film focuses on activities which human beings can only enjoy excessively (like eating, sex, shopping), and the protagonist in the film revolts against the excessive enjoyment of these activities. Ania chooses to stop being a creature of excess defined by desire, and instead chooses to become an animal, a beast of no consciousness, that purely reacts to the world around it as a physical, instinctual being. In a world where humans are defined by excessive enjoyment, she chooses the animal world of pure pleasure. In this sense, becoming animal means giving up the burden of freedom that is part of being an individual. Here becoming animal means giving up the freedom of being an individual, and the solution at the end of the film introduces the idea of a different freedom: the return to being animal. Even though real transformation is not possible, the film leaves a small room for hope at the end, with the possibility of entering a magical world.

Entering the Fantastic

Through their excessive representations, both *Raw* and *Wild* enter the realm of the fantastic, where ambiguity keeps the viewer in suspended hesitation. This Todorovian mode (1975) of a

film's interaction with the supernatural refers to the constant hesitation between magic and trick. In the realm of the fantastic, the viewer remains in a suspended, uncertain state about the supernatural.

It is ambiguous whether Ania truly becomes a wolf, since the viewer never actually witnesses a transformation other than in her behaviour. The nature of Justine's condition in *Raw* and how it is passed on in her family like a disease is similarly ambiguous. Do these films present supernatural transformations or do these female characters simply go insane? It is this ambiguity that creates space for the fantastic. The films present extreme situations, where the viewer cannot fully explain what she is witnessing and whether it is supposed to be taken seriously or not. This absurdity is expressed in the films' materiality with the help of exaggeration. The absurd becomes the site of excess, which is inseparable from the lack that creates it.

Nicolette Krebitz's world in *Wild* is a representation of Todorov's fantastic; however, in its closing scene the film enters the territory of the marvellous, where magic really exists. The film's ending can be interpreted as a magical ending, where Ania becomes the wolf herself. Initially she desires death (the wolf could easily kill her in her own home). However, by the end of the film, she successfully attains her new identity without dying and with the help of magic. She does not die, but literally incarnates the wolf. The film ends with a close-up shot of her smiling face.

McGowan argues that miracles are funny. Miracles are always necessarily excessive by their nature and this "excessiveness of the miracle attests to the lack of God" (McGowan, 2017, p. 40). This means that miracles shine light on how miserable the world really is, since if the world were a perfect place to live (and if there was a perfect God), there would simply be no need for miracles. This is why miracles are always funny: they underline the inevitable relationship between lack and excess. The excessiveness of the miracle attests to the absence

of God (McGowan, 2017, p. 40). *Wild* reveals a similar discovery in the end, where the miracle of the protagonist's transformation also speaks to her lack of transformation. She laughs but her laughter is a fool's laughter. Ralph Lerner (2013) argues that the wise fool's laughter is always ironic:

In their several ways, these wise fools frustrate our plans by inviting us to pause and see an issue in the round. They make us aware of the limiting presuppositions with which we so assuredly view the world. Pretending to know little or nothing, the fool deploys his irony in shaming us worldly-wise people to recognize how little we understand. (Lerner, 2013, p. 5)

Paradoxically, by admitting knowing little about the world, the fool's irony highlights the ignorance of those around her. This way laughter will be an expression of absurdity, since the fool recognizes this incongruity.

Being and Having a Body: The Comparison of the Two Films

Raw is an illustration of "being" a body, where human beings are purely defined by physicality and are equal to animals; whereas *Wild* is a depiction of "having" a body, where animals and humans are clearly distinct. The first case is an example of monist thinking, where the mind and the body together is associated with animality; the second example adopts the viewpoint of substance dualism, arguing that minds and bodies are distinct. In the latter film, the consciousness of the subject is linked to the human. This is in contrast with animals, who can be thought of as purely physical entities.

The comparison of the two films uncovers absurdity. Their excessive representations call the viewer's attention to our own world's irrationality. The absurd is a gap, a constant oscillation between the two different ways of thinking about ourselves. On the one hand, we are purely defined by our physicality. On the other hand, we also think of ourselves as a duality of body and mind. Since these two approaches are mutually exclusive ways of thinking, this gap constitutes a logical contradiction and there is a constant oscillation between the two. In

the first case, in *Raw*, we saw that humans pretend not to be animals, but at the same time the human is already reduced to animal, so the absurdity revolves around human pretension in acting superior. In the second case, in *Wild*, we looked at the illustration of Todd McGowan's argument that we indeed constantly pretend to be close to animality when in fact we remain distant. The more we want to appear similar to animals, we actually expose our fundamental difference from them.

In Chapter 4, the absurd will manifest itself through the comparison of two unsatisfactory and non-rational endings. This will further emphasise the idea that no matter our ideology, the world will never behave accordingly.

CHAPTER 4

Absurd Death: Suicide as an Existentialist Motif in Jessica Hausner's *Amour Fou* (2014) and Ildikó Enyedi's *On Body and Soul* (2018)

“Would you care to die with me?” Heinrich in *Amour Fou*
“I feel like I’m going to die. I love you so much.” Endre in *On Body and Soul*

This chapter investigates absurdity from an Existentialist point of view, developing Albert Camus’s idea on suicide in his famous essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955/1991). Camus considers suicide a logical but inadequate reaction to the world’s meaninglessness, and introduces Sisyphus as a rebellious hero in order to illustrate how it is possible to embrace absurdity. Camus’s definition of the absurd is central to Existentialist thinking and it allows him to contemplate suicide – “the one truly serious philosophical problem” (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 1) – from a unique perspective. Whereas suicide is usually understood as the expression of mental or social disorder, Camus claims that the decision that life is not worth living is a completely sane reaction to the world’s absurdity (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 2). Because of this, the question is not “why would someone decide to die?”, but rather “why do we keep on living?”. Why does everyone *not* commit suicide?

This chapter presents an Existentialist reading of the representation of suicide in Jessica Hausner’s *Amour Fou* (2014), with corroborative examples from Ildikó Enyedi’s *On Body and Soul* (2018). I argue that the comparison of the two films uncovers absurdity and their Existentialist reading forces reflection on our own world’s irrationality. The absurd is a gap, a constant oscillation between the two different ways of thinking about ourselves and our world, and this makes the viewer recognize either that the realization of our desires is unsatisfactory, or that happiness is possible but only in the realm of fantasy.

Of course, suicide is not simply a philosophical question. An abundance of academic literature examines its sociological and psychological aspects, with Émile Durkheim's seminal study (*Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, 1897/2002) probably being the most prominent example. However, the focus of this chapter is not sociology; rather, my aim is to buttress my Existentialist analysis of cinematic suicide with Camus's philosophy. When discussing whether life is worth living, Camus establishes a difference between the meaningless (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 5) and the unbearable (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 24). This differentiation is key to understanding Camus's argument, which claims that even though life is meaningless, it might still be worth living. The unbearable refers to a particular sorrow or loss that the individual experiences and deems impossible to overcome (O'Dwyer, 2012, p. 173).¹⁵ This chapter focuses on suicide as a reaction to the world's meaninglessness and does not investigate suicide from the point of view of the unbearable.

The question of whether life is worth living is strongly connected to the ideas of authenticity and freedom of choice, which are foundational concepts for Existentialist philosophy. Although strictly speaking, the only self-proclaimed Existentialist philosophers were Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, the thesis here discusses ideas by Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus as instances of Existentialist philosophy. Both Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence thought experiment and Camus's discussion about the world's absurdity highlight the importance of authenticity, which is central to Existentialist thinking.

With a focus on authenticity, the films *Amour Fou* and *On Body and Soul* invite an Existentialist reading in their depictions of suicide. In order to discuss the cinematic representation of suicide in these films, I am first going to define three different categories of suicide films and then look at how the selected films fit or disrupt these categories. The theme

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek makes a similar differentiation between different forms of suicide in the documentary film *Zizek!* (Astra Taylor, 2005), when he argues that there should be a "medical or psychiatric advisory committee" deciding whether a suicide is a true metaphysical suicide or a case of psychological crisis.

of each category is based on an Existentialist idea and, through the introduction of these themes, I show how the representation of cinematic suicide can be read as an Existentialist motif. The first category's protagonist has to attempt suicide in order to be able to live an authentic life; the second category considers time-loop films and how these can be interpreted through the Nietzschean idea of Eternal Recurrence; and the third explores the idea of self-destruction and how it relates to this thesis' overall argument on the definition of crisis as a critique of capitalism. Suicide films belonging to any of these categories often feature melancholic characters, so this chapter will also introduce the Existentialist idea of melancholy and its relationship to suicide as represented in the films under discussion. The film examples do not constitute an exhaustive list of suicide films; my aim is rather to illustrate how it is possible to read these films from an Existentialist perspective.¹⁶ This overview of Existentialist suicide films will serve as an introduction to the analysis of this chapter's two films: *Amour Fou* and *On Body and Soul*.

Developing Michele Aaron's analysis on the cinematic language of dying in mainstream Hollywood cinema (2015), the selected films – in their absurd representations – disrupt this mainstream language through different filmmaking styles. *Amour Fou* uses various alienating film-technical solutions (framing, editing and acting); whereas *On Body and Soul* illustrates a “haptic-phenomenological” filmmaking style (Sorfa, 2018, p. 3/19). The films' disruptive visual representations convey the feeling of Existential alienation from the world. By bringing together ideas on the absurd, my argument here feeds into the broader hypothesis of the thesis on crisis as capitalist critique. As this chapter will discuss through the example of

¹⁶ Consistent with the overall thesis methodology, this chapter presents a qualitative more than a quantitative analysis, where the connection between certain films is not necessarily chronological but analogical. My goal here is not to map out the full history of suicide film, but to consider some key examples of the representation of suicide in European cinema from an Existentialist point of view. The main selected films (in this as in every other chapter) are award-winning, critically acclaimed European films, which were screened at major European film festivals. The thesis ascribes to the idea that every cinema is transnational and aspires to complicate the reductive opposition between European (as artistic) and American (as entertaining) cinema. In order to show how interrelated these cinemas are, I am using some American examples.

disaster film (understood here as Earth-suicide film), these films question the prevalent ideology of capitalism both in their narratives and narration. Capitalism is a suitable system for creating an illusion of desire, since it offers constant possibilities for us to find what we want to desire (McGowan, 2016, p. 42). Existentialism is its attendant philosophy, since with its focus on freedom, it maintains a permanent illusion about choice. Thus, with the example of disaster film, I create a link to the broader argument of the thesis. Through an Existentialist reading of the representation of suicide in these films, crisis can be interpreted as a logical contradiction of the capitalist system.

Absurdity and Suicide

Suicide has long occupied the thoughts of philosophers, from as early as the Classical period of Ancient Greece. Plato for example contemplated the immortality of the soul in *Phaedo*, discussing the final days of Socrates (Miles, 2001). While this chapter explores suicide as a philosophical question, various other intellectual fields approach the topic from different points of view. Émile Durkheim's seminal sociological study, *Suicide* (1897/2002), investigates the possible external social causes of intentional self-killing. There are works that seek an overarching definition of suicide (Giddens 1966; Shneidman 1985; Kreitman 1988), while C.A. Soper in *The Evolution of Suicide* (2018) explores its possible evolutionary origins. Countless contemporary scholarly articles discuss the psychology of suicidal behaviour (see for example Westefeld & Borden 2019; O'Connor & Nock 2014; Chatard & Selimbegović 2011). Many academic articles explore country-specific aspects of suicide (Hurley 2011 in Japan and the US; Voracek 2013 in Germany; Das-Munshi and Thornicroft 2018 in Europe), while others investigate it in relation to a specific social group (Patterson and Holden 2012 with homeless men, Hadland et al 2015 with street youth). Scholars also contemplate religion and its relation to suicide (for example *Sacred Suicide*, Lewis & Cusack, 2014).

Suicide is also a topic of psychoanalytic theories. In the theory of internalized aggression, Freud relates suicidal impulses to depression (Freud, 1917). While Freud touches upon suicide in connection with broader theories of personality and abnormal behaviour (Lester, 1994), he rather more importantly identifies the “death instinct” as one of the two major impulses driving human nature (Freud, 1940/1964, pp. 9-10). The interdependent relationship between erotic desire and death is the major argument of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). This chapter will also examine the relationship between the death drive and the feeling of Existential anxiety in connection with cinematic suicide.

Most of the Film Studies literature examines the relationship between suicide and film from a sociological point of view. *Suicide Movies: Social Patterns 1900-2009* (2011) is a film-based social study, employing a Durkheimian approach. Here Steven Stack and Barbara Bowman investigate how suicide is portrayed in cinema by analysing more than 1500 cinematic suicides and examining the role social factors (like relationship problems, economic strain, and suicide for the benefit of others) play in self-inflicted death and how these findings can be used to develop prevention techniques. The same authors also explore suicide films in the article “Durkheim at the Movies: A Century of Suicide in Film” (2011). Other film studies articles that contemplate suicide also approach the topic from a sociological perspective. For example, Martin Storhaug Gran discusses the representation of suicide in late 1940s British cinema and argues that self-murder was “informed by the social and sexual politics of that time” (Storhaug Gran, 2011, p. 7). Storhaug Gran shows how British films in the post-war years conveyed different attitudes towards men and women in their representations of suicide, and how these works also channelled the frustrations of British society of the time.

While the sociological aspect of suicide is not the focus of this chapter, Durkheim’s study (1897/2002) still serves as an effective starting point, since it features key Existentialist concepts like anxiety and the absurd. Durkheim ponders whether suicide is a monomania or a

state of insanity, and introduces different types of “suicides of the insane” (Durkheim, 1897/2002, p. 12). He identifies obsessive suicide as the type where the person who commits suicide has no reason to die, but has a fixed idea of death that “has taken complete possession of the patient’s mind” and where the patient confesses that “[she has] no reason to kill [herself]” (Durkheim, 1897/2002, p. 11). Durkheim writes:

As the patient realizes *the absurdity of his wish* he tries at first to resist it. But throughout this resistance he is sad, depressed with a constantly increasing *anxiety* oppressing the pit of his stomach. Hence this sort of suicide has sometimes been called *anxiety-suicide*. (Durkheim, 1897/2002, p. 11, emphasis mine)

“Absurdity” and “anxiety” appear as key concepts in relation to suicide in Durkheim’s social study, and these are also important ideas of Existentialist philosophy. While Durkheim discusses these concepts under the umbrella of “insanity”, anxiety in Existential philosophy is every sane individual’s permanent state, because we realize that we are responsible for every single decision we make in our life (Bakewell, 2017, p. 34; Pamerleau, 2009, p. 12).¹⁷ This is the reason why, in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre famously argues that “[t]o be free is to be condemned to be free” (Sartre, 1956/2015, p. 129):

... [a] man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being. (Sartre, 1956/2015, p. 553)

We are “condemned to be free” because we are the ones responsible for giving meaning to our own lives by making decisions. According to Sartre’s (1956/2015, p. 333) and also Camus’s (1955/1991, p. 5) Existentialism, anxiety is a “sane” reaction to recognizing the weight of making decisions and our own responsibility. The importance of making decisions about our own lives highlights one of the key concepts of Existentialist thinking (Pamerleau, 2009, p. 26). Existentialism is a philosophy of freedom; the main question it contemplates can be

¹⁷ Bakewell for example writes about anxiety as “inseparable from human existence itself” (2017, p. 34). Similarly, Pamerleau writes “to be free means that one is responsible for oneself, and that brings with it anxiety over the choices we make and possibly despair at having chosen somehow incorrectly” (2009, p. 12).

summarized as “what does it mean to be free?”. Freedom is an important concept in order to understand why suicide is a logical outlet for Camus when contemplating the world’s absurdity.

According to Sartrean Existentialist philosophy (we are “condemned to be free” [1956/2015, p. 553]), human beings do not have any pre-existing essence; we are born as nothing and our actions shape our personality. Freedom in this regard is not liberating, but rather a fate of humanity “we cannot escape” (Pamerleau, 2009, p. 12). The despairing side of Existentialism and why it is often considered a negative philosophy (Porfirio, 1976, p. 213) lies in the nature of this freedom. Since one is always responsible for her choices, the individual often feels anxiety and despair about having to make these decisions and about the prospect that she might choose incorrectly (Pamerleau, 2009, p. 12). In Camus’s thinking, choosing death is also linked to the idea of freedom and authenticity.

Freedom of choice and death are connected through the absurd. The absurd can be defined as a clash between the human desire for meaning and the world’s meaninglessness, since the absurd exists in the desire of the individual to find meaning in a meaningless world. As opposed to looking at suicide as the result of social dysfunction, Camus considers suicide as a logical reaction to the world’s meaninglessness. Drawing inspiration from Camus, I will show how the representation of suicide in the selected films is related to the absurd and how contemplating whether or not life is worth living shaped Existentialist thinking.

“Does the Absurd Dictate Death?”: Camus on Suicide

Even though Camus was not a self-proclaimed Existentialist thinker (“I am taking the liberty at this point of calling the existential attitude philosophical suicide” [Camus, 1955/1991, p. 14]), he is generally considered to be a major representative of the Existentialist tradition. Many academic works discuss how Camus’s work demonstrates Existentialist thinking (Wartenberg 2008; Flynn 2006; Shaw 2017). In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955/1991), he defines one of the

key tenets of Existentialist philosophy: the absurd. In this essay Camus asks, “[d]oes the absurd dictate death?” (1955/1991, p. 3) and in the opening paragraph, claims that “[t]here is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 1). When we realize that the world is absurd, the question of suicide logically follows. The world-in-itself or humanity-in-itself is not absurd, but the absurd is the clash between the two. On the one hand, humans have an innate desire for everything around them to make sense, whereas the world in its reality remains highly irrational. Thus, Camus describes the absurd as “confrontation”:

[...] absurdity springs from a comparison. I am thus justified in saying that the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression, but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation.
(Camus, 1955/1991, p. 10)

Camus here implies an essence; the desire for meaning seems to be an essential human quality. Once we realize that there is a clash between how humans would like to perceive the world and what the world is really like (never quite fitting the box of rational thinking), there are three possible reactions: philosophical suicide, literal suicide or absurd freedom. The individual either consciously takes the Kierkegaardian “spiritual leap” (what Camus defines as “philosophical suicide” [Camus, 1955/1991, p. 20]) – that is, they decide to believe in some kind of higher entity, god or divine purpose that gives the world meaning – or they commit literal suicide. To choose this latter option is to refuse to “escape consciousness” (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 20) because, according to this opposing position, any type of “philosophical suicide” decision is a betrayal of the intellect, since it intentionally avoids or sidesteps rational thinking. Camus writes: “it is clear that death and the absurd are here the principles of the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can experience and live” (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 20). Thus, in this case, ending one’s life logically follows as an almost inevitable and as the

only rational reaction to the world's absurdity. The third and final reaction is choosing to live life according to absurd freedom.

Camus does not regard suicide as an act of rebellion ("It may be thought that suicide follows revolt – but wrongly. For it does not represent the logical outcome of revolt. It is just the contrary by the consent it presupposes. Suicide, like the leap, is acceptance at its extreme" [Camus, 1955/1991, p. 19]). Camus maintains that human beings are always able to make a choice, no matter how desperate their situation. Daniel Shaw (2017) points out how suicide is a controversial idea in the writings of Camus, since on the one hand Camus condemns suicide as an easy way out (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 19), while on the other hand it is held up as an understandable and logical reaction to the world's absurdity. Shaw writes:

In Camus's eyes, committing literal suicide amounts to an admission of being conquered by the absurdity of existence, like an innocent lamb slaughtering itself. Consciousness and revolt are uniquely human characteristics, which must be cultivated with an indomitable passion. (Shaw, 2017, p. 124)

The connection between death and freedom of choice inevitably raises the question of suicide for Camus. To understand however, why suicide is an unsatisfactory reaction to the world's absurdity, it is important to address the differentiation Camus makes between life as meaningless and life as unbearable. The only satisfactory reaction to absurdity is embracing the absurd, which Camus explains through the example of Sisyphus as an absurd hero.

Why Doesn't Everyone?

The major insight of Camus's thinking about suicide can be explained through the absurd. As Roberts and Lamont point out in their article "Suicide: An Existentialist Reconceptualization" (2014), Existentialist thinking highlights suicide from a completely different perspective and this can help to inform possible prevention policies. Suicide is generally treated as a form of mental illness and the person who takes her own life is usually assumed to be suffering from a mental disorder. Camus's insight however shows the exact opposite: he understands suicide as

the only sane and logical reaction to the world's absurdity. Kathleen O'Dwyer expresses a similar opinion in "Camus's Challenge: The Question of Suicide" (2012), where she argues that the question Camus poses is not why a person commits suicide, but rather why everyone does not.

Camus however does not actually promote suicide but aims to propose an argument for revolt. That is why he introduces Sisyphus as an absurd hero and argues that it is possible to rebel against any type of fate with the right kind of attitude. According to Camus, every impossible destiny can be overcome with scorn. This expression of disdain enables Sisyphus to take his destiny in his own hands, since the only thing that Zeus cannot break is Sisyphus's mind (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 23).

Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 23)

No matter how desperate our situation is, we can always choose our freedom. Following Camus's argument, O'Dwyer (2012) points out that regarding suicide, it is important to make a difference between the unbearable and the unworthiness of life. There is a difference between committing suicide because life is unbearable and because it is not worth living. Giving up hope is not an expression of despair or nihilism in Camus's writing. Rather, it shows a willingness to embrace absurdity. According to Camus, it is possible to acknowledge that life itself is meaningless, yet still find it to be worth living. Camus's solution to the problem of suicide lies in this differentiation. O'Dwyer writes:

Therefore, Camus's dismissal of hope as an illusory ploy is contentious. However, Camus differentiates between the relinquishment of hope and the assumption of a despairing or nihilistic attitude. [...] From his point of view, hope is directed toward an unknowable and uncontrollable future and, as such, is a limitation of our freedom. (O'Dwyer, 2012, p. 171)

According to the tenets of Existentialist thinking, we humans desperately would like the world to make sense to us, but we are constantly confronted with an irrational world. According to Camus, with the realization of the absurdity of this situation comes the release of false hope.

O'Dwyer writes:

Why choose life and not commit suicide? However, in a statement that may appear contradictory to his project, Camus acknowledges that "it often happens that those who commit suicide were assured of the meaning of life" (Camus, 2005, p. 6). Again, the differentiation between meaninglessness and worthlessness is asserted. Life may be meaningless, but it may be worthwhile! (O'Dwyer, 2012, p. 169)

Life as "worthwhile" instead of life's meaninglessness explains Sisyphus's happiness. It is indeed possible to rebel against our slavery (the absurdity of life) through the enjoyment of our punishment (embracing the absurd). As *The Myth of Sisyphus* makes clear, we are all condemned to be slaves; Sisyphus's punishment is humanity's destiny. However, if we decide to enjoy our punishment ("If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy" [Camus, 1955/1991, p. 24]), we can rebel through spite, since no one is ever supposed to enjoy a punishment. The human condition is plagued by a permanent state of anxiety; however, it can be a joyful anxiety. Camus imagines the moment when the rock starts to roll back from the top of the hill and Sisyphus has to start his strenuous exercise all over again (Camus, 1955/1991, p. 24). He has no choice, he cannot stop rolling the rock up the hill again, but he can decide to put his heart into it. It is possible to use enjoyment as an act of rebellion against slavery. Camus imagines Sisyphus happy.

Camus's definition of happiness here – being able to laugh at our own situation no matter how desperate it is – is what makes life worthwhile. Camus's position can be interpreted as ironic detachment, where scorn prevents the individual from completely identifying with her desperate fate. This attitude creates space for a more removed position, with potential for laughter. According to this interpretation, it is the simple pleasure of humour – laughing in the face of the world's meaninglessness – that makes life worthwhile.

This interpretation contradicts Thomas E Wartenberg's definition of the worthwhile, which argues that pleasure cannot give life true meaning. Meaningless bliss does not seem to be enough for humans. According to Wartenberg, if we could just take a pill and experience pleasure, it still would not be meaningful enough to make most humans happy. Wartenberg writes:

[...] is pleasure all there is to life? There are pills that make people happy, but we don't think that living a meaningful life is simply a matter of taking a suitable number of the right pleasure-inducing pills. We seem to want something more, some deeper meaning from our existence. This is especially true if we think, as many contemporary people do, that there is no afterlife, that all that we have are the lives we live on this Earth. Acknowledging the fact of our own finitude leads not just to anxiety, but also to a quest for meaning, something to give us reassurance in the face of our own mortality. (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 75)

This idea of finding meaning in our life "in the face of our own mortality" introduces the question of authenticity. Authenticity is an important concept for Existentialist philosophy: in his discussion of Heidegger¹⁸, Wartenberg explains why realizing our own finitude is of central importance. Our death is certain, but indeterminate: that is, we do know that we are going to die, but we do not know when (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 71). As Wartenberg demonstrates, this means that human beings – although aware of their own finitude – act as if they were immortal, and that is why they fail to think about mortality in any meaningful way (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 72). Nietzsche expressed this thought already in 1882 in *The Gay Science* (1882/2001), where he describes death as a fellow dark traveller:

How even now everyone's shadow stands behind him, as his dark fellow traveller! It's always like the last moment before the departure of an emigrant ship: people have more to say to each other than ever; the hour is late; the ocean and its desolate silence await impatiently behind all the noise – so covetous, so certain of its prey. And everyone, everyone takes the past to be little or nothing while the near future is everything; hence this haste, this clamour, this outshouting and out-hustling one another. Everyone wants to be the first in this future – and yet death and deathly silence are the only things certain and common to all in this future! *How strange that this sole certainty and commonality barely makes an impression on people and that they are farthest removed from feeling like a brotherhood of death!* It makes me

¹⁸ The concept of authenticity was developed by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927). Academic works often consider Heidegger a precursor to Existentialist philosophy (Bakewell 2017; Flynn 2006; Pamerleau 2009; Wartenberg 2008). My argument here is founded upon Wartenberg's reading of Heidegger.

happy to see that people do not at all want to think the thought of death! I would very much like to do something that would make the thought of life even a hundred times more worth being thought to them. (Nietzsche, 1882/2001, p. 158, emphasis mine)

Here Nietzsche expresses his happiness and incredulity at the observation that human beings do not contemplate their own mortality in regard to their actions. In order to solve this problem, Existentialist philosophy introduces the concept of authenticity. Instead of traditional Western morality that differentiates between universally good and bad actions, Existentialism focuses on authenticity from the individual's perspective. According to Camus, while suicide is the only authentic reaction to the world's meaninglessness, laughing at the absurd becomes a passive admission of our fate without any meaningful action. Choosing death (literal suicide) is an authentic reaction, while choosing the absurd is passive compliance.

Authenticity

According to the philosophy of phenomenology – which is considered to be a starting point for Existentialist thinking (many scholarly works discuss phenomenology as an introduction to Existentialism: e.g. Boulé 2011; Bakewell 2017; Pamerleau 2009; Wartenberg 2008) – we can only perceive the world from our own subjective point of view. This means that the mind and the body cannot be distinct; the mind cannot outlive the body, and the individual cannot survive death. Thus, Existentialism does not submit to the idea of the afterlife of the soul, because

[...] death is final, an end to the being of the human being. And in affirming the finality of death over and against a view of death as a liberation into a more God-like existence, the Existentialists refuse to transcend one of the features of our lives – our deaths – that most firmly establishes us as the finite creatures that we are.
(Wartenberg, 2008, p. 72)

As Wartenberg points out, while some Existentialist thinkers, like Heidegger and Tolstoy, believe that the authentic self is a hidden but pre-existing, essential part of the individual, others like Nietzsche and Sartre argue that it must be created by the individual. According to these latter thinkers, the authentic self can only be created by the rejection of social norms responsible

for creating an inauthentic self (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 87). In Wartenberg's reading of Nietzsche and Sartre, if a person blindly follows social rules, that only leads to an inauthentic life. In contrast, when a person recognizes that life is finite, that can transform the person's perspective.

Recognizing that we only have this life can lead to a more authentic one, where a person lives according to her own values and not preestablished rules or expectations. Authenticity is thus closely related to the idea of freedom, since a person freely chooses how to live her life authentically (Pamerleau, 2009, p. 23). The individual will only become authentic through the contemplation of her own death (Pamerleau, 2009, p. 24); that is, our day-to-day decisions about how to live our life will attain greater importance once we admit our finitude. The cinematic representation of suicide often approaches the topic of death from the point of view of authentic living.

An Existentialist Reading of *Amour Fou* and *On Body and Soul* Through the Representation of Suicide

“Here there is nothing but blackness.” (Sartre, 1964, p. 25)

In the following, I will introduce three different readings of the representation of suicide, based on an Existentialist model. While the focus is on the analysis of the selected main films, these ideas also introduce three thematic film categories. The first category considers films in which a character has to attempt suicide in order to live a more authentic life; the second features time loop films explained by the Nietzschean idea of Eternal Recurrence; and the third explores a critique of capitalism through the idea of self-destruction and the disaster film genre. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, this selection of films does not constitute an exhaustive list nor does it present a chronological overview of suicide films. Rather it highlights important

examples showing how the representation of suicide in European cinema can be read as an expression of the absurd.

The concept of authenticity is of central importance in each category. In the first group of films, a character has to die in order to live a more authentic life. With the time loop motif, the films in the second category represent a thought experiment on how to make authentic decisions. And in the third category of films, destruction films, the characters no longer see the possibility of living an authentic life and thus rebel against inauthenticity by destroying themselves and the world around them.

Die to Live an Authentic Life: Rebirth Films

In rebirth films, the protagonist attempts suicide in order to live a more authentic life. Both Ildikó Enyedi's *On Body and Soul* and Jessica Hausner's *Amour Fou* revolve around the question of authentic living (or authentic dying). The representation of suicide as an authentic choice has a long history in European (and American) cinema. While Enyedi's film joins this category by (at least partially) affirming its tradition, Hausner's film offers an ironic reinterpretation.

On Body and Soul represents suicide as an authentic choice. The protagonist Mária (Alexandra Borbély) chooses to die rather than to live an inauthentic life. The suicide attempt will eventually be the event that leads to the film's happy ending and offers a chance of rebirth for the character. Through the motif of suicide, *On Body and Soul* investigates the relationship between dream and reality and more specifically, the impossibility of a dream becoming reality.

In Ildikó Enyedi's film, the two protagonists – Mária, a woman and Endre, a man – work at a slaughterhouse in present day Budapest. In their everyday lives they struggle with social relationships, but they are able to connect with each other in their dreams. While the dream world represents a blissful romantic fantasy, they are unable to build a romantic

relationship in the real world. After multiple failed attempts, Endre (Géza Morcsányi) suggests ending the romance, a rejection that leads to Mária's decision to end her life.

In the suicide scene, Mária meticulously tidies up her environment, lies in the filled bathtub and cuts her wrist with a piece of glass. The film's representation of suicide reinforces what Michele Aaron calls the mainstream cinematic language of dying (Aaron, 2014, p. 154). Aaron argues that in mainstream Hollywood cinema, the representation of suicide is often connected to the idea of femininity and portrayed according to a certain representational logic of visual pleasure (2014, p. 52). Thus, in the case of female characters, suicide is depicted with an aesthetic that Aaron calls the "necromanticisation of femininity" (2014, p. 52), where "a woman is figured as beguilingly and prophetically ethereal", and "she embodies a romance with death" (2014, p. 52). There is an "erotic economy" at work in this representation, where the "to-be-dead woman" is portrayed as a visual spectacle and "as [an] inevitable projection of male desire and despair" (2014, p. 52). This aesthetic is on full display in *On Body and Soul*: a young and beautiful naked woman is lying against a perfectly white backdrop, in pristine water, while listening to a heart-breaking romantic song.



Figure 10: Ildikó Enyedi's *On Body and Soul* (2018): Romance with Death

Despite the fact that death is generally considered a sensitive topic, cinema abounds with images of dying (Aaron, 2015). In *Death and The Moving Image*, Aaron explores the cinematic

representation of death and its psychological, philosophical and aesthetic foundations. Aaron points out that mainstream cinema usually favours uplifting endings and thus shies away from depicting morbid or nihilistic versions of self-endangerment. She argues that when suicide appears in Western cinema (even when it is of climactic importance), it is never of essential importance to the film's story. Indeed, in *On Body and Soul*, suicide is not what the film is about; rather, it serves as a tool, representing an authentic choice for the character against inauthentic living and eventually to the film's happy ending.

Aaron argues that there is a cinematic language of death and dying in mainstream Hollywood cinema. The two most important characteristics of these representations are triumph and futurism. She also argues that cinematic dying is gendered, racialized and normative (Aaron, 2014, p. 154).

I have shown that there is a cinematic language of dying. It is rich and multifaceted but heavily censored nevertheless. It suppresses, still, the banality and brutality of bodily decline to promote the sociocultural and positivist fantasies of late capitalist culture. (Aaron, 2014, p. 155)

In its representation of suicide, *On Body and Soul* imitates mainstream Hollywood cinema, which promotes "positivist fantasies" of late capitalist culture as described by Aaron. While suicide is represented as triumphant (it will lead to the film's happy ending) and visionary (the character has to attempt suicide in order to live authentically), the film also slightly disrupts this mainstream representation through its sense of humour.

While Mária is lying in the bathtub with a bleeding wrist, her portable CD player breaks down and stops playing the romantic song she was listening to. She becomes frustrated but decides to stay in the water. At this point her mobile phone starts ringing in the other room and she decides to get out of the bathtub to answer it. Of course, Endre is calling. They engage in small talk about their evening activities. "I was listening to music", says Mária. They are about to hang up when Endre tells his soulmate "I feel like I'm going to die. I love you so much". The irony of this situation is that he talks about dying while Mária is standing naked in the

bathroom dripping blood from her wrist. Endre is reflecting on dying from love, whereas Mária is actually in the process of dying. While this scene is undeniably touching and the characters express genuine emotions, the tone is darkly humorous. Mária says she just “quickly has to take care of something” before she goes to see Endre: she stops by the hospital to have her bleeding wrist mended, which she temporarily fixes with Sellotape.

While the characters eventually initiate a romantic relationship in the final scene of the film, their connection starts to become ambiguous. The world of ideal happiness was their dream world: they were able to meet and find companionship in their dreams as deer. However, when they connect in real life, this dreamworld disappears. In the final conversation of the film, they reflect on how the previous night (the first night they spent together as a couple) they stopped dreaming.

ENDRE: “By the way, what did we dream last night? Somehow, I can’t remember.”

MÁRIA: “I don’t think I dreamed anything.”

After they say this, the film cuts to the snowy forest – their dreamworld – which is now deserted; no deer can be seen anywhere. The film ends with the image of this empty, silent forest. Their ideal world of bliss is now lost to them.

In Jessica Hausner’s film *Amour Fou*, the real tragedy is that, not only is it impossible for the characters to live authentically, but they also utterly fail in their quest to commit suicide in a meaningful way. Thanks to its deadpan performances and alienating visual style, *Amour Fou* presents an ironic reinterpretation of what it means to live and die authentically.

***Amour Fou*’s Ironic Film Style**

The first dialogue effectively sums up the film’s premise. Heinrich von Kleist (Christian Friedel) is a troubled poet in Romantic-era 1810s Berlin. He finds the world so unbearably meaningless and cruel that he is no longer able to live in it, asking his lover: “Would you care

to die with me?”. Marie (Sandra Hüller) rebuffs him with an awkward smile as though the question had been an ill-conceived pickup line:

HEINRICH: May I ask something of you?

MARIE: Of course.

HEINRICH: Would you care to die with me?

MARIE: Of course not.

HEINRICH: But with pistols it can be very quick. First, I’d shoot you, and then myself. You would make me very, very happy.

The film follows the final stages of Heinrich von Kleist’s and Henriette Vogel’s lives. Kleist’s famous story, *The Marquise of O.* (1808), is of central importance to the film’s plot. Von Kleist and Vogel (who suffered from a terminal illness) committed suicide together in 1811. However, in the interpretation offered by Jessica Hausner’s film, Heinrich’s question and its reception suggest that there is great contrast between discussing the romantic notion of suicide and carrying out the act.

While Heinrich has Romantic ideas about dying for love, the execution of the suicide pact is going to be disappointingly mundane. This absurdity – following Camus’s notion that our ideas about the world and reality never quite mesh – is expressed in the film by the actors’ deadpan delivery and other alienating stylistic techniques (like the use of double frames, off-screen space and ellipses). Edward Branigan defines narration as disparities of knowledge (Branigan, 1992, pp. 65–72). Branigan writes: “[n]arration comes into being when knowledge is unevenly distributed – when there is a disturbance or disruption in the field of knowledge” (1992, p. 66). He argues that narration would not be possible if all observers were all-knowing. Since this is never the case, there is always a disparity between “subjects” (characters, narrators and authors) and their relationships with the objects (what is happening in the film). Film-specific techniques (such as framing, camera angles and editing) construct the viewer’s perception in order to transfer knowledge (1992, p. 66). If these techniques create distance and not work towards immersing but rather alienating the viewer, she will experience ambiguity.

Ironic distance is expressed on multiple levels in the film. Heinrich's novella, *The Marquise of O.*, is about a woman who is impregnated by an unknown man while she is unconscious. She later discovers that the man she thought she loved is the unknown man and that is why she cannot love him anymore. When in the film, Henriette (Birte Schnöink) discusses this story with her husband, Vogel (Stephan Grossmann), he finds it strange, claiming that "these things rarely happen in real life". This sentence becomes ironic, since such a strange thing is about to happen to Vogel himself. The irony here is based on a disparity of knowledge: while Vogel is completely unaware of what is about to happen to him, it constitutes a prompt to the viewer (especially with the reference to the novella) that such a strange thing is very likely to happen in the film. This opening scene sets the ironic tone of the film.

This irony is also apparent in the film's visual representation, which employs ellipses, off-screen space and off-screen voice to create ironic space, since it requires the viewer to look at the film with critical distance and a detached point of view. Most of the shots are very static, constituted from what one magazine review calls "Vermeer-like tableaux compositions" (Kermode, 2015). The action (almost entirely comprised of dialogue between characters) mostly takes place in the background of the images and the audience's view is often obstructed. Almost the entire film takes place in home interiors, where we have to peek at the characters through multiple door frames when they are not partially hidden by heavy curtains. This detached style is further emphasized by unusual camera angles. For example, when Henriette contemplates her illness for the first time, we see a close-up of the back of her head while she is talking. One of the film's most pivotal scenes not only starts with a medium shot focused on a character's back (when Heinrich loads the pistol but it does not fire, he faces away from the camera), but is actually an ellipsis: the viewer only finds out later from an off-screen voice that Heinrich killed himself.

The representation of the suicide pact is also ironic. This is a pivotal moment in the film, since the whole plot revolves around it and the characters have been preparing for this event from the very beginning. Heinrich and Henriette walk to an isolated spot in the snow-covered woods. We see a medium close-up of Henriette: first she looks away, then she faces the camera but her eyes do not meet the viewer's, as if she were unsure where to land her gaze. Heinrich walks up behind her, and when she suddenly turns towards him saying "Heinrich, what I wanted to say...", he immediately shoots her without listening. Instead of the double suicide, what we actually witness is murder. When Henriette changes her mind, Heinrich shoots her anyway.

After shooting her, Heinrich looks disturbed: we see him from a medium shot, his back turned towards the camera while he is reloading the pistol. He points the pistol to his head, but we cannot see his face, only his back. He pulls the trigger, but the pistol does not fire. He fumbles with it, puts it to his head again and pulls the trigger again, but the pistol still does not fire. Confused, he turns around and then the film cuts to the next scene. The last we see of him, he is still alive, so the film sows doubt in the viewer. It is not clear whether he still wants to kill himself after two failed attempts and, even if he wanted to, how he would be able to do it without a working pistol.



Figure 11: Jessica Hausner's *Amour Fou* (2014): He Pulls the Trigger, but the Pistol Does Not Fire.

The film works with ellipses and uses off-screen space and off-screen voice. We only find out in a later scene and from an off-screen voice that Heinrich managed to kill himself and that he used two different pistols (this reminds the viewer of an earlier scene where Henriette asks him why he is carrying two pistols, and he explains that it is in case one of them fails to work). Henriette's husband, Vogel, eventually finds two dead bodies in the woods. That shot imitates the earlier shot of the confused Henriette, with Vogel also looking towards (but not quite into) the camera.

The authenticity of both protagonists' decisions about their self-killing remains ambiguous. At first, Henriette finds Heinrich's suicide offer ridiculous, but she enthusiastically comes around when she finds out that she is supposedly ill. However, by that time her eagerness does not please Heinrich. He does not want her to kill herself because she is terminally ill: the sacrifice is not of sufficient magnitude. He eventually accepts because he finds out that the woman with whom he is truly in love with is going to marry someone else. They choose each

other because they cannot do any better: in short, they both settle and end up pretending to make authentic decisions.

Vogel's closing remark – "It was out of love after all" – sounds ironic to the viewer, who knows that Henriette's death was not out of love at all. The irony here is again created by a disparity of knowledge: the viewer has surplus knowledge compared to the character. With this remark Vogel repeats his earlier irony at the beginning of the film and remains a completely unknowing character. Having witnessed the reality of the suicide pact's execution, his exclamation sounds ironic to the viewer.

There is a stark contrast in Heinrich's repeated "would you care to die with me?" between the romantic idea of dying for love and the ridiculous sound of it when uttered aloud in all seriousness. There is an immense clash between the desired fantasy and its unsatisfactory realization. Jessica Hausner herself sums up her characters in the following way:

The male character, Heinrich, has a very strong vision of what he thinks love should be like, and he tries to adapt reality to his vision actually. For Henriette, on the other hand, this difference is not very clear. She lives a little bit in an illusion and she seems to not be able to act in a really willful way. (Hausner as quoted in Lawson, 2015)

This irreconcilability is emphasized by the actors' deadpan performances, the static shots and the alienating framing. The manner in which Heinrich delivers his exaggerated claims about life's unbearability is in stark contrast to his unaffected tone: "my soul is in such a precarious state that when I stick my nose out of the window the daylight pains me with its constant shimmering." Almost every sentence uttered in the film sounds ironic because of the actors' extremely deadpan delivery. While the words suggest extreme emotions, the characters act like lifeless robots. James MacDowell considers this type of deadpan delivery (analysing Buster Keaton's acting style) an ironic form of acting, where "there is an incongruity between a character's extremely emotionally intense conditions and a performer's extremely downplayed manner of expression that creates the humour, and irony" (MacDowell, 2016, p. 145). According to MacDowell, when an actor emotionally recedes from an emotionally heightened

moment, it creates ironic distance (MacDowell, 2016, p. 146). This means that there is a clash between how the characters are expected to behave in an emotionally overwhelming situation, and how they actually remain completely unaffected.

The characters' robot-like behaviour also recalls the type of incongruity Henri Bergson (1900) observes when discussing laughter. Incongruity is always revealed between two different concepts that are suddenly placed next to each other. According to Bergson, what is funny is when humans behave like machines; we laugh when we see "[...] something mechanical encrusted on something living... We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing" (Bergson, 1900/2007, p. 25). The incongruity lies between the different characteristics of humans and machines, who suddenly appear the same. The incongruity in *Amour Fou* stems from the use of exaggerated words which are meant to convey the heightened emotions of romantic ideals; however, these emotions are not conveyed effectively due to the actors' deadpan delivery. This incongruity again reinforces Camus's notion of absurdity: when we act out our desired fantasies, our ideas will never quite fit the world's realities.

The representation of suicide is central to both films. *Amour Fou* and *On Body and Soul* both reflect on the question of authenticity through their cinematic representations of dying; however, they also remain fundamentally different. *On Body and Soul* uses the mainstream cinematic language of dying (though the film also disrupts this with the use of humour), while *Amour Fou* presents an ironic interpretation. As these two examples show, authenticity is a key Existentialist concept that is closely connected to the idea of suicide in these films. Their characters attempt to die in order to live more authentically. This interpretation of suicide connects these two films to other European films using this motif.

French New Wave directors were directly influenced by Sartrean Existentialist philosophy. Herbert Granger (2004) argues that Louis Malle's *Le Feu follet* (1963) "is

essentially a philosophical film” (2004, p. 87). The protagonist’s pursuit of life’s meaning drives the plot. When Alain Leroy (Maurice Ronet) goes to bed at the beginning of the film, he pledges to kill himself the next day: “tomorrow, I will kill myself”. Granger observes that the question of life’s worthiness “might appear silly for someone like Alain to consider since he seems to have everything” (2004, p. 76). He is handsome, charming, intelligent and financially supported by his lovers, all beautiful women. Yet he feels alienated from the world around him. At Alain’s home – a Versailles mental clinic, which he has voluntarily checked into due to his alcoholism – fellow patients discuss philosophy and theology at lunch. His doctor asks Alain whether he is still experiencing “feelings of anxiety”, to which he responds that “it’s not feelings of anxiety, Doctor – it’s a single feeling of constant anxiety”. Alain realizes that the world is absurd, yet he is determined to make one last attempt to find something that makes life worth living. He visits his friends in Paris and examines the worthiness of their lives. His friends – the intellectual, the artist, the radical counter-revolutionaries, the rich aristocrats and their beautiful lovers – all live different but equally inauthentic lives. Following Camus’s thinking, in Alain’s eyes they are all committing philosophical suicide: work, drugs, money and even love (for loving’s sake) provide different escapes from reality. Finding none of their ways of life meaningful, Alain stays true to his resolution and kills himself at the end of the day.

As András Bálint Kovács explains, there is a direct link between Sartre’s concept of nothingness and the feeling of loneliness and disappearance, which he describes as the “fundamental existential experiences of modern man” (Kovács, 2007, p. 95). In Jean-Luc Godard’s *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), Ferdinand (Jean-Paul Belmondo) is confronted with the world’s meaninglessness after a failed attempt to find love. He attempts suicide right before realizing that if life has no meaning, his death would also be worth nothing. Kovács writes:

He paints his face blue and wraps his head with sticks of dynamite. However, just as he lights the fuse, he mutters: “After all, I am an idiot!” and desperately attempts to

put out the fuse – but a moment too late. Ferdinand realizes that after having devalued life, his death is worth nothing, either. There is no other choice: he has to accept nothingness, and he must continue to live. (Kovács, 2007, p. 95)

This description recalls Camus's description of absurdity in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The only other possible reaction to the world's meaninglessness (besides suicide) is embracing the absurd and continuing to live by "accepting nothingness."

Similarly, Czech New Wave films often feature suicide. Miloš Forman famously claimed that if you do not know how to laugh, you might as well kill yourself:

The tradition of Czech culture is always humor based on serious things, like *The Good Soldier Svejk*. Kafka is a humorous author, but a bitter humorist. It is in the Czech people. You know, to laugh at its own tragedy has been in this century the only way for such a little nation placed in such a dangerous spot in Europe to survive. So humor was always the source of a certain self-defense. If you don't know how to laugh, the only solution is to commit suicide. (Forman as quoted in Kovács, 2007, p. 326)

In Forman's films suicide is often a tool to express the sorrows and difficulties of a fatherless young generation. In *Loves of a Blonde* (1965) Andula (Hana Brejchová) admits to Milda (Vladimír Pucholt) that she tried to commit suicide by slashing her wrist with a razorblade after her parents' divorce. Milda pretends to be interested only in order to bed her. The socialist realist style of the Czech New Wave not only depicted the problems of the "small man" as realistically as possible in everyday anecdotes and non-serious life events (Forman's *Talent Competition* [1964]; *Black Peter* [1964]; and *Loves of a Blonde* [1965]), but they also expressed additional existential meaning. That is, these films are not only about their time but also contemplate universal, human problems. Similarly, in Jiří Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains* (1966), the protagonist is a human first, and a historical figure second. Milos's (Václav Neckár) main quest is to lose his virginity. When the circumstances work against him (the film takes place during the Second World War), he attempts to commit suicide. After this attempt, people around him treat him much more nicely which means he will be able to reach his goal. He also blows up a Nazi train and becomes a hero who will be remembered forever.

A very recent representation of an Existentialist thought experiment on how to live life authentically is presented in *After Life* (2018), a contemporary British black comedy television series. After Tony (Ricky Gervais) loses his wife to cancer, he becomes utterly depressed and almost commits suicide. The realization that he has to feed his dog eventually stops him from killing himself, but he decides to live a different life, one where he does not care about anyone or anything around him. He decides to do as he pleases and say out loud everything that comes to his mind without holding back. That is, he decides to live his life authentically, without conforming to any social norms.

Much of the show's humour arises from an incongruity. When Tony says whatever he pleases, it highlights the artificiality of our everyday social norms by pointing out how these rules often forbid us to speak or act according to what we really think or feel. According to Todd McGowan's theory of humour, everyday life hides comedy, and when comedy takes us by surprise, this "jolt that shatters the ground of everyday life" (McGowan, 2017, p. 11) shakes us. However, Tony eventually realizes that the world is not as meaningless as he originally thought. A person can only lead an authentic life if he does not hurt others. This is the problematic that introduces the question of responsibility. In *After Life*, Tony eventually realizes that even if he himself cannot be joyful, he can still make other people happy and that is a more satisfying, meaningful existence. Existentialism from this point of view can be considered as a sort of "self-help" philosophy, since it attests to the idea that an individual is always able to change and is always able to live any life he or she chooses. We have to take into consideration that humans live in a society and not in isolation from others. Sartre and Camus eventually fell out regarding this question of responsibility. Camus condemned violence, while Sartre believed that it was necessary, and that communism (a state of complete freedom and justice) is only achievable through revolutionary violence (Birchall, 2019).

In *Amour Fou*, Henriette represents complete alienation. According to Wartenberg, an alienated individual

[...] is out of touch with all the important features of his own experience as a human being, living a life according to a set of instructions that he has internalized and missing out on the sorts of experiences that most people think make life worth living. (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 83)

At the beginning of the film, Henriette claims that her authentic self is to be a mother. She tells her husband Vogel that she feels bad for the opera singer they have just heard singing, because her fame makes her a constant target of other people's judgement. Taking an opposing view, Vogel argues that she is also loved and admired by many and that she has earned a position in society through her talent, managing to achieve success alone as a woman. Henriette exclaims that she is perfectly happy being a wife and mother. Soon however, this claim is proven to be false. First, Henriette is outraged when Heinrich suggests that she is lonely and is loved by no one ("you love nothing, and nobody loves you"). She later realizes that she is unsatisfied with her life and agrees to commit suicide with Heinrich in an attempt to act authentically and with no regard to social norms. This act is especially bold in a world that is built around the importance of social decorum.

The film is comprised of a series of vignettes, most of which depict some sort of social gathering and intense discussion. The Romantic era was a period which experienced great social and political upheaval and the question of freedom repeatedly comes up as a conversation topic at social events. The romantic aesthetic experience was based on the expression of intense emotions, however what is striking in the film is how excessive emotions are in stark contrast with their extremely deadpan delivery. One of these discussions addresses a new tax reform introduced in Berlin. A guest argues that people do not truly want freedom, and that they prefer to live in slavery:

GUEST 1: "I believe the peasants would rather remain in bondage than be free like their masters just so they can pay taxes. That is an undesirable freedom, which nobody would want. They would have to be freed by force."

GUEST 2: “Exactly.”

GUEST 1: “How should a serf, who knows nothing but bondage, survive on his own! It will be his downfall.”

This recalls Sartre’s argument about bad faith. According to the Existentialist philosophy, human beings are born as nothing and it is up to the individual to give her life meaning. We become someone by making decisions and acting according to beliefs that we hold authentically. However, most people blindly succumb to social rules and that is why they live inauthentically, in bad faith. Heinrich, however, claims that he would rather die than live in slavery – that is, according to bad faith: “and yet... I would rather be free and face my downfall than remain in bondage.” On the contrary, Henriette expresses that she is happy to live according to social rules and that she is happy to be her husband’s property: “I would not. I am my husband’s property, and I should never dare to demand freedom.”

Authenticity is also closely related to the idea of death in Nietzsche’s thinking. He suggests that we have to first imagine dying in order to decide whether our actions are authentic. While death is not a central motif in Nietzsche’s writing, his thoughts on the matter of dying become clear from his condemnation of Christianity for believing in an afterlife and how this affects human actions (Foale, 2000, p. 71). The following section introduces the next category of films, where time travel can be read as a metaphor for the Nietzschean idea of Eternal Recurrence.

The Eternal Recurrence in Time Loop Films

Time loop films hold up death as the only possible solution to being caught up in repetition. Time travel in these films will be read through Nietzsche’s concept of Eternal Recurrence. Again, these films revolve around the question of authenticity in their representations of suicide. With regard to authenticity, Nietzsche is often considered a forerunner of Existentialism (Wartenberg 2008; Shaw 2017; Flynn 2006; Pamerleau 2009), since he believed

that one cannot blame a higher entity for one's mistakes but has to take full responsibility for one's actions. Death is not an overtly central topic in Nietzsche's writing. Rather, he expresses his thoughts on death in his criticism of Christianity and its belief in the afterlife. In her reading of Nietzsche, Susan Foale writes that the philosopher criticizes Christianity because it "preaches death" (Foale, 2000, p. 71). And indeed, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes about the "posthumous people", who believe in the afterlife:

"And what were you thinking?" one of them once said impatiently; "Would we wish to endure this estrangement, coldness, and sepulchral silence enveloping us, this entire subterranean, bidden, mute, undiscovered loneliness that we call life but might as well be called death unless we knew what will become of us and that it is only after death that we come into our life and become alive – oh, very much alive, we posthumous ones!". (Nietzsche, 1882/2001, pp. 229-230)

Thanks to their belief in the afterlife, "posthumous people" disregard the importance of making authentic decisions in their life on Earth. Nietzsche famously claimed that "God is dead" (1911, p. 105) and he firmly believed in the biological as the only dimension of human existence, denying any type of transcendence into an afterlife (Flynn, 2006, p. 37). This materialist point of view is echoed in the idea of the Eternal Recurrence. Nietzsche introduces the idea of Eternal Recurrence in *The Gay Science*:

What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? (Nietzsche, 1882/2001, p. 194)

Nietzsche did not believe in traditional morals; instead, he suggested imagining that "[...] everything that takes place in the history of the world will repeat itself an infinite number of times exactly as it has in the past or as it will in the future" (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 90). Eternal Recurrence can be considered as a test for determining whether a person's actions are authentic. If a person fails to do something or does something in error, she has to imagine that she will

commit that error not just once but for all eternity, over and over again. If the person is happy with making the same decision for all eternity than she can call that decision authentic. As Wartenberg points out, Nietzsche's test is an "inversion" of the Christian idea of being eternally damned for a certain sin. This idea is central to the Existentialist philosophy because, instead of the Western tradition of differentiating between morally right or wrong, authenticity (or the lack of authenticity) is used to evaluate human actions (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 90). Nietzsche's (and also Sartre's) problem with "conformist" behaviour is that there always needs to be some sort of higher authority (something external to the individual) to determine which behaviours are correct; the idea of living life "authentically" removes this reliance on an external arbiter.

Amour Fou can be read as a metaphor for the Nietzschean idea of Eternal Recurrence, and in the film this idea is echoed through the repetition of a song about a violet that gets trampled under the foot of a princess. In the opening scene, Henriette sings it in front of a small audience. When she dies at the end of the film, the closing sequence is also based on a performance of the song, but now it is Henriette's young daughter singing it. The life of the characters here is trapped in a Sisyphean fate: the children will repeat their parents' mistakes. The little girl will grow up just like her mother, living the same inauthentic life.



Figure 12: Jessica Hausner's *Amour Fou* (2014): Eternal Recurrence

The same type of repetition occurs in the scenes showing the doctor's various visits. The doctor changes his diagnosis with each visit, constantly reinterpreting Henriette's illness. That is, the film not only recalls the idea of repetition as a metaphor, but it is also built on a repetition in its structure. When the doctor first comes to visit, he claims that "perhaps this is a female complaint of a more spiritual than physical nature", a condition that it is extraordinary and difficult to understand. "Medicine is facing a mystery here," he says. From this point on, the doctor's visits become a running joke. The ridiculousness of this repetition is further emphasized by the little girl's contradictory exclamations: "so Mama doesn't have to die"? followed by "so Mama does have to die?".

Let me step away from *Amour Fou* momentarily to briefly consider the idea of repetition and its representation in European cinema. Time loop films highlight the importance of death in connection with living authentically. Prominent European examples of time loop films include: *Blind Chance* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1987, Poland); *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998, Germany); *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1998, US-UK co-production); and *Source Code* (an American film by British-born director Duncan Jones, 2011). Famous American counterparts are the film *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993) or the recent Netflix television series *Russian Doll* (Natasha Lyonne, Leslye Headland, Amy Poehler; 2019). In these films, the protagonist wakes up every day at the same time and in the same place in order to live through the same day (or other limited timeframe) over and over again.

As represented in these films, the thought-experiment focuses on the authenticity of decision-making: a person dies, but then has to live the same life again and again the exact same way, without altering any of the decisions she made during her entire lifetime. In *Sliding Doors*, Helen (Gwyneth Paltrow) has to be hit by a van and die on one of the timelines in order to survive and get rid of her cheating boyfriend on the other; in *Source Code*, Steven (Jake Gyllenhaal) asks for another soldier's help to disconnect his life support so that he does not

have to go back to the time loop again: when he dies, he continues to live in a (happy) alternate reality. Similarly, both in *Groundhog Day* and *Russian Doll*, the protagonists try to kill themselves before they find a solution to get out of their time loop. The lesson the main character has to learn in each film is that every time he or she makes a decision, it has to be authentic and responsible.

The Hungarian philosophical film, *The Turin Horse* (Béla Tarr, 2011), is also a representation of Nietzschean thinking. It features a time loop, and in its apocalyptic vision, this work also becomes an Earth-suicide film and thus creates a bridge to the next section and third category of films. *The Turin Horse* depicts a man (János Derzsi) and his daughter (Erika Bók) living their life the same way over and over again in a world on the brink of apocalypse. Tarr's film explores a state – an allegory of Nietzsche's materialist worldview – where moral and metaphysical thinking no longer exist; instead the world is solely governed by the rules of physicality and biological functionality. The protagonists try to escape this world; however, they are only able to walk up a hill to a certain point before they have to turn back, because their world starts again where it finishes. Their journey is similar to that of Sisyphus's rock that inexorably rolls back to the bottom of the hill.

In Tarr's film, the characters are reduced to their biological functions and repetitions of mundane everyday tasks. The end of the physical world is also the end of the human world. The film also directly reflects on Nietzsche: at the beginning the narrator recalls the famous story of Nietzsche's breakdown upon seeing a horse. In its attempt to wipe out every moral, emotional and metaphysical relationship from the world, the film reflects Nietzschean philosophy. At the end of *The Turin Horse*, not only do humans disappear, but so does the whole world. The wind stops blowing, the darkness remains, and the characters refuse to eat and stay completely silent. This idea of complete collapse leads to the next category of films, examining the idea of destruction and its relationship to the absurd.

Earth-Suicide Films: Self-Destruction as a Critique of Capitalist Ideology

In this category of films, the representation of suicide can be explained as a reaction to Camus's original contemplation on absurdity. The focus here is not on how self-destruction can be related to mental health, but rather on the reason behind the individual's decision to self-destruct. In the selected films, the characters realize that the world is absurd and view any type of "leap of faith" as a betrayal of the intellect. They destroy themselves and the world around them for seemingly no reason; however, they actually realize the world's meaninglessness. The characters recognize that what it means to be human is to be in a permanent state of crisis.

Michael Haneke's *The Seventh Continent* (1989) is a prime example of this type of film, where a middle-class Austrian family gets rid of all their possessions and destroys their house, before finally committing suicide. As Gregor Thuswaldner (2010) writes, the family has no apparent reason for ending their lives:

In *The Seventh Continent* (1989) the family's fate seems inevitable at first glance, as Georg contends in his farewell letter to his parents that their lives are not worth living and that it is only consequential to kill his family and himself. This statement is particularly unsettling, as Georg, Anna, and Evi have been living a seemingly normal life, which mirrors the lives of many middle-class families. (p. 189)

The film is a critique of capitalism; Haneke reportedly claimed that witnessing the destruction of money would upset viewers more than seeing parents killing their own child ("It's much less upsetting to show parents killing their children than to show money being destroyed. It's a total taboo in our society. The real people did this [the film was based on a real event] – I don't know whether I could have made it up!" [Haneke as cited in Brunette, 2010, p. 19])¹⁹.

Eva Kuttner (2014) writes about this scene:

The family bluntly dismisses the most cherished capitalist possession by flushing a grand total of 478,000 Austrian schillings, bundles of hard-earned money, down the toilet. Some filmgoers perceive this gesture, captured in a three-and-a-half-minute long shot, as more appalling than the parents making their child an accomplice in suicide. (pp. 157-158)

¹⁹ Original interview: Toubiana, Serge. Interview with Michael Haneke. *The Seventh Continent* DVD . Wega Filmproduktion, 1989. Kino International, 2006.

Amour Fou, together with Jessica Hausner's other films (such as *Lovely Rita*, 2001), can be considered as representative of this Hanekean tradition. Alongside the works of another contemporary Austrian director, Ulrich Seidl (especially in his film *In the Basement*, 2014), these films reveal horrible secrets hidden below the perfect veneer of the middle-class family and unveil the horrors of the national unconscious. Academic articles emphasize this capitalist critique and how Haneke displays "fundamental mistrust in the certainties of contemporary capitalist society" (Sorfa, 2006, p. 98). Using Freud's formulation of the uncanny, David Sorfa (2006) argues that the director's films problematize the concept of the domestic environment as a space of safety: "Haneke indicates that the home is fundamentally predicated on aggression and fear rather than kindness and security" (Sorfa, 2006, p. 93). Elsie Walker (2018) argues that *The Seventh Continent*'s critique of capitalism is not only present in the film's narrative, but also in its aural representation. She writes:

Despite its shocking content, *The Seventh Continent* establishes Haneke's compassionate emphasis on making us hear the emptiness and loss of some ordinary human lives. *While the family provides no clear-cut reason for choosing death, the sound track stresses a hostile, capitalist social context that makes their decision understandable: the noises of transactional and mechanical processes dominate the aural hierarchy more than any meaningful, interpersonal conversation.* (Walker, 2018, p. 18, emphasis mine)

As it is clear from these examples, characters of Haneke's films and those of his successors often express a Freudian death wish in their helplessness against the world's meaninglessness through the films' representation of violent death and suicide.

Famous European antecedents of this type of representation include Věra Chytilová's *Daisies* (1966), one of the great Existentialist films about destruction. The director herself has said of this film that it "is about people's ability to destroy things, which is the opposite of creativity, yet there is a certain creative attractiveness within destruction" (Chytilová as cited in Čulík, 2018, p. 206). Academic articles invite an Existentialist reading of the film through the motif of destruction. Cheryl Stephenson (2018) writes about the "film's inquiry into

questions of morality, violence, destruction, and consumption” (p. 219), and Kathleen Bracke (2012) observes how in the film “[t]he two girls question if the destruction they are about to cause will matter or not” (p. 11). Similarly, Jan Čulík’s analysis (2018) also focuses on the motif of destruction: “*Daisies* shows two young girls, Marie I and Marie II, who decide that the world is spoilt, so they themselves will also be spoilt and destructive” (p. 206). The two characters decide that if everything is meaningless, they can do anything they want. They embark on a series of destructive adventures and destroy everything around them. With its playful and allegorical style, the film rebelled against the socialist realism aesthetics of its time. The destructive actions of the characters can be interpreted as a critique of the excesses of consumerist culture. Čulík writes about the protagonist in Chytilová’s *The Very Late Afternoon of a Faun* (1983), “who is increasingly aware of the danger of death and of the futility of his existence” (p. 212). Čulík argues that Chytilová’s films tackle “issues of consumerism and selfishness” (2018, p. 212). As these arguments show, the motif of destruction in these films invites an Existentialist reading and presents a critique of the dominant ideology.

Similarly, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Weekend* (1967) is the representation of the “apocalyptic crisis of the bourgeoisie” (Noys, 2014, p. 77). Benjamin Noys describes Godard’s film as a representation of destructive consumption. Again, this film can be interpreted as a critique of capitalist ideology, where the cannibal is not only a character of extreme destruction but also a “figure of autoconsumptive capital” (Noys, 2014, p. 77). Through this theme of destruction, the film can be interpreted as a representation of accelerationism: the idea that the capitalist system should be as capitalist as possible, as quickly as possible, and that in this way it will eventually destroy itself.

Self-destruction films are closely related to disaster films. In *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (2016), Todd McGowan discusses American disaster films like *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009), *Earthquake* (Mark Robson, 1974) and *The Towering*

Inferno (John Guillermin, 1974), and argues that these films show how a disaster can put an end to at least some aspects of capitalist society (McGowan, 2016, p. 139). The catastrophic narrative of these films “can represent an attempt to counter the capitalist infinity, to show that this infinity will run into a limit” (McGowan, 2016, p. 139). As McGowan points out, disaster in these films (like the earthquake or the fire) represents the ultimate limit of capitalism, which it will never be able to overcome (McGowan, 2016, pp. 139-140). As McGowan explains, the very idea of capitalism is built upon imagining a constantly expanding future, and that is why imagining any type of barrier to such an expansion means challenging the very idea of the system. In *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason* (2017), David Harvey also describes capitalism as a system with no ending that surpasses human understanding (Harvey, 2017, p. 173).

Robert Sinnerbrink (similarly to McGowan’s analysis) also explains how the disaster film can be interpreted as a capitalist critique. Using the film example of *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier, 2011) he writes about the “fascination with the ‘end of the world’ topos” and how the film expresses “a variety of social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental concerns” including globalisation, climate change and economic crises (Sinnerbrink, 2014, p. 113). He argues that an allegorical reading of the film reflects “the unsustainable character of the globalised consumer capitalism”, and how “our inability to envisage a different world as our own confronts the threat of cascading ecological, economic, and geopolitical crises” (Sinnerbrink, 2014, p. 113). The disaster film in this interpretation, again, is an allegory for the unsustainable nature of the capitalist ideology. Developing this idea further, I argue that these films’ Existentialist themes, with their focus on a melancholic affect, express the same absurdity: how our ideology of the world never fits its reality.

Suicide and Melancholia

In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva describes melancholia as a magnetic and attractive force (1989). Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) is considered an authentic representation of depression (Sinnerbrink, 2014). However, as Sinnerbrink points out, it would be a mistake to look at the film as a mere psychological study. He writes:

For all the brilliance of Kirsten Dunst's performance, and the authenticity of the film's presentation of melancholia, it would be a mistake to interpret the film too literally as a psychological study of depression or as a nihilistic negation of the "human project." Rather, melancholia is evoked in the film as a mood, an aesthetic sensibility, a way of experiencing time; a visionary condition and mesmerising aesthetic experience that contemporary cinema has all but forgotten. (Sinnerbrink, 2014, p. 117)

Reading *Melancholia* not as a "psychological study of depression", but rather according to Existentialist thinking, makes it clear that the depressed person (Kirsten Dunst's character, Justine) is the only truly sane person in the film. This interpretation links back to Camus's absurdity: the question is not why Justine is depressed, but why everyone else is not. In their everyday life, people usually avoid thinking about dying or the inevitability of death. In Lars von Trier's film, Justine arguably has everything that can make a person happy: she is rich, about to get married, has a successful career and a family who cares about her. Still she is not happy and people around her do not understand why she is depressed. When it becomes certain that a planet called Melancholia will hit and destroy Earth, the relationship between the characters is reversed. Justine becomes relieved, almost happy that now other people finally understand the soul-crushing reality of inevitable doom, while everyone around her becomes depressed: the realization even leads John (Kiefer Sutherland) to commit suicide. In Lars von Trier's film, depression is a sane reaction to the world's absurdity. The planet that destroys the Earth is a tool to emphasize the inevitability of finitude.

Melancholic characters are of course not new to film history. Ingmar Bergman's protagonists are notorious for their melancholic personalities. In *Wild Strawberries* (1957),

Evald (Gunnar Björnstrand) experiences life as pain and when his wife tells him that she is pregnant, he does not want to have the child. He experiences the world as meaningless; if there is no God, he does not consider life to be worth living for anyone. In an interview, when talking about the trilogy of *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Winter Light* (1963) and *The Silence* (1963), Bergman says:

When I was younger, I had illusions about how things should be... Now I see things as they are. No longer any questions of “God, why?” or “Mother, why?” One has to settle for suicide or acceptance. Either destroy oneself (which is romantic) or accept life. I choose now to accept it. (Bergman as quoted in Gado, 1986, p. 279)

Here Bergman echoes Camus’s sentiment: when you realize that the world is meaningless, you either commit suicide or decide to embrace the absurd and accept to live a meaningless life. However, Paisley Livingston (2009) rejects this reading. Livingston argues that Frank Gado’s main objective in his book on Bergman (1986) is “to use psychoanalytical assumptions to provide the key to Bergman’s personality.” However he disagrees with reading Bergman’s films as “symptomatic expressions of the personality structures determined by Bergman’s relation to his parents” (Livingston, 2009, p. 163). Instead, Livingston invites a different reading of Evald’s aforementioned scene in *Wild Strawberries* with a reference to Eino Kaila’s philosophy. Livingston writes:

This is the moment... at which Björnstrand delivers Evald’s line that a few Bergman scholars have recognized as carrying an allusion to Kaila: “There is nothing called right or wrong. One functions according to one’s needs: you can read that in a schoolbook.” Marianne pursues: “And what are our needs?” He tells her she has a hellish need to live and to create life. And his need is “to be dead, absolutely, totally dead”. (Livingston, 2009, p. 163)

Here Evald seemingly accepts Kaila’s philosophical statement that “nothing is right or wrong” and that “‘therefore’ the satisfaction of needs or desires is the only standard of conduct” (Livingston, 2009, p. 167). However, Livingston argues that Evald’s declarations in this scene are “internally inconsistent and patently unreliable” (2009, p. 166), since he later chooses to stay and raise the child with Marianne. Livingston writes:

Why would agreeing that Marianne should have a child prevent him from committing suicide at some later point should he so desire? It might be surmised that he would think it irresponsible or wrong to abandon his child in this manner, and this thought would be an obstacle to his desire to kill himself. But how does this fairly ordinary reasoning square with the doctrine that there is no right or wrong? If people merely function according to their needs or desires, why could not Evald allow that he could currently act on a desire to let Marianne have the child, but later act on his desire to kill himself? Is he assuming that he will end up desiring to behave correctly or morally in relation to the child? Yet that is not consistent with his claim that he does not believe that anything is right or wrong. (Livingston, 2009, p. 166)

According to Livingston, Bergman not only invites a philosophical reading, but also maintains a critical distance between his own perspective and Kaila's philosophy (2009, p. 167). Livingston expresses a similar criticism regarding the representation of suicide in another Bergman film, *From the Life of the Marionettes* (1980). Here the idea that "only someone who kills himself fully controls himself" (2009, p. 146) is expressed by a pretentious psychiatrist, who is complicit in his patient's murder. Livingston argues that Bergman's close-up on the character disproves this reading. He writes: "the image hardly confirms the psychiatrist's verbal account of this complex person's condition, such as his rather speculative idea that Peter is likely to attempt suicide in an attempt to master himself" (2009, p. 154). Livingston rejects a psychoanalytic reading of Bergman's film, as such a reading misunderstands the condemnable nature of a central character (2009, pp. 147-148). The representation of death and suicide will present an opportunity for convergence between psychoanalytic theory and Existentialist philosophy in the next category of films. As discussed below, the abattoir film presents another type of Earth-suicide film, where human suffering is expressed through the metaphor of slaughtering animals.

Slaughterhouse Films as a Representation of Earth-Suicide

Films taking place in a slaughterhouse often feature melancholic or depressed characters, perhaps because the brutal physical confinement of cattle serves as an illustrative metaphor for the spiritual entrapment of the depressed individual. Slaughterhouse films are also a type of

Earth-suicide film, since the suffering of animals is often juxtaposed with the torment of humans. Animals in these films often appear as equals to, or as embodiments of, humans. In this sense, the brutal slaughtering of the cattle at an abattoir represents another type of Earth-suicide²⁰, where humans set out to kill themselves.²¹

Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975/2002) is considered a manifesto by the largest animal rights organization PETA (PETA, n.d.), even though Singer's argument is not about rights but about feelings. Singer argues that animals are capable of suffering (just like humans) and thus they deserve equal ethical treatment. Singer writes:

If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering – insofar as rough comparisons can be made – of any other being. If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account. (Singer, 1975/2002, p. 8)

Slaughterhouse films often represent the same idea and juxtapose animals' suffering with the troubles of their human counterparts. The slaughterhouse metaphor invites both a psychoanalytic and an Existentialist reading. According to Freudian psychoanalysis, the brutal murdering of the cattle in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *In a Year of 13 Moons* (1978) can be seen as an expression of its protagonist's castration anxiety (Silverman, 1989, p. 79).²² Elvira (Volker Spengler) visits the slaughterhouse where she used to work as a butcher in her previous life (still as Erwin). The brutality of the scene contrasts with the beauty of the Goethe poem

²⁰ According to *The Economist* for example, veganism became “mainstream” in 2019. While veganism used to be a “minority within a minority” – according to an American survey in 2015, only 3.4% of the population were vegetarian and just 0.4% were vegan – in 2019 a quarter of 25- to 34-year-old Americans identify as vegetarians and vegans (Parker, 2019).

²¹ This reading also explains the re-emergence and current popularity of slaughterhouse films, such as *Okja* (Bong Joon Ho, 2017) or other contemporary popular films deliberating climate change and its effects on the environment and the animal world, such as *The Dead Don't Die* (Jim Jarmusch, 2019).

²² Silverman (1989) offers a redefinition of the concept here according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, arguing that “[o]ne of the crucial features of Lacan's redefinition of castration has been to shift it away from this obligatory anatomical referent to the lack induced by language” (Silverman, 1989, p. 79).

she recites. Fassbinder's hero (as in most of his films) experiences love as utter submission to the loved one, which inevitably leads to an identity crisis. As Silverman (1989) argues:

Fassbinder not only refuses to give us male characters who might in any way be eligible for "exemplariness," focusing always upon figures who are erotically, economically and/or racially marginal, but he obsessively de-phallicizes and at times radically de-idealizes the male body, a project which at least in one film – *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* – leads to a corresponding psychic disintegration expressive of the absolute annihilation of masculinity. (Silverman, 1989, p. 65)

Here Elvira completely gives up her own identity and even changes sex for her lover. In Fassbinder's interpretation, even our desires are not our own; rather, they are coded by the expectations of society.

Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1978) can be interpreted as the Fassbinder film's American counterpart (coincidentally the two films were even made in the same year). *Killer of Sheep* is a filmic representation of the psychoanalytic concept of the death drive. According to a Freudian reading, life is determined by the feeling of anxiety, and what humans really desire is the end of anxiety by death. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud introduces the idea of the repetition compulsion and the concept of the death drive, arguing that the ultimate desire that drives humans is a yearning for the repetition of loss. In *Killer of Sheep*, the abattoir is the only place where the protagonist Stan (Henry G. Sanders) is happy and free. In contrast to the brutality of other slaughterhouse films like *Blood of the Beasts* (Georges Franju, 1949), here we see a lyrical presentation of the abattoir; the depiction of the animal killing is quite gentle. Stan's working life, however, contrasts with his private life. While he feels at ease at the slaughterhouse, at home he is unable to engage with his loving wife. The familiarity of the slaughterhouse is shown in comparison with a heart-breaking dance scene during which the same song loops. So, while Stan feels comfortable at work, in his private life he is anxious and alienated.

The protagonists of a Hungarian abattoir film experience a similar alienation from their surroundings. *On Body and Soul* also takes place at a slaughterhouse, which becomes an Earth-

suicide metaphor contrasting with a parallel, fantastical dreamworld. In Enyedi's film, a man and a woman, both working at a slaughterhouse, meet in their dreams as deer. The film is not a Freudian dream analysis about our repressed desires; rather, it investigates the relationship between dream and reality, the impossibility of a dream becoming reality. In this regard, the film is similar to Enyedi's previous film, *My Twentieth Century* (1989), in which the final viewpoint suggests that the film was a shared dream between the two twin protagonists. Instead of a psychoanalytic approach, *On Body and Soul* offers an Existentialist reading, with suicide as one of its central motifs.

The film juxtaposes the brutal claustrophobia of the slaughterhouse cattle, who live in narrow cages, with the unrestrained beauty of the deer. It is as though the majestic wild animals were the ideal dream versions of the cattle that are kept only for slaughter. As Enyedi asserted at the 67th Berlinale première press conference²³, she depicted the slaughterhouse cattle's life and death with brutal naturalism in order to convey strong emotions. The location was inspired by a personal experience: according to the director, hospitals show little respect for the life and death entrusted to them. The subjectivity of experience is conveyed through the film's phenomenological filmmaking style.

The Phenomenological Film Style of *On Body and Soul*

On Body and Soul represents a phenomenological approach in its quest to explore how we experience the world. Phenomenology can be interpreted as not only a philosophy but also a filmmaking style, concentrating on sensual experiences in its depiction of the physicality of the body and its interaction with the world. Since it is a style that focuses on the visual representation of sensual experiences, its most characteristic quality is "haptic visuality". David Sorfa defines its "distinctive formal features" in film, as "shallow focus, action obscured by

²³ my own notes and recording of the event

objects in the foreground and symmetrical image composition”. These formal features “emphasise the experience of both spectators and characters” (Sorfa, 2018, p. 188). This type of visual representation highlights the practical function of film as medium, since it draws the viewer’s attention to the image.

According to phenomenology as a philosophy, objects do not exist in themselves, but in the perspective of the subject interacting with them. There is no meaning in the object itself, only in someone’s perception of it. As Bakewell writes: “[t]he word *phenomenon* has a special meaning to phenomenologists: it denotes any ordinary thing or object or event *as it presents itself to my experience*, rather than as it may or may not be in reality” (Bakewell, 2017, p. 40, emphasis in original). Films with a phenomenological style often use shallow focus and close-ups in order “to accentuate the texture of the cinematic image” (Sorfa, 2018, p. 203). With the use of these filmic techniques, they encourage the viewer to look not only at the object of representation but also at the image itself. As Sorfa writes: “it is important to note that it is the film itself as an object of perception, as well as a record of experience, that is foregrounded by this phenomenological approach” (Sorfa, 2018, p. 193). The film recording of the image is part of the reality we are asked to interact with. By concentrating on sensual contact and focusing on the idea that the world can only be subjectively experienced through our own bodies, the phenomenological style deconstructs the difference between mind and body. Bakewell notes:

An existentialist who is also phenomenological provides no easy rules for dealing with this [ambiguous] condition, but instead concentrates on *describing* lived experience as it presents itself... By describing experience well, he or she hopes to understand this existence and awaken us to ways of living more *authentic* lives. (Bakewell, 2017, p. 34, emphasis in original)

On Body and Soul highlights and draws the viewer's attention to the image. It emphasises the human body and its interactions with the world. As Sorfa argues, “[p]henomenology uses the idea of touch as a metaphor for direct communication between reality and ourselves. Touch is a symbol of true apprehension” (Sorfa, 2018, p. 192). The film puts the physicality of the character to the fore; Mária has a phobia of touching, so the film's images often convey the subjective experience of feeling different textures as she plunges her palm in potato purée, strokes the rough fur of a cow, or lies down in the park to feel the waterdrops falling on her skin from a sprinkler. We cannot experience the world outside of our own body, and here these scenes act as a human body, conveying sensations to the audience. Because we humans can only perceive other things as bodies, the viewer interacts with the film as if it were a body.



Figure 13: Ildikó Enyedi's *On Body and Soul* (2018): Phenomenological Film Style

This phenomenological visual representation again disrupts typical Hollywood filmmaking traditions, which Kristin Thompson defines as a style that “smooths over [such] distinctions and gives us a sense of watching one steady flow of events constantly progressing toward a conclusion” (Thompson, 1988, p. 70). With its focus on the materiality of the image

and the visual representation of sensual experiences – instead of “progressing” forward – the film takes time to highlight these experiences in multiple episodes. Ildikó Enyedi’s “rejection of conventional narrative codes” in her representations is characteristic of her earlier films as well. Catherine Portuges (2007) writes how critics “disdained” the unconventional style of Enyedi’s earlier film, *My Twentieth Century* (1989), for its “frantic logic” of free association instead of realizing that the film’s narrative and visual strategies “interrupt, subvert, and transgress traditional cinematic conventions” (2007, p. 529). In *My Twentieth Century*, Enyedi’s style invokes the traditions of silent cinema and her “repeated use of intertitles continues throughout the film, underscoring this celebratory gesture toward early cinema while, at the same time, signifying the cyclical peregrinations of its main protagonists” (2007, p. 530). This type of visual creativity and its subversion of traditional cinematic conventions is characteristic of all of Enyedi’s films. As Portuges claims, “Enyedi has played a central role as an innovative intellectual and artistic leader of the postcommunist generation of talented directors” who appeared on the filmmaking scene during the years of transition after the fall of socialism in 1989 (2007, p. 526). With the inventive visual forms of films like *The Magic Hunter* (1994) and *Simon, the Magician* (1998), Enyedi’s style with the “originality of her vision in narrative feature” was “dedicated to liberating the imagination from the ideological constraints of – and obsession with – the region’s traumatic history” (2007, p. 527). By highlighting the creative nature of Enyedi’s visual representations, I have emphasized how *On Body and Soul* disrupts conventional filmmaking traditions, and thus expresses absurdity both in its narrative (suicide as a tool for rebirth) and in its narration (humorous representation of suicide and phenomenological filmmaking style).

The depiction of suicide in *Amour Fou* is similarly disruptive. At the last minute, Henriette changes her mind about the suicide pact and is shot against her will. It is also revealed at the end of the film that her death was completely in vain, since she was healthy and did not

suffer from any physical illness. Instead of celebrating triumph and futurism (Aaron, 2014, p. 154) in their representations of suicide, both *On Body and Soul* and *Amour Fou* highlight our own world's irrationalities via the failed attempts at achieving idealized fantasies.

Unsatisfactory Solutions

Amour Fou illustrates the clash between desired fantasy and reality, whereas *On Body and Soul* provides a fantasy solution to absurdity. In the latter, the two protagonists truly understand each other; there is no longer a gap between the desire to be understood and the achievement of this objective. However, this harmony can only be attained in a dream world. The absurd here is uncovered through the comparison of these two films, since both of their solutions fail. In *Amour Fou*, the realization of the fantasy is unsatisfactory since it is a failed attempt at achieving a romantic idea. In *On Body and Soul*, it is successful but remains a fantasy. The absurd becomes apparent from these two, both unsatisfactory and non-rational endings. No matter what our ideology about the world is, the world in its reality will never quite fit it.

The disruptive film styles of *Amour Fou* and *On Body and Soul* convey the feeling of Existential alienation from the world. The comparison of the two films speaks to Camus's foundational absurdity: the way we imagine our world is inherently different from what the world truly is. By bringing together ideas from the realm of the absurd (i.e. freedom of choice, authenticity and alienation), my argument supports the broader hypothesis of this thesis: the absurd expresses how humans experience a permanent state of crisis.

As mentioned, in their endings, the selected films offer different solutions to the world's absurdity. Following Camus's definition of happiness, it is possible to adopt an ironic position and laugh at the misery of our fate. This approach can be understood as a positive one since it does imagine life as worthwhile (and Camus thinks of Sisyphus as happy) but it can also be interpreted as a pessimistic and passive one, since we seem powerless to do anything about our

fate other than laughing at it. Further developing this idea of absurd laughter and its two different expressions, Chapter 5 will bring together the main concepts of humour, politics and the absurd through the analysis of the film *Toni Erdmann* (Maren Ade, 2016).

CHAPTER 5

Humour, Politics and the Absurd in *Toni Erdmann* (Maren Ade, 2016)

Toni Erdmann recapitulates the themes discussed in the previous chapters and that is why the analysis of this film brings together three major concepts: humour, politics, and the absurd. The previous chapters investigated contemporary European films that established different absurd worldviews in order to question prevalent values or institutions. In its discussion of the film *Toni Erdmann*, this chapter offers answers to the two original questions asked in the introduction. The first question interrogated the relationship between film and reality and asked how film as an artform could relate to real cultural and political developments. *Toni Erdmann* reflects the current state of Europe and makes a clear political statement about the disadvantages of globalisation. Taking place in multiple European countries and focusing on main characters who travel between these countries, the film also asks questions about European identity. Regarding the second question about the ways the comic and the absurd are represented on screen, the film presents an important case study by incorporating various forms of comic expression and invoking multiple genres of comedy.

The film does not easily lend itself to categorisation simply as a comedy, but, as its director Maren Ade put it in an interview, “it’s more a film *about* humour” (Romney, 2017). In discussing the film’s humour, this chapter looks back at the discussion of ironic expression (from Chapter 1) and focuses on how the representation of awkwardness in *Toni Erdmann* can be interpreted as a different version of absurd laughter compared to ironic detachment. What follows revisits the connection between film and politics (as discussed in Chapter 2) and also reintroduces Todd McGowan’s theory of comedy based on lack and excess (as discussed in Chapter 3). The characters in *Toni Erdmann* represent three different generations of German citizens, and this analysis reflects on the pivotal function of death in the story (with a reference

to Chapter 4's discussion on the cinematic representation of dying). Developing Jared Diamond's crisis framework (2019), each of these generations in the film are linked to different "crisis points" in Germany's history. Bringing together these arguments, this chapter further develops the overall thesis statement that the absurd is an expression of humans experiencing a permanent state of crisis. Finally, and developing the idea of absurdity further, the film's representation of an absurd world is viewed through the different coping mechanisms the main characters enlist in order to deal with the irrationalities of their worlds. Looking back at Camus's definition of the absurd, this chapter also examines what possible solution the film offers in its ending. The analysis of the film's closing scene provides an alternative to the other forms of solution proposed in the various endings of the films discussed in the previous chapters.

The pessimistic film endings of *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, *Raw* and *Amour Fou* address the "blackness" of humour (as it appears in this thesis' title), while the more optimistic endings of *The Great Beauty*, *Youth*, *On Body and Soul*, *Wild* and *Toni Erdmann* suggest an active approach in their "social criticism" (again from the thesis title). The first category of films can be interpreted as having a defeatist reaction to life's absurdity and voting for escapism as a solution, in the form of ironic detachment. Thus, redefining black humour, I argue that the humour in these films does not necessarily contemplate suffering or death, but in its detached ironic bemusement, it represents a pessimistic, defeatist approach to the world's absurdity. Regarding the more optimistic endings, this other category of films uncovers an error in the workings of the capitalist system and calls for active reaction. Refusing ironic detachment, the viewer in this case cannot remain an outside observer. Developing Adam Kotsko's idea of awkwardness (2011), this type of humour can be grasped through the recognition of the universal feeling of embarrassment. Contrary to defeatism, laughing *at* ourselves is an optimistic act. As demonstrated below, these contemporary European films offer either a

pessimistic or a hopeful reaction to the world's meaninglessness in their ironic or awkward endings. Reiterating the three major themes of discussion, the structure of this chapter mirrors the arrangement of the introduction. Thus, the analysis is divided into three parts: humour, politics and the absurd.

The film *Toni Erdmann* reflects on death and social taboos through the lens of absurd humour (defined in this thesis as a “lack of fit” between our human desire for rationality and the world's irrationality [Wartenberg, 2008, pp. 114-115]) to highlight the irrationalities of the rules governing contemporary life. Humour plays an important role in *Toni Erdmann*, expressing political anxiety, and social dysfunctionality also manifests in the characters' uncompromising behaviour. Thus, the film can be interpreted as a symptom of crisis, while it also endeavours to shape society by calling attention to the depicted issues. That is, *Toni Erdmann* fits all of the corpus criteria set up in the introduction.

While its director is German, the film itself is a coproduction between six different countries (Germany, Austria, Monaco, Romania, France and Switzerland). This transnationality however is not limited to production, since the film's story takes place in two different European countries (Germany and Romania) and its characters speak multiple languages (German, English and Romanian). The film won several awards at major European film festivals (director Maren Ade was nominated for the Palme d'Or and received the FIPRESCI prize at the Cannes film festival 2016; the film was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 89th Academy Awards, and it won multiple German film-awards). Ade's film was elected best film of 2016 by *Sight & Sound* magazine (“Sight & Sound”, 2016) and was called “the best 162-minute German comedy you'll ever see” by *The Hollywood Reporter* (Felperin, 2016). Praised by European and American film critics alike, *Toni Erdmann* represents award-winning European arthouse cinema. It has a clear political viewpoint, which is not only metaphorical, but also diegetic: commenting on the current state of Europe is also

very much part of the film's plot. Thus, this film expresses the most overt critique of capitalism among the selected works in the thesis corpus.

Toni Erdmann, an award-winning, critically acclaimed European arthouse film establishes an absurd worldview in its representation of a father-daughter relationship. Winfried (Peter Simonischek) is a practical joker, while Ines (Sandra Hüller) is a hardworking careerwoman. These two characters not only have different personalities but are also estranged, living in separate countries. Their worldviews represent two opposing ideologies that nevertheless both fail in the film, because no matter what they believe in, the world will never transform according to their respective perceptions. Contrary to this realization however, by the end of the film, the two protagonists do find a way to build a connection again after struggling through a series of extremely uncomfortable situations. This experience of awkwardness in the film expresses a new, completely different form of absurd laughter compared to ironic detachment. Developing the idea of laughter, this chapter first examines the humorous elements in *Toni Erdmann*.

Humour as “Anti-social”, “Irrational” and as a “Pressure Valve”

Humour is present on multiple levels in *Toni Erdmann*: it determines the film's genre, tone and also its story. The film portrays a father-daughter relationship, where a lonely, single father desperately tries to reconnect with his estranged, workaholic daughter. After the death of his dog, the free-spirited Winfried pays a surprise visit to his daughter and is shocked by her ultra-capitalist lifestyle. Impersonating the titular Toni Erdmann as a comic alter-ego, Winfried infiltrates Ines's life in order to lighten her up. Winfried is a prankster: he uses humour in his everyday interactions with his family, friends and even with strangers. In the very first scene of the film, he puts on a comic performance for a delivery man, where he pretends to be his own brother. The delivery man however looks more confused than amused; he does not seem

to know whether he is supposed to take this act seriously or not. Moreover, Winfried is interrupted in the middle of the scene, when one of his students unexpectedly shows up at his doorstep. He confesses to the deliveryman that he himself played the two brothers all along. This awkward encounter introduces Winfried's penchant for comic performance and also sets the tone of the whole film.

Winfried often uses props in his playacting: he carries a set of fake teeth in his shirt pocket and spontaneously puts them in whenever he wants to diffuse the seriousness of a situation. He is a music teacher at a German high school, so choreographing musical performances is also part of his job. That is, humour and comic performance are at the centre of Winfried's character. The film's title references his comic alter-ego, Toni Erdmann, invented by Winfried in order to get closer to his daughter. Unlike her father, Ines does not care for humour when it comes to her professional life. Working as a consultant for an oil company in Bucharest, Romania, she takes her job extremely seriously. She does have a sense of humour however, and when his father unexpectedly appears on her office's doorstep and pretends to be an entrepreneur, she decides to play along with it.

Toni Erdmann was well received in its home country; German reviews praise the film for its good sense of humour (for example, the *Zeit* review's title reads: "If You Can Laugh, You Are Still Alive / Wer lacht, der lebt noch" [Assheuer, 2016]). Similarly, the English language advertisement poster announces the film as "the finest comedy in recent memory." All of the poster quotes selected from various magazine reviews reflect on the film's humorousness: "a moving and often hilarious portrait of a father-daughter relationship" (Calhoun, 2016); a "hilarious triumph" (Lodge, 2016); "not only does German comedy exist, it might just save your life" (Collin, 2017 – and the article's title is "Three Hours of Very Funny, Very German Comedic Joy"); "an outrageous and enjoyable comedy" (Bradshaw, 2016); "effortlessly funny and moving" (Chen, 2017). Review quotes from another

advertisement poster similarly describe the film as “achingly funny” (Chang, 2016); “absolutely nuts” (Ealy, 2017); [featuring] “delightful and strange twists” (Felperin, 2016); and [containing] “the funniest nude scene of my life” (Kohn, 2016). This strong emphasis on the film’s humorousness is striking, especially since the director Maren Ade herself maintains that the film was originally meant to be a drama (Romney, 2017) and accordingly, many of the represented subjects are less than cheerful: the film depicts the difficulty of communication, identity crises, the depressing state of Europe and the devastating effects of globalisation. Moreover, the film starts and ends with the death of an important family member (and both of these deaths serve as pivotal turning points in the film for the main characters). It is an intriguing aspect of the film that despite its dire subject matter, many critics primarily reflect on its funniness and hilarity. In order to elaborate on this point, it is important to revisit the three established theories of humour: superiority, relief and incongruity.

John Morreall’s definition of humour in *Comic Relief* (2009) describes the different perspectives theories of humour use as “anti-social”, “irrational” and “pressure-valve” (pp. 4-23). While their focus is different, the three established theories of humour are interconnected:

[...] the three approaches characterize the complex phenomenon of humour from very different angles and do not at all contradict each other – rather they seem to supplement each other quite nicely... the *incongruity*-based theories make a statement about the *stimulus*; the *superiority* theories characterize the *relations* or *attitudes* between the *speaker* and the *hearer*; and the *release/relief* theories comment on the feeling and psychology of the *hearer* only.
(Raskin, 1985, p. 40, emphasis in original)

Thus, looking at all of these established theories at the same time with reference to one film is useful, since each considers a different aspect of humour. As discussed below, this chapter re-examines the three different definitions of humour (as “anti-social”, “irrational” and as a “pressure-valve” [Morreall, 2009]) through examples of *Toni Erdmann*.

Morreall argues that the superiority theory looks at humour as “anti-social” (2009, p. 4). Academic literature dates the superiority theory back to ancient Greece and often refers to

Plato as the earliest philosopher who was interested in what it is about certain situations or things that we humans find funny (Morreall, 2009, p. 4; Carroll, 2014, p. 8; Diffrient, 2014, p. 41). According to the superiority theory, laughter establishes a relationship of dominance: when we laugh at someone, we find a weakness in the other and this makes us feel superior to them. When Plato writes about the ideal society in *The Republic*, he describes laughter as a type of potentially dangerous and abusive behaviour as humans seem to lose self-control in the act. Plato writes: "... [n]either ought our guardians to be given to laughter. For a fit of laughter which has been indulged to excess almost always produces a violent reaction" (360 B.C./1881, p. 389). Humour is described here by Plato as something potentially dangerous, since the act of laughter disrupts socially accepted behaviour.

Accordingly, contemporary thinkers also highlight this social approach of the superiority theory. Noël Carroll describes how laughter according to this point of view, "results from perceiving infirmities in others which reinforces our own sense of superiority" (Carroll, 2014, p. 8). David Scott Diffrient (2014) writes that the superiority theory emphasizes the "destructive nature of laughter, which is said to arise when an individual recognizes his or her intellectual and/or moral preeminence over others" (Diffrient, 2014, p. 41). All of these definitions highlight the potentially dangerous or destructive characteristic of laughter from a social point of view.

Enlisting laughter of superiority, *Toni Erdmann* invites the viewer to laugh at the strange habits of the business milieu, which represents the absurdities of our contemporary world. When Winfried surprises Ines at her workplace, the viewer sees her environment through the eyes of an outsider. This detached position allows the audience to perceive the often exaggerated behaviour this world requires from its inhabitants. The Toni Erdmann character is an excellent example: a man in an obvious cheap wig and with fake teeth is still taken seriously when he drops names and partakes in activities that are associated with a

businessman's lifestyle. Winfried claims that he is a professional lifestyle coach and good friend of Romanian businessman Tiriac, and is there in Bucharest in order to spend time lounging at spas and shopping malls.

Another good example of this type of humour relates to the behaviour of the CEO, Henneberg's wife (Victoria Malektorovych). This character exemplifies the stereotypically insensitive behaviour of the wealthy, when she claims that she enjoys living in Frankfurt, because cities with a middle class relax her. This joke pointedly makes fun of the ignorance of the superrich, produced by an ultra-capitalist society. However, as Zupančič argues, the problem is not only that financial successes have become "the supreme values of our late capitalist society" (Zupančič, 2007, p. 6), but rather, that success is so overimportant that it genuinely creates a huge divide between different groups of people. As Zupančič writes:

The poorest and the most miserable are no longer perceived as a socioeconomic class, but almost as a *race* of their own, as a special form of life. We are indeed witnessing a spectacular rise of racism or, more precisely, of "racization." This is to say that we are no longer simply dealing with racism in its traditional sense of hatred towards other races, but also and above all with a production of (new) races based on economic, political, and class differences and factors, as well as with the segregation based on these differences. (Zupančič, 2007, p. 6)

The film is a poignant illustration of Zupančič's argument, where the poorest are represented as completely segregated based on their economic and class status. They are the only people in the film who are isolated in their language (they do not speak the shared language of English and their dialogue is not subtitled), and their living and working spaces are separated as well. When Ines looks out of the office window after a business meeting, the poverty-stricken area of the city is shown closed off by a high wall. The two main characters' major confrontation will also happen at a worksite. When Winfried's interaction with an oilfield worker inadvertently leads to the man's dismissal from his job, the film expresses its more forward critique of globalisation. This will be represented as a clash of ideology between the two characters in a dispute about the meaning of humour.

Moving on to the second approach of defining humour, the incongruity theory focuses on “irrationality” (Morreall, 2009, p. 9). This approach highlights the element of surprise, showing how humour “appreciates startling juxtapositions and the commingling of seemingly unrelated things” (Diffrient, 2014, p. 42). What is more important however, is that in incongruous humour, we discover a disparity “between what we expect or believe to be true and what is actually the case” (Diffrient, 2014, p. 42). That is, incongruity means more than elements that do not fit. Human behaviour works with learned patterns, so humour’s incongruity specifically refers to something that does not meet our expectations, that does not fit with the patterns that we have learned about the world (Morreall, 2009, p. 10). Similarly, Carroll emphasizes that what is “key to comic amusement is a deviation from some presupposed norm – that is to say, an anomaly or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be” (2014, p. 17). This means that our everyday lives work according to rules that we take for granted and humour has the ability to reveal the illogical way these rules often work.

Theorists frequently emphasize the incongruous nature of humour – notable representatives of thinkers stressing the incongruous nature of humour include Henri Bergson, Noël Carroll and Todd McGowan – arguing that we laugh when we suddenly discover a previously overlooked connection between elements we usually perceive as disparate. Humour in this case arises from surprising juxtapositions. Henri Bergson’s *Laughter* (1900/2007), is one of the earliest and most-cited essays (Morreall, 2009, p. 8; Diffrient, 2014, p. 52; Trahair, 2007, p. 16; Hewitson, 2012, p. 223; Carpio, 2017, p. 347; McGowan, 2017, p. 52) explaining the workings of humour. Bergson notes the comic nature of the event when “a person gives us the impression of being a thing” (Bergson, 1900/2007, p. 25). That is, he points out a startling juxtaposition of people behaving like machines. In Morreall’s discussion of Bergson, when we laugh at people, who are acting like machines, “we do feel superior to them, and we are

humiliating them, but that humiliation spurs them to think and act more flexibly, less like a machine” (Morreall, 2009, p. 8). Showing how interrelated the three established theories of humour are, while some thinkers use Bergson’s juxtaposition of humans and machines to explain superiority in laughter, others read it as an example of incongruity. Todd McGowan points out that Bergson’s contribution in his association of comedy with mechanization is that this juxtaposition relates to a transition (from human to machine). What is funny for Bergson is that this juxtaposition “brings together difference and sameness” (McGowan, 2017, p. 55). That is, incongruous humour highlights the element of surprise and the disruption of expectation.

According to Carroll, comic amusement is created when the audience perceives deviation from a presumed norm, because the incongruity disrupts the framework we use to think about the world. What we find humorous is a subversion of our expectation (Carroll, 2014, p. 17). Again, humour has the ability to reveal that there is a gap between how we perceive the world around us and how it actually works. A lot of *Toni Erdmann*’s humour is based on incongruity.

Most of the film’s humour is created by highlighting a clash between expected social conduct and how the characters actually behave in the situations they find themselves in. One of the most effective examples of this incongruity relates to Ines’s singing performance (reviews referring to this scene include for example Calhoun, 2016; Bradshaw 2016; Collin 2017). She sings a classic song with the poise of a professional but with the skills of an amateur. This situation works similarly to the structure of jokes: the audience expects one thing, but a completely different thing happens in the punchline. When someone asks a large group of people to listen to their performance, the audience expects to hear a performer who is good at singing. While Ines performs with the gestures of a professional, she is clearly not good at

singing. Thus, the audience's expectation is disappointed (there is a clash between the expectation and the actual experience) which produces a humorous situation.

What is curious about incongruous humour is that even though it disrupts our normal way of thinking, we still seem to find it pleasant. The third theory explains why laughter is a pleasurable experience. Morreall calls the third aspect of humour, the "pressure valve" (2009, p. 15). Relief theory focuses on the working of the human body in its explanation of laughter. In academic literature this theory is associated with Freud's name and his discussion of the working of jokes in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905/2002). Here Freud argues that when we laugh, a kind of psychic energy is released that was originally summoned for a different psychological task. According to Freud, most jokes are either "hostile" or "obscene" (1905/2002, p. 94). That is, jokes violate the rules of the polite society we live in and in laughter we release psychic energies that we store to repress our hostile and obscene feelings. In *Toni Erdmann*, Winfried's behaviour seems to reinforce this theory. He insists that he likes to make jokes, however his jokes are often inappropriate, and his audience rarely reacts with laughter. For example, one of his reoccurring jokes is about a substitute daughter he must hire because he never sees his real daughter. He tells this joke to the CEO Henneberg (Michael Wittenborn) at the American Embassy, who at first seems to be amused by it. Playing along, he asks Winfried whether the substitute daughter is better. Winfried replies that the cakes are better, and the substitute daughter cuts his toenails. The reaction to this joke is awkward silence. Then Winfried makes the situation worse by saying to Henneberg that "oh but she is not your daughter" nodding towards his much younger wife, at which point Henneberg just walks away. Winfried uses humour to express the inappropriate, since it is his belief that humour should function as a pressure valve, releasing repressed energies in its revelations.

These different scenes exemplify different kinds of laughter, suggesting that *Toni Erdmann* enlists superior and incongruous humour, while at the same time it also uses laughter

as a pressure valve. Absurd humour can be understood by bringing together all these established theories of humour. Borrowing Morreall's words, it is "anti-social", "irrational" and serves as a "pressure valve" at the same time. It is anti-social, since it often reflects on taboo subjects, topics that we tend to ignore rather than emphasize in our everyday interactions. The whole concept of the absurd is based on the idea of incongruity, since – according to Camus's definition – it highlights a lack of fit between how we wish the world to operate and how in reality the world never functions according to our expectations. Finally, humour in the film also works as a pressure valve, intended to reveal uncomfortable truths. Thinking back again to Camus's definition of the absurd, when we realize life's absurdity, the only thing we can do – without committing literal or philosophical suicide – is to laugh. Before discussing the different types of laughter further as opposing reactions to the world's absurdity, it is important to introduce the comic genres that influenced *Toni Erdmann*.

Genres of Comedy

The director Maren Ade's claim that the film is "*about* humour" (Romney, 2017) seems to suggest that the film is self-aware and intentionally references comic genres. There are two approaches explaining the relationship between humour and film: the first understands comedy as a mode, while the second establishes comedy as a film genre. What follows reintroduces the idea of the comic mode (as explored in Chapter 1) and also discusses the different comic genres that influenced *Toni Erdmann*.

To explain the comic mode, Geoff King refers to Rick Altman's genre categorization, which differentiates genres depending on whether they are used as an "adjective" or as a "noun" (Altman, 1999, p. 51). Where a certain genre is used in its noun form, the film in question shows the major genre's qualifications. That is, depending on its characteristics, the film lends itself to be categorized as a musical, western or melodrama for example. On the other hand,

the adjective form refers to the mode the main genre is presented in. This means that the film in question does show some genre characteristics, however the mode it is presented in also allows the film to be categorized as a different genre (for example a *comic* western, a *romantic* comedy). Comedy is a mode that can be applied to any genre, since any film can be presented in a humorous way. Often the humorous tone of the film is only a mode (that is used as an adjective) but not enough to categorize the film as a comedy, since its main genre characteristics (the noun form) is deeply rooted in a different genre. As discussed in Chapter 1, in Paolo Sorrentino's films, comedy's adjectival qualification manifests itself as an expression of irony; whereas here in Ade's film, comedy as a mode is expressed as awkwardness.

Before discussing awkwardness as a comic mode, it is essential to discuss *Toni Erdmann*'s relationship with comic genres, like the comedian comedy, the slapstick and the screwball comedy. The film's titular character was inspired by a famous American entertainer from the 1980's and this reference to a real comic persona connects the film to the comedian comedy genre. The film also shows influences of the slapstick genre in its emphasis on physical humour and in its reliance on situational comedy. *Toni Erdmann* can also be seen as a contemporary version of screwball comedy, since it follows this classic genre's typical plotline. First the central pair of characters drive each other mad with their respective eccentric behaviours, reaching a breaking point in their relationship, but in the end they manage to overcome this conflict and rebuild their relationship. The film's awkward humour also echoes the parodic tone of the classic screwball comedies. Lastly, screwball comedy can be seen as a genre of crisis (flourishing during the Depression era in the US), and similarly, *Toni Erdmann* reflects on a contemporary European crisis in its criticism.

Comedian Comedy

WINFRIED: "I like to make jokes."

Toni Erdmann's titular character was inspired by a famous American comedian and this reference to a real comic persona pays homage to the comedian comedy genre. Steve Seidman discusses a type of comedy that focuses on actors' comic performances in *Comedian Comedy* (1981). Emphasizing the genre's "extrafictional features", Seidman writes that "comedians very often 'step out' of their fictional characters and/or comment on the fictional situations of the films" (Seidman, 1981, p. 59). Lisa Trahair's contemporary discussion of Seidman emphasizes this feature of the protagonist, arguing that it transgresses "the conventions of classical Hollywood realism by adopting a performance strategy that derives from his or her simultaneous status as a character within the narrative and as an extradiegetic persona" (Trahair, 2007, p. 4). The central importance of the comic performer can be read from the film's title, since the film is named after Winfried's comic alter ego.

An overview of academic literature shows the importance of the comedian comedy genre through the different time periods. Comedian comedy was most influential during the silent film period in the early years of cinema in the United States. James Agee's seminal poetic essay "Comedy's Greatest Era" (1949) provides portraits of four silent comedy masters, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langdon, Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Walter Kerr's *The Silent Clowns* (1980) similarly celebrates the slapstick comedy films of the 1920s, based on the performances of these famous comedians. However, the comedian comedy genre not only involves the comic performers of the 1920s but is a "continuing tradition in Hollywood cinema" (Seidman, 1981, p. 59) also including films by later comedians such as Mae West, Jerry Lewis, W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, Steve Martin and Woody Allen. In Maren Ade's contemporary film, Winfried's invented alter-ego, Toni Erdmann, can be interpreted as an homage to these classic comic performers.

In Seidman's comedian comedy, protagonists were played by actors who were known by the audience as comedians and, thanks to their strong comic personas, in their film appearances they were recognized as comedians first, and characters in the film only second. *Toni Erdmann* reflects on this tradition by creating a character, who in turn invents a comic persona himself; thus, it is not actually the actor but the character's comic alter-ego, who summons the association with a comedian. Ade, the director herself commented in various interviews and festival discussions that the Toni Erdmann character was inspired by the comic persona Toni Clifton, who was created by the American comedian Andy Kaufman. The twist here is that the alter ego is not played by an instantly recognizable comedian, but a character in the film creates this persona. Kaufman was known for his unconventional approach to comedy (Ressner, 1999), and often confused his audience with his ironic sense of humour. A *Time* review describes Kaufman as someone, who "never let on where the prankster stopped and the real person began" (Ressner, 1999). Winfried's humour is similar to Kaufman's in this regard; his audience often does not know whether they are supposed to laugh at all and what it is that Winfried means seriously and what can be laughed at.

Comic performance in the film is focused on Winfried's character. He always carries his fake teeth in his shirt pocket and Toni Erdmann is created with the help of these removable teeth, a longhair wig and a shiny suit jacket. Winfried invents his titular comic persona to prank his daughter one hour into the film; in the remaining larger portion of the running time (1 hour 40 mins), he almost exclusively appears as Toni. Even before the invention of his comic doppelgänger, Winfried engages in multiple pranks enlisting an arsenal of props like face paint, fake teeth, sunglasses and even a cheese grater. From the very start of the film we see him putting on various comic performances and pulling off multiple pranks: he impersonates a fictitious twin brother when the delivery man arrives, he wakes up Ines meowing next to her in cat-eye shaped sunglasses with whiskers, and he also puts in the fake teeth at a classy social

event at the American embassy. At the beginning, he walks around with a white-painted face and black eyes imitating a skull. Wearing this skeleton mask, he greets everyone he meets saying, “do not be scared” and has great fun when he sees the surprised faces of the people around him wondering why his face is painted. As previously mentioned, Winfried is a music teacher at a German high school, and he wears this mask in preparation for a musical performance with his students. It is also telling about Winfried’s character that this performance is out of the ordinary. The children are supposed to say farewell to a retiring teacher, but in Winfried’s rendering, the students’ faces are painted as skulls, and they sing a cheerful song about death as the final farewell.

Winfried wears his mask outside of this performance (on his way to school when he visits his mother, and also after the performance, when he shows up to a family gathering), showing how he is most in his element when he is performing a role. He only decides to wash off the make-up when he accidentally stains Ines’s coat while hugging her, and Ines asks if she was supposed to get the joke. Interestingly, when Winfried does not wear any masks, he and his daughter do not seem to understand each other, and they only find a way to connect after various uncomfortable performances which they deliver together later in the film. These performances are simultaneously painful and pleasurable to watch, constituting the film’s primary comic mode of awkwardness. Towards the end of the film, when the two protagonists finally reconcile in a warm embrace, Winfried is wearing a full body costume, completely covering his face and his body. On the one hand, this scene shows how embracing awkwardness can possibly lead to a more profound understanding of each other, emphasizing the film’s comic mode. However, on the other hand, Winfried’s costumes make him resemble a clown, reminding the viewer of the performers of early cinema’s slapstick routines.

Slapstick

INES: “Do you have any plans in life other than slipping fart cushions under people?”

Some of the films’ characteristics suggest that the film was influenced by the slapstick genre. Similarly to comedian comedy, slapstick is also associated with the tradition of American silent film cinema (Agee, 1949). According to Alan Dale (2000) the term slapstick today has a pejorative connotation to mean “merely” low physical comedy (Dale, 2000, p. 1). In *Comedy Is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*, Dale interrogates the reasons why slapstick comedy still appeals to audiences today.

Enjoying enormous popularity in the early 20th century and popularized by circus clowns and vaudeville actors, slapstick humour’s contemporary legacy still lives on in the films of Jim Carrey and the Farrelly brothers. According to Dale, the key to understanding of the genre’s never fading popularity lies in its ability to convey emotions. Dale writes: “[s]lapstick doesn’t feel profound but rather feels true to our experience very much as we live it. It’s a popular phenomenon that predates modern pop culture but that in movies shares pop culture’s immediate access to the audience” (Dale, 2000, p. 27). No matter what the historical period, the audience can always relate to slapstick because it says something about the human experience. Human existence is always and necessarily a physical existence. Dale writes: “[s]lapstick can’t be replaced because it offers a fundamental affirmation in the face of the physical frustrations of existence in a form that no one in the audience has to reach for” (Dale, 2000, p. 251). This shared emotional experience Dale writes about in regard to slapstick is expressed as awkward humour in Ade’s film.

Influenced by this classic American popular genre, *Toni Erdmann* is an interesting case study also from the perspective of transnationality, since it shows how the popular culture that we usually associate with American cinema is very much interrelated with European art cinema. Despite the suggested “low” status of physical comedy (Dale, 2000, p. 1), here

slapstick's influence can be found in an award-winning European arthouse film. Slapstick was an increasingly popular genre of comedy at the beginning of the twentieth century, and silent comedy as a whole played an important role in the development of film history and American culture (King and Paulus, 2010, p. 128). One of the genre's trademark characteristics is its emphasis on physical humour, as shown when King and Paulus write about "slapstick's trademark physicality" (King and Paulus 2010, p. 8). The genre's name derives from a tool that was used by circus clowns to beat each other with in their performances in the early twentieth century:

[...] the slapstick undoubtedly gave its name to the dominant genre of silent comedy, and the knockabout vaudeville and clown acts that preceded cinema, because of the high degree of physical violence – slapping, bopping, and especially ass-kicking – that many comedians cultivated. (King and Paulus 2010, p. 140)

Slapstick is a type of popular comedy that bases its humour on physicality; indeed in *Toni Erdmann*, the characters frequently appear as pure bodies and they also often express themselves through their bodies.

Another important characteristic of the genre relates to how the film implements gags into its narrative (Crafton, 1995). Accordingly, in *Toni Erdmann*, the characters often find themselves in unfamiliar situations that culminate in unexpected twists. Academic literature often emphasizes slapstick comedy's non-narrative characteristics, like the importance of performance (Kerr 1980; King and Paulus 2010), or other types of "narrative excess", such as "non-narrative gags" (Crafton, 1995). For example, in *The Pie and Chase* (1995), Crafton discusses how slapstick balances between presenting the pure spectacle of gags and moving the story forward. *Toni Erdmann*'s narrative structure shows a similar balance, where the various comic performances are not only entertaining but also help the progression of storytelling.

The slapstick usually builds on humorous situations (and not characters) and uses long, establishing shots in order to capture the quick movement of the physical humour. While there

are some jokes in the dialogue in *Toni Erdmann* (for example Winfried's joke about him hiring a substitute daughter), most of the humour in the film arises from the depiction of certain situations. The characters themselves are not funny, but they act comically in the situations they find themselves in. Even though Winfried's character is all about performance, his jokes are usually not rewarded by laughter. He mostly tells bad jokes and the general reaction from his audience can be described as surprise rather than amusement. However, in the right circumstances, he becomes funny because of the clash between the expected behaviour the situation requires and the way he actually acts.

Filmic techniques also accentuate the central importance of the comic situations. The interactions between the two main characters are shown in long, uninterrupted scenes shot from a medium distance with a handheld camera. Imitating gags, these long episodes are often pushed to their limit, where an impossible situation is suddenly solved by an unexpected twist. There are many twists in *Toni Erdmann*, and one of the most surprising scenes features Ines's birthday party. Most magazine reviews mention this plot twist (Calhoun, 2016; Chang, 2016; Collin, 2017) and one article even refers to it in its title as "the funniest nude scene of all time" (Kohn, 2016). In this birthday party scene, we see Ines putting on the final touches just before the guests arrive. She is already made up, wearing a chic dress, and is about to put her shoes on, when she realizes that her dress is too tight, and she cannot properly move in it. She runs to the bedroom to change clothes, but she cannot take the dress off. After great physical struggle, when she is only half-way out of the dress, the doorbell rings. She finally manages to take the dress completely off and runs to open the door just in her underwear, herself looking surprised that she manages to open the door with complete confidence. Her friend, Steph (Lucy Russell) asks: "am I too early?". Steph looks uncomfortable with Ines's nakedness but decides to ignore it, jokingly saying "I'm kind of a last-minute girl too". She offers to help Ines choose a dress, but she turns it down. All of a sudden the doorbell rings again, and Steph offers to open

it so Ines can get dressed, but she rejects the offer again and goes to open the door herself. On her way, she gets rid of her underwear and we hear a surprised scoff from Steph, echoing the audience's surprise. Ines's boss Gerald (Thomas Loibl) stands in the door, looking greatly uncomfortable when he sees his employee naked. She assures him that everything is fine, she just has nothing on, and informs him that this is a "naked reception [...] for team building". The scene progresses forward with multiple plot twists, including Ines throwing out Steph who refuses to undress; Gerald coming back to the party naked, and finally, a stranger showing up in a full carnival costume.

Dressed in costumes, Winfried's character reminds the viewer of clowns and their theatre and vaudeville performances in the early 20th century. As discussed in Chapter 1 in regard to Fellini's documentary *The Clowns* (1970), white clowns and Augustes were acclaimed artists during the golden age of the circus, but later often became bitter old men with a nostalgic attachment to the past. Winfried is a similarly tragicomic character; a performer who is very much attached to an idealized notion of the past and its values. He constantly performs comedy but is also a tragic character: he is a lonely, divorced man, struggling with an emotional crisis caused by the death of his dog.

Director Ade's own claims about the film also encourage a more tragic reading, when she maintains that the film's "humour comes out of a big desperation." She says: "[w]hile shooting, I had the feeling this was a very sad film" (Romney, 2017). This sadness is emphasized in the film's storytelling, since it revolves around two cases of death. First, the death of Winfried's dog sets the events in motion, serving as a trigger for Winfried to visit his estranged daughter. Later, the reconciliation between the two protagonists happens at the funeral of Winfried's mother at the end of the film.

The most tragic aspect of Winfried's character however relates to his relationship with his daughter. He refuses to get out of his clown persona even when Ines completely breaks

down in front of him and asks, “listen, are you insane? Are you trying to ruin me or what?”. Winfried however does not drop his act; in his answer to her hopeless question he says, “if this is about your father, I’m not the right man... but if you want to work on your charisma, or if you notice that you are talking to no one on the phone, you’re welcome to contact me” and leaves Ines on the brink of crying. Ines often reacts to Winfried’s performances with desperation, which highlights the tragic nature of Winfried’s clowning around. Despite this sadness, the way Ines and Winfried drive each other mad also has a comic tone to it and the next comic genre reveals this latter aspect.

Screwball Comedy

INES to WINFRIED: “Listen, are you insane? Are you trying to ruin me or what?” *Toni Erdmann* also shows the influence of the screwball comedy genre. The screwball is again a primarily American popular genre, flourishing in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s. Screwball comedy is known for its humorous and optimistic tone; during the troubled time period of the Depression, it offered a means of escapism to its audience. Discussing a 1937 Mae West comedy sketch, Lori Landay (1998) writes how the famous actress’s character articulates “an optimistic response to the turmoil of the Depression.” She argues that, presenting change as preferable to stability, “Depression-era comedy participated in the cultural work of disseminating the optimism necessary for the acceptance of the New Deal” (Landay, 1998, p. 97). With witty characters finding love in their happy endings, these films offered optimism for the audience in a troubled time period.

Screwball comedies however made fun of traditional love stories and often used a slightly parodic tone. For example, Landay writes about the character of the female trickster who parodies class conventions (1998, p. 17). The genre’s main characters are couples, who

famously annoy each other into loving each other (again). Tina Olsin Lent writes about the screwball comedy genre in regard to this typical plot:

[...] the films' plots characteristically involved a sexual confrontation between an initially antagonistic couple whose ideological differences heightened their animosity. The courtship entailed the verbal and physical sparring referred to as the battle of sexes, and their recognition of mutual love and decision to marry (or remarry) ultimately reconciled the sexual and ideological tensions.
(Olsin Lent, 1995, p. 315)

In a classic film example, *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), Dexter (Cary Grant), annoys his former wife Tracy (Katharine Hepburn) so much that she falls back in love with him again and marries him again. While the main pair of characters is not a romantic couple but a father and a daughter in *Toni Erdmann*, the film does show some of the genre characteristics of the screwball comedy.

Appearing in almost every scene together, Winfried and Ines do exist in the film in relation to each other and the film's focus is the development of their relationship. Either Ines or Winfried appears in every scene, which means that there is not one scene in the film without at least one of the two main characters. A closer analysis reveals that they share screen time almost equally, leaving some individual scenes to both characters (in the opening scenes we first get to know Winfried, while later we get to know Ines in her own work environment). This means that the audience does get a glimpse of their life individually, but mostly we see them in the context of their relationship.

Toni Erdmann's plot follows a similar structure to that of the classic screwball comedy: the two main characters are initially estranged and even antagonistic and their ideological differences are highlighted in their confrontations. A good example of this animosity is when Winfried asks his daughter whether she is even human after tagging along with her to her daily activities. However, through these confrontations (which manifest in the film as a series of shared awkward performances) they eventually recognize and successfully express their love for each other. The characters' ideological differences here are not related to gender, but to a

generational divide. Winfried and Ines represent different ideologies that are characteristic of their age and that also relate to important historical turning points in Germany's history: the idealistic optimism of the late baby boomer generation clashes with the avid embracement of contemporary capitalist culture.

While the screwball comedy was a genre of the Depression era, *Toni Erdmann* is also a reaction to contemporary crisis in its criticism of capitalism and globalisation. The parodic tone of the screwball comedy expressed optimism of the changing times of the era, and the awkward humour of *Toni Erdmann* can be interpreted from a similarly optimistic perspective. It is going to be humour and the shared experience of embarrassment that will eventually bring the protagonists together.

As discussed in the introduction, Stanley Cavell (1981) famously rebranded the screwball comedy genre as a “comedy of remarriage”, focusing on strong female characters, who are able to act according to their own will. Developing Cavell's idea, Todd McGowan (2017) also discusses screwball comedy with a focus on the female leads. He argues that the genre's humour comes from female characters, who refuse to live an absent-minded life as domesticated wives. In this way, they deviate from expectations (McGowan, 2017, p. 53). This aspect of the screwball comedy highlights the clash between performance and disruption. We find the disruptive behaviour of these characters funny, because it reveals the artificially created nature of social rules that we have to follow in our everyday lives.

Looking back to Chapter 4, McGowan bases his theory of comedy on the psychoanalytic concepts of lack and excess. Lack and excess are psychoanalytic concepts which refer to pleasure and enjoyment. Based on Freud's idea about the importance of the death drive, McGowan argues that humans are desiring beings and are only able to experience pleasure in excess. Thus enjoyment can only ever be traumatic, because it means too much and therefore painful pleasure, revealing how enjoyment is always created by some sort of lack. To

use one of McGowan's easily understandable examples, overeating is a self-destructive behaviour, where humans eat too much not because it brings them pleasure, but in order to be able to continue to dream of the perfect body, which remains unachievable. The real desire here lies in this constant pursuit. According to McGowan's theory, society works according to rules, which hide the connection between lack and excess. As opposed to everyday life, comedy always reveals the interconnected nature of lack and excess, which means that comedy highlights the incongruities of our everyday lives.

The interconnected nature of lack and excess reveals that excess can never exist without some sort of lack. This revelation is the source of humour in the screwball comedy (McGowan, 2017, p. 33). In McGowan's film example, *My Favourite Wife* (Garson Kanin, 1940), there is an excess of wives that will create a lack. The Cary Grant character, Nick's wife has been missing for seven years and is officially declared dead. Nick is about to marry a new wife, however before he can do that, his original wife unexpectedly returns. In the humorous scenes, Nick always has to deal with too many wives at once, meaning that he is not able to enjoy spending time with either (McGowan, 2017, p. 33). Thus, the moments of comedy always concern this relationship between lack and excess in the film (represented by too many while at the same time the absence of wives).

Similarly, in another legendary screwball comedy, *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), there is an excess of suitors. Here the Ralph Bellamy character functions as an excess, who seems to embody the failure of the Cary Grant character (McGowan, 2017, p. 33). Hildy (Rosalind Russell) is about to marry Bruce (Bellamy) for the promise of a quiet life that Walter (Grant) was unable to provide for her during their marriage. According to McGowan's theory, Bruce is an excess that promises to fill this lack; however, he is too much (2017, p. 33), since Hildy seems unsure about the possible boredom this quiet life will impose on her compared to her current active lifestyle. Comedy happens when in an unexpected twist she confronts the

excessiveness of what is lacking (McGowan, 2017, p. 33) and eventually remarries Walter instead of Bruce.

The socially approved choices are never humorous (McGowan, 2017, p. 36), which means that comedy requires some sort of disruption. When the audience identifies lack with excess (and this comes as a surprise) that is always funny. However, as McGowan argues, these disruptions also create discomfort (2017, p. 36), since they highlight a failure in the system, which means that the rules governing our society can never function perfectly. Developing this theory, I argue that in the case of *Toni Erdmann* this discomfort is represented as awkwardness.

Even though *Toni Erdmann* does not focus on a romantic couple but a father-daughter pair, its representation of this relationship is similar to the screwball. Winfried's excessive performances highlight the lack of communication between him and his daughter. The most excessive performance, when Winfried wears a full-body Kukeri costume, emphasizes the lack of real connection between them. Winfried must wear a heavy, goat fur costume completely camouflaging him in order to challenge this lack. In the end, the two main characters successfully confront their failures and take a step towards building a better relationship. The Kukeri is identified in the film as a traditional costume worn for the celebration of the carnival in Bulgaria in order to scare evil spirits away. The reference to this custom invites the interpretation of Bakhtin's carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 200-201), where for the period of the carnival, social rules are turned upside down. Thus, Winfried's costume further encourages the reading that his character is about the disruption of rules.

All of the above-mentioned comic genres are representatives of the heyday of cinema in the United States. Despite widely being celebrated as an award-winning European film, in regard to the film's humour, most of *Toni Erdmann*'s influences come from American popular cinema. This contradiction raises problems with the binary categorization of European as art cinema and American cinema as popular entertainment.

Anxieties about Globalisation

European film is often defined as a negation of American characteristics, which does not constitute a sufficient definition. A further problem is that the concept of European identity represents two opposing approaches at the same time: the idea of Europe inherently references a shared culture, while at the same time, European films generally strive to highlight diversity. To solve this problem Dimitris Eleftheriotis (2001) suggests using a specific framework for analysis. According to Eleftheriotis,

[...] one way of studying national cinemas without reducing the complex and contradictory nature of the object of study is the investigation of statements made about the nationhood, national identity and national cinema in specific historical moments and in specific nation states. (Eleftheriotis, 2001, p. 35)

Developing this idea, the following analysis examines how the film *Toni Erdmann* represents the issue of globalisation in contemporary Europe. Globalisation is an economic phenomenon, meaning “the integration of economic activities, across borders, through markets” (Wolf, 2004, p. 14). The term however also has a strong political aspect. Brink Lindsey (2002) argues that globalisation has three interrelated meanings:

[...] first, [it is used] to describe the economic phenomenon of increasing integration of markets across political boundaries (whether due to political or technological causes); second, to describe the strictly political phenomenon of falling government-imposed barriers to international flow of goods, services and capital; and finally, to describe the much broader political phenomenon of the global spread of market-oriented policies in both the domestic and international spheres. (Lindsey, 2002, p. 275)

The following analysis of *Toni Erdmann* focuses on this last, political aspect and defines globalisation as a social and political phenomenon.

Ian Aitkin (2005) claims that the model of globalisation can provide a useful framework to examine European cinema in connection with national identity. European cinema can be studied according to the different ways certain films represent issues of globalisation (Aitkin, 2005, p. 82). Aitkin suggests thematic motifs, which speak about issues regarding globalisation and changing national identity and he provisionally identifies these with European cinema.

These thematic motifs are “the expression of anxieties about national identities”, “the affirmation of particular national identities”, “the expression of anxieties about supra-national identities”, or the affirmation of such identities; while another motif relates to the representation of an ambivalent relationship between the individual and the local, national or supra-national sphere (Aitkin, 2005. p. 82). Some of these motifs are expressed in *Toni Erdmann* in the main characters’ different political viewpoints concerning how to behave in a globalised world.

There are multiple jokes in the film reflecting on European identity in the framework of globalisation. At his first encounter with Ines’s boss, Winfried poses as the life coach Toni. Winfried asks Gerald if he is willing to consider him running a workshop at the office. Winfried says, “are you willing?”, however he pronounces the “w” as the sound “v” which is a typical non-native English speaker mistake. Thanks to this pronunciation error, Gerald has no idea what Winfried is talking about, and this lack of understanding paired with Winfried’s strange but confident appearance produces an awkward situation. Gerald does not understand what Winfried is saying and Winfried repeats the same question with the same pronunciation over and over again (“are you ‘villing’?”). This joke is funny, because it highlights an instance of a language barrier in the globalised world.

In the film, the business world’s language of communication is English, however, the German characters often switch between their native and business languages. While English is the shared language, it is not the first language of most European countries, thus most of the European audience can relate to the difficulty of pronouncing “w” and “v” differently and to the confused reaction the mispronunciation can result in. To make the situation worse, Winfried also comments on Gerald’s sweaty hands when he shakes them (“is that lotion?”), which makes Gerald even more uncomfortable. Toni disrupts the rules of polite business behaviour in a scenario where these rules are normally followed, which results in an awkward situation.

Another joke concerning European identity makes fun of a stereotype about the globalised world. At her grandmother's funeral, Ines has to indulge in small talk with one of the guests, who asks her where she is working. He mixes up the Hungarian capital Budapest with the Romanian city of Bucharest. When Ines corrects him, he reacts "it is great how you get around." This little remark in the film can again be interpreted as a criticism. In the globalised world where there are supposed to be no more borders and international travel is simple, people are still not aware of specific cultures.

The film also directly references the issues of globalisation in the film's plot. When Ines and Winfried drive to the working site to meet the oil workers, the two main characters' different political attitudes become clear. Winfried approaches the workers with a friendly attitude, whereas Ines remains a detached observer. When Winfried wants to shake hands with one of workers, but the worker's hand is black with oil from digging a drill hole, he says "that is not good." Their boss, Iliescu (Vlad Ivanov) thinks Winfried is pointing out the lack of protective gloves, and with the intent of demonstrating that they take safety regulations seriously, he fires the incautious man on the spot despite Winfried's protesting that he was only joking. Ines sarcastically remarks that the boss can fire who he wants "and the more he fires, the fewer I have to fire." Ines here refers to her role in the project as a consultant, however, Winfried is shocked by his daughter's embrace of the job's super-capitalist ideology. While Winfried is desperately trying to help, Ines remains distant.

According to Dani Rodrik, our current world "renders hyperglobalisation incompatible with democracy" (Rodrik, 2010, p. xix), and "if we want to push globalisation further, we have to give up either the nation state or democratic politics" (Rodrik, 2010, xviii). *Toni Erdmann* seems to illustrate this problematic and with the help of humour the film expresses anxieties about the disadvantageous effects of globalisation by representing the failure of both opposing ideologies the two main characters speak for. Winfried's naïve idealism connects him to the

baby boomer generation, while Ines rebels against her parents' generation by joining the establishment. The two characters symbolize their conflicting political attitudes both in their behaviour and in their appearance. While Winfried always looks dishevelled with his fuzzy hair and unshaven face, carrying the pair of fake teeth in his shirt pocket, Ines's appearance is chic, elegant and flawless. Winfried is a character from the past, while on the other hand, Ines exhibits the unrelenting expectations of the contemporary world. The film is sympathetic towards both characters and thus proposes a broader critique of the world we live in.

“Mosaic” Identities

Representing these two opposing ideologies, the two main characters stand in for different instances of traumatic events in Germany's history. The confrontation between Winfried and Ines recalls what Jared Diamond defines as the “mosaic identity” of a person or a country (2019, p. 5). Diamond argues that nations deal with national crisis in a similar way to individuals in case of a personal trauma (2019). The “mosaic” metaphor applies “to individuals and nations in whom or in which disparate elements coexist uneasily” (2019, p. 5). When someone experiences a major crisis (for example an accident or the death of a family member), even if they manage to overcome the tragedy and completely recover, the memory of this experience will be part of their personality, and the troubled past and the recovered present self will coexist in the same person. Similarly, a nation can also have a mosaic identity: even if a country's citizens together with their elected officials have collectively come to terms with a traumatic past, the memory of that past event will remain part of their national identity.

Crisis can be overcome by applying the method of “selective change” (2019, p. 6), thus the event of a crisis can trigger the need for adjustment in the individual's/nation's life. This is why Diamond describes crisis as a “moment of truth: a turning point, when conditions before and after that ‘moment’ are ‘much more’ different from one another than before and after

‘most’ other moments” (2019, p. 7). Crisis in Diamond’s interpretation stands in for a challenge, where the individual/nation must find new ways of coping with a certain problem.

Developing Diamond’s interpretation of crisis, in the film, three characters represent three turning points in German history. These turning points are connected to traumatic events when the nation had to come up with new coping mechanisms to deal with certain traumas. In the film, each of the three characters symbolising these turning points in the nation’s history, belong to the same family: grandmother, father and daughter. Thus, using Diamond’s metaphor, these crisis points not only reflect the individuals’ but the whole country’s coping mechanisms with crisis.

The father in the film is played by (Austrian) actor Peter Simonischek. The actor was born in 1946, so it seems fair to assume that his character, Winfried, is roughly the same age. This means that Winfried presumably belongs to “Jahrgang 1945”, the generation born when the Second World War ended. As Diamond argues, members of this generation in Germany often introduce themselves by naming the year they were born in. People saying, “I was born in 1945” conveys the meaning of “just knowing that fact will help you figure out a lot about my life and my attitudes without my having to tell you” (Diamond, 2019, p. 231). This is the generation, whose young members are associated with the student revolts in 1968. That year they were in their early twenties. As Diamond writes: “Germans of Jahrgang around 1945 discredited their parents and their parents’ generation as Nazis” (Diamond, 2019, p. 233). Thus, just his year of birth explains Winfried’s idealistic, liberal character and also his shock at his daughter’s behaviour, who he raised according to these same ideals. Students in 1968 rebelled against the ideology of capitalism, and this context explains why Winfried’s ideology is so different from his daughter’s, who completely embraces her ultra-capitalist lifestyle.

There are subtle hints in the film about the divide between Jahrgang 1945 and the previous generation in the depiction of Winfried’s relationship with his mother. After the

grandmother's funeral, Winfried comments on the music played at the ceremony. A song was supposed to be played by Harry Belafonte, a popular American-Jamaican pop star. He says that the grandmother "liked him. Although it was 'Negro music'". In the same scene, he looks at the grandmother's collection of hats with Ines. Winfried picks one up, a "steel helmet", which indicates the now deceased old lady's fascination with the military. These hints about the grandmother's character comment on the previous generations' different historical circumstances and its prejudices.

Germany's political borders radically changed throughout its history and the nation implemented various methods to successfully deal with crisis. Thanks to a collective process of coming to terms with trauma, Germany "drastically reassessed its Nazi past" (Diamond, 2019, p. 250), which means that it was able to implement selective change. This is represented in the character of the grandmother, who – despite her upbringing – became more tolerant towards other cultures at the end of her life.

“Don't Lose the Humour”

INES: “I couldn't believe you told them not to lose their humour. That's really bitter.”

WINFRIED: “It wasn't about that. It was a nice encounter.”

The generational divide between Ines and Winfried can be grasped through their different attitudes towards humour. When they visit the oilfield, Winfried tells one of the workers: “don't lose the humour”. This sentence could also be a motto for the whole film and the characters interpret it in different ways. On the one hand, Ines criticises her father for saying this to the workers after their visit, claiming that it was really bitter. She says, “I couldn't believe you told them not to lose their humour. That's really bitter”. While, on the other hand, her father insists that is not how he meant it. Winfried answers, “It wasn't about that. It was a nice encounter”.



Figure 14: Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann*: "Don't Lose the Humour"

Representing a more idealistic and hopeful generation, for Winfried “not losing the humour” means maintaining a positive attitude and looking at life’s events with cheerful nonchalance, even in the face of adversity. Despite being disillusioned (he cannot even save one worker from being fired), for him, laughter is an act of rebellion, a hopeful and optimistic act. His interpretation of humour recalls Camus’s reaction to absurdity (1955/1991, p. 24), where Sisyphus laughs in the face of the gods in an act of defiance. Winfried realizes that the world is absurd and confronts it with laughter. The exaggerated persona of Toni Erdmann – with his ridiculous props and blatant jokes – highlights the inherent humour of the world’s irrationality.

On the other hand, Ines understands humour from the point of view of superiority. In her interpretation, Winfried telling the workers not to lose the humour expresses finding the weakness in the other and laughing *at* it. As opposed to Winfried, Ines reacts to the world’s absurdity not by disrupting the rules but by overestimating them. She relentlessly works on her career day and night, and her job also determines her private relationships.

Ines summarizes the characteristics of her world when she gives instructions to Winfried about how to behave at an embassy reception: “there’ll be speeches, appetizers, small talk and that’s it”. She has to fend off comments from her boss like “this will annoy the feminist in you”, and the only task the CEO entrusts her with is to help his wife with shopping. Her character rigorously follows the rules of corporate behaviour, even if this world is shallow, sexist and does not have respect for her. Ines realizes the ridiculousness of this situation when she visits the worksite with Winfried. The boss at the oilfield takes her seriously for the first time when she appears with a man by her side, even if this man is wearing a wig and fake teeth. When she recognizes this, she cannot stop laughing. The clash of the two main characters’ attitudes highlights absurdity, since both following and disrupting the rules turn out to be unsuccessful. The two protagonists however do reach an understanding by the end of the film. This second reaction to life’s absurdity (as opposed to ironic detachment) is expressed in the film’s comic mode of awkwardness.

A New Comic Mode: Awkwardness

Toni Erdmann, like Maren Ade’s two previous feature films, is an expression of awkwardness. Adam Kotsko describes awkwardness as an incongruity, “an encounter between two sets of norms” (2010, p. 7). Depending on what these norms concern, he differentiates between “everyday awkwardness”, “cultural awkwardness” and “radical awkwardness” (Kotsko, 2010, pp. 7-8). Developing Kotsko’s categories, I argue that Maren Ade’s three feature films express these three different modes of awkwardness.

Everyday awkwardness describes individuals whose behaviour combines gracelessness with uncomfortable performance (Kotsko, 2010, p. 7). However, awkward people cannot simply be the source of awkwardness, since the people around them are only able to identify the awkward person’s behaviour because they do something that is inappropriate for a given

context. The rules they violate are often not written laws but the unspoken principles of what is perceived as polite or appropriate behaviour by a certain community. Thus, their personalities highlight a clash between how people are supposed to behave and how the awkward person actually behaves by disregarding these unspoken rules. Maren Ade's first feature film is an illustration of everyday awkwardness featuring an utterly graceless and socially inappropriate main character. *The Forest for the Trees* (2003) is about a young, idealistic schoolteacher, who leaves the countryside in order to start a new job in the German city of Karlsruhe. As the title suggests, Melanie (Eva Löbau) is unable to understand and act according to the unwritten rules of polite behaviour in her new community, and she constantly behaves inappropriately both at her new job and in her private relationships. She has enormous difficulty in relating to her social environment and she constantly puts herself into cringeworthy situations. At the beginning of the film, she knocks on the doors of all of her new neighbours to greet them with homemade schnapps. She is trying so hard to make friends that she completely alienates everyone around her.

Going back to the different modes of awkwardness, Kotsko describes a second type, cultural awkwardness (Kotsko, 2010, p. 12). This type of awkwardness relates to the contemporary zeitgeist and it happens when seemingly there are rules in place, however the individual either does not fully understand these rules or they are impossible to follow. Kotsko writes: “[j]ust as it is easier to criticize than to create something, a social order in decline maintains its ability to tell you what you’re doing wrong even as it is losing its ability to provide a convincing account of what it would look like to do things right” (Kotsko, 2010, p. 12). That is, the unwritten rules of culture are often confusing, since they are only able to tell you when you are doing something wrong, but they do not provide a clear direction regarding how to act correctly. Ade's second film is an examination of this cultural awkwardness depicting the coming-of-age story of a budding couple. *Everyone Else* (2009) explores the relationship of

Gitti (Birgit Minichmayr) and Chris (Lars Eidinger). At first, they seem very much in love, but their relationship regresses when they befriend another, already married couple. While the protagonists are at a stage where they are still trying to find themselves (both in their careers and in their relationship), their new friends have steady jobs and a baby on the way. The protagonists become frustrated, because on the one hand, they do not share the traditional values of their friends, while on the other hand, their sheer rebellion against those values does not seem to be fulfilling either.

Writing in an American context²⁴, Kotsko locates the origin of cultural awkwardness in the 1960s, when civil right movements successfully managed to question “traditional values” (Kotsko, 2010, p. 13). According to Kotsko, the problem is that no new values were implemented in place, and contemporary society still struggles with this confusion. Kotsko writes:

[...] the failure to develop a stable vision to replace the so called “traditional values” that the 1960s era rightly called into radical question has meant that the festering wound of cultural awkwardness has never healed, with the decades that followed offering makeshift solutions at best. (Kotsko, 2010, p. 13)

Maren Ade’s film illustrates this cultural awkwardness in a European context. Since the social order does not present individuals with clear rules for coming of age, the characters in Ade’s film are terrified of doing the same mistakes as “everyone else”, however, their own copying mechanisms to avoid the unavoidable pressure of growing up equally fall short.

Ade’s third film, *Toni Erdmann*, features both everyday awkwardness (as explored in her first film) and cultural awkwardness (as explored in her second film), and by combining these two modes, the film creates situations of radical awkwardness. According to Kotsko’s categories, as opposed to its everyday mode, radical awkwardness occurs when there are absolutely no rules prescribed regarding proper behaviour in a given situation (Kotsko, 2010,

²⁴ Kotsko (2010) analyses contemporary American popular films like Judd Apatow’s *Knocked Up* (2007) and TV shows like *The Office US* (Greg Daniels, 2005–2013), and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (Larry David, 2000-2020).

p. 7). The discomfort in this case is greater, since here awkwardness is not the result of disregarding unwritten rules, but the result of the individual being confronted with a complete absence of rules. Kotsko describes this awkwardness as the “encounter of two sets of norms” and uses the example of an impromptu, amateur singing performance at a pub, where the assumptions of “normal pub behaviour” clash with the expectations of a “serious musical performance” (Kotsko, 2010, pp. 7-8). *Toni Erdmann* creates various situations of radical awkwardness, where two different sets of expectations are in conflict.

One of the most memorable scenes in *Toni Erdmann* features a radically awkward singing performance. Winfried (as Toni) and Ines unexpectedly show up at a stranger’s home, who is celebrating Easter with her friends and family. The awkwardness of this situation first stems from the fact that they were never invited, and they do not know anyone present. Furthermore, the host seems to know that Toni is not really the German ambassador as he claims, but she still chooses to entertain them. Even though they show up unexpectedly, everyone is extremely kind to them. Ines thinks that her father took this prank too far (before they enter she tells him: “let’s stop now, Dad”), so she decides to leave, however, Winfried insists on “bringing this to an end” and suggests singing a song to show their gratitude for the hospitality. Winfried sits down to the synthesizer and starts playing tunes. He introduces Ines as “Whitney Schnuck”, which is a piece of incongruous humour in itself, since in this made-up name he mixes the name of Whitney Houston, whose song “The Greatest Love of All” they are about to perform, and “Schnuck” the fake name he used when introducing Ines as his secretary.

Ines decides to play along with this pretence performance. She starts singing accompanied with exaggerated hand gestures, which could indicate ironic acting. However, the guests take the performance seriously and suddenly radical awkwardness is created from a clash of two assumptions. The film’s script describes this scene as follows: “the guests,

however, remain serious, and the song becomes too complicated for Ines's performance to stay ironic" (Daily Script, 2016). The song is extremely difficult for an amateur performer and she struggles with the high pitch and the varying tempo.



Figure 15: Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann* (2016): A New Comic Mode

The awkwardness here is radical, since there are no written or unwritten rules prescribing how to act when witnessing a pretence performance. The situation is highly confusing for the guests, because they have no way to know whether to take this performance seriously or not. The singing is unprofessional, but not utterly horrible, while on the other hand, serious but not quite serious, which means that it is not straightforward for the audience whether the performers are joking (that is, that the audience is required to laugh) or whether Ines and Winfried think they are actually good (in which case they should not be laughed at).

In its radical awkwardness, *Toni Erdmann* combines the everyday awkwardness of Winfried's character with the cultural awkwardness his new milieu provides. When Winfried travels to Romania to see his daughter, he finds himself in a completely different environment and he is unable to navigate this world's rules. To surpass this problem, he cleverly invents an alter ego. His business-world doppelgänger is the lifestyle coach of a CEO, so this imaginary

character must be in possession of all the social graces that this position requires. Through this character – and as a social-political criticism – the film presents examples of cultural awkwardness by showing situations where the characters are uncomfortable, but culture does not provide any pointers of correct behaviour.

Kotsko argues that the nature of awkwardness is fundamentally social (2010, p. 54), since in radical awkwardness, one consciously joins and endorses someone else's awkwardness (2010, p. 54). This is what happens during the performances Winfried and Ines participate in together. The singing performance is an especially convincing example, since Ines freely chooses to enter and embrace an awkward situation that Winfried creates. At any moment in the film she could say, "stop, this is my father", but she chooses to play along. Kotsko argues that this type of consciously shared awkwardness is a way of not only accepting the other's behaviour but also a way of connecting between people (2010, p. 53), and this is indeed what happens by the end of the film.

Toni Erdmann suggests the possibility of connection between people through the experience of embarrassment: the two main characters manage to bond through these shared, uncomfortable performances. Thus, the film seems to reinforce Kotsko's hypothesis that "awkwardness is a social bond that exists outside the social order" (2010, p. 53). Through the experience of shared awkwardness even people who have nothing in common – regardless of social class, customs and accepted behaviour – can create a real connection. The film supports this absolutely positive view of awkwardness, arguing that awkwardness can lead to happiness because it is able to look beyond difference and create greater understanding through a shared experience. Since awkwardness does not need the social order, it can create connection between complete strangers and without asking to change anyone's behaviour. My contention is that it is this positive view of awkwardness that makes watching even the most uncomfortable scenes in the film not only entertaining but pleasurable.

David Scott Diffrient discusses awkwardness from a similarly positive perspective. Developing the three established theories of humour, he introduces “recognition theory” as a fourth approach, arguing that awkwardness can also be interpreted as a response to “*embarrassment* as a universal experience” (2014, p. 40, emphasis in original). When a film uses this type of humour, the audience recognizes a universally shared feeling and is “encouraged to *laugh at themselves* – at their own foibles, failings or frustrations” (2014, p. 40, emphasis in original). Thus, awkwardness is a shared experience that everybody is able to relate to, regardless of age, gender, social class or cultural presupposition.

This positive perception of awkwardness is important regarding the film’s critique of the issues that it represents, and the solution which it offers to them. As Ines’s character exhibits, success is an all-important value in contemporary capitalist society. Although the “social promotion of success” is not a new concept, what Zupančič calls the “genuine racism of successfulness” is indeed a contemporary feature of capitalist society (Zupančič, 2007, p. 6). The shared experience of awkwardness can provide a solution to the isolation created by economic, political, and class differences.

The positive effects of awkwardness are underlined in the film in the main characters’ relationship. Winfried and Ines represent different economic status, political opinions, generations and genders; however, they are able to overcome these differences through the shared experience of awkward laughter. The radicality of their awkwardness results from the fact that they consciously choose to share each other’s awkwardness and thus disregard the rules of the social order. As Kotsko writes:

When we resist awkwardness, the social order looks good. When we resist the social order, awkwardness looks good. But on those rare occasions when we figure out a way to stop resisting the social order and yet also stop resisting awkwardness and just go with it, something genuinely new and unexpected might happen: we might be able to simply enjoy one another without the mediation of any expectations or demands. That, I believe, is the promise of awkwardness. (Kotsko, 2010, pp. 18-19)

The politics of neoliberal capitalist society is based on rational reason, however the characters' embracement of the absurd (as awkwardness) remains outside of this reason. There is a clash between the desire for a rational (neoliberal) society and the vulgar reality of our world, which does not quite fit into the neoliberal model. Embracing awkwardness, the characters rise above the crisis between the rational and the irrational.

Jared Diamond describes how certain crises “can shake our faith in a world of justice” (2019, p. 4) or how they can be a “blow to your belief that the world is fair” (2019, p. 32). In this interpretation, crisis is the realization of the world's absurdity. Both main characters represent a certain attitude (following versus disrupting the rules), and the ridiculousness of their different worlds becomes clear through the eyes of the other. Winfried can see the ridiculousness of Ines's world when he becomes part of it as Toni Erdmann. Conversely, Ines looks at his father's behaviour as folly at best, however, as she decides to go along and takes part in a series of different performances, the two of them will eventually be able to connect. Camus writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that “[h]appiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable” (1955/1991, p. 24). Echoing the ending of Camus's essay, laughter (or embracing the absurd) seems to be the only sustainable reaction to the world's absurdity in the film.

This positive approach towards laughter however is contrasted in *Toni Erdmann's* last scene, and in this way the ending also encourages a more solemn reading. In this final scene, Winfried brings up Ines's previous question about why life is worth living. He speaks about the difficulty of hanging on to happy moments, since one only realizes the importance of those events when they have already passed. “In the moment itself, it's not possible”, he muses. As Winfried is saying this, Ines reaches to her father's shirt pocket, takes out the fake teeth and puts them in her mouth. To Winfried's further amusement, Ines also takes one of her grandmother's old hats on. They are living one of those precious, fleeting moments Winfried

is talking about, when he says, “wait, I’ll get my camera”, and leaves. He wants to immortalize the moment but precisely in this effort, he lets it pass. Ines waits for him for a while, peeking every now and again in the direction of his exit, keeping the hat and the teeth on. However, the moment is now gone.



Figure 16: Maren Ade’s *Toni Erdmann* (2016): Mosaic Identities

Ines not only accepts but eventually identifies with Winfried’s persona. She wears the teeth and also her grandmother’s hat, indicating how her grandparents’ generation is part of her identity too. This way Ines in the closing scene can be seen as the illustration of a mosaic identity both as an individual and synecdochally representing the whole nation. This last scene requires a more detached critical perspective. If shared experience is not possible, only ironic detachment remains. Ines takes her costume off and the film ends on her solemn face as she is left alone in the garden.

Redefining humour and funniness, absurd laughter is either expressed as ironic detachment or as awkwardness. The first case, ironic detachment, conveys a pessimistic, defeatist attitude, where the audience is looking at the humorous situation from the perspective of an outsider. Irony requires a reflected understanding and by presupposing a critical position it creates distance. As opposed to this ironic detachment, the second case conveys a positive and hopeful attitude. Awkwardness is recognized because it is a universally shared experience. This position demands identification; and – since the audience cannot remain an outsider – the humorous situation in this case calls for laughing *with* rather than laughing *at*. Here laughter is hopeful, because a universally shared experience can lead to greater understanding between those who are laughing.

CONCLUSION: The Absurd as Social Criticism

In its exploration of European cinema, this thesis has used a dual approach. On the one hand, it has presented an Existentialist understanding of the absurd, while on the other hand, it has also examined how black humour is used as a method to express social criticism. Thanks to this two-fold perspective, this work contributes to the advancement of film theory and, more specifically, of discussions on film genre (comedy), affect (laughter), existential-anxiety (film-philosophy) and political engagement (critique of capitalism). Developing ideas by David Graeber, the thesis also uniquely applies an anthropological perspective to film studies in its critical analysis. Redefining the concept of debt, Graeber claims that conflating the idea of existential debt with the debt that we owe to society leads to the conclusion that we necessarily owe something to the state, and this is why the idea of primordial debt becomes the ultimate nationalist myth. This theory is especially relevant to my thesis, since it highlights a logical contradiction of neoliberal ideology.

A scene from Małgorzata Szumowska's *Body* (2015) effectively illustrates the main points of the thesis. In this film, a homicide prosecutor (Janusz Gajos) arrives at a scene where a man has hanged himself from a tree. The policemen, who are already there, cut the rope from the tree and the body falls to the ground. While the officers are busy setting up the crime scene, the "corpse" suddenly sits up on the ground, dusts his clothes off and walks away. The source of the humour here is our disappointed expectation: we expect the hanged man to be dead, but he suddenly turns out alive, except nobody notices it. The humour here is created by the film's narration, since it is based on a disparity of knowledge: the characters around the dead man remain unknowing, while the viewer watches him walking away.

As Szumowska confronts her characters with grief, she approaches the topic of faith from esotericism, but lightens the dramatic tone with humour. She pokes fun at autocracy and religion – as if her native Poland was stuck halfway in-between an old and a modern era, in-

between scepticism and occultism. She paints a picture of her country by contrasting the characters' different points of view on lifestyle. In *Body*, the daughter of the homicide prosecutor wants to end her life, but by the end of the film, she manages to bond with her father. They find common ground in acknowledging the ridiculousness of their world; they laugh at a psychic, who claims to be able to talk to the dead. Their laughter here echoes Camus's scorn. These characters are grieving the loss of a loved one, but through ironic detachment, they still manage to laugh at their fate, and through this laughter they find happiness. This film presents another example of a contemporary, award-winning arthouse film, which uses absurd black humour in order to express social anxiety. By presenting another acclaimed film of European cinema as another example of the expression of socio-political criticism through the prism of absurdity, I want to emphasize how there are multiple contemporary films that fit the framework of the absurd and thus invite further discussion of this topic.

Absurdity is expressed in European film through two types of laughter. The first, ironic laughter, addresses the pessimism of absurd black humour, while the second, awkward laughter, indicates a more optimistic reaction. Thus, absurd laughter can either be interpreted as choosing escapism in the form of ironic detachment, or, as the second, more optimistic reading suggests, laughter can also call for an active participation from the viewer. While irony requires a detached and critical attitude, awkwardness focuses on the more direct and shared experience of embarrassment. These two types of reactions to the world's meaninglessness can be observed through the comparison of the films' different endings.

Throughout the thesis I have argued that contemporary European film not only establishes an absurd worldview in its narratives (what its stories are about), but that it also reflects on absurdity in its different filmmaking styles (the way it presents these stories to the viewer). David Bordwell writes about the significance of film form, arguing that in order to discover patterns, the viewer must compare a film's beginning to its ending (Bordwell, 2013,

p. 69). This basic method of thinking about film assists the viewer in identifying different ideas the film conveys, since, as Bordwell writes, “[f]orm shapes our experience of the film” (Bordwell, 2013, p. 69). In order to see what solution European film offers to the viewer to living in the contemporary absurd present, it is important to examine and compare the films’ endings.

A comparison of the films under discussion shows that there are two types of endings. The defeatist approach of the pessimistic film endings (*The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, *Raw*, *Amour Fou*) opts for irony, while the more optimistic endings suggest a more hopeful perspective (*The Great Beauty*, *Youth*, *On Body and Soul*, *Wild*, *Toni Erdmann*). The films in the first category require a more distant critical attitude from their viewers; while the films in the second category invite more direct involvement and identification from the audience.

The Deadpan as a Political Act

First, the thesis has considered the pessimistic endings. The films in the first category use deadpan or affected performance. In *Raw*, the absurd humour focuses on the protagonist’s hubris. Since Justine is in denial about her real nature, there is a gap between how she thinks about herself and what she is really like. In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* and *Amour Fou*, the characters only express themselves in a monotonous, unaltered tone. The thesis considers this type of deadpan performance an ironic way of acting, which also articulates political critique.

Deadpan means unaffected performance. “Pan” is a now outdated slang term for face, so the term literally means dead-face and “‘dead’, in this context, refers figuratively to the static and unchanging nature of that face” (Holm, 2017, p. 104). On the one hand, academic literature emphasizes deadpan’s unaffected character as it is described as “emotionless” or “expressionless” presentation (Holm, 2017, p. 104); “lack of expression (facial, vocal, bodily)” or “immobility” (Peberdy, 2012, p. 56); or an “extremely downplayed manner of expression”

(MacDowell, 2016, p. 145). On the other hand, other definitions stress that deadpan is a type of acting or performance: “deadpan can be thought about in terms of the performance of ‘doing nothing’” (Peberdy, 2012, p. 56). Developing James MacDowell’s claim (2016), that narration itself can pretend to partake in certain filmmaking conventions and thus storytelling itself can be ironic, the thesis considers the deadpan as a form of ironic acting.

MacDowell defines deadpan humour as a form of incongruity, arguing that “there is an incongruity between a character’s extremely emotionally intense conditions and a performer’s extremely downplayed manner of expression that creates the humour, and irony” (MacDowell, 2016, p. 145). That is, MacDowell claims that an actor’s deadpan delivery creates ironic distance. Similarly, Holm writes how the deadpan is principally understood as a

[...] style of comic acting in which humorous content is performed with a blank face and an unenthusiastic demeanour... To perform comedy in a deadpan manner is to present it in such a way that the presenter seems unaware of or uninterested in the underlying humour and its potential for amusing the audience. (Holm, 2017, p. 105)

The deadpan performer often conceals the fact that she is saying something humorous. There is a lack of fit between the content of the comic performance and its delivery and in this way deadpan humour creates ironic detachment. The ingenuity of this type of humour lies in the fact that the audience often does not know whether they are supposed to laugh at all. As Holm writes, there is a “fissure” between the comic material and its presentation, “so that the performance seems to work against – or at least not with – the comic grain of the underlying content” (Holm, 2017, p. 105). Deadpan (or ironic expression in general) creates “obfuscation”, since it “tends to provide its audience with a lower level of information than is usually required for the straightforward confirmation of interpretation (Holm, 2017, p. 106). By emphasizing its ambiguous character, Nicholas Holm’s definition also highlights how the deadpan is a form of ironic acting that requires interpretation from the viewer.

The humour in this type of acting is created by an incongruity between the characters' extremely intense emotional situations and their downplayed manner of expression. In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* a father is asked to murder one of his own family members and *Amour Fou* revolves around committing suicide; still the characters in these films remain detached and unaffected in the way that they express themselves in these emotionally overwhelming circumstances.

Regarding the broader context of cultural politics, however, deadpan goes “beyond performance and rhetoric” (Holm, 2017, p. 105) and thus Holm defines deadpan not only as a type of performance but as its own aesthetic mode: “[d]eadpan thus emerges as more than just a matter of facial expression: it is better understood more broadly as a comic mode characterised by the muting and flattening of those formal, aesthetic elements that make it recognisably comic” (Holm, 2017, 105). This definition fits nicely with the thesis, since I have identified the expression of irony as a comic mode.

The deadpan however can be interpreted as more than just a comic mode. Lauren Berlant describes it as a form of resistance, which suggests that the deadpan as an aesthetic style can have political implications. Berlant describes the deadpan as “underperformed emotion” (Berlant, 2015, p. 191), defying the overdetermination of the melodrama, by emphasizing importance over intensity (Berlant, 2015, p. 197). That is, in Berlant's description deadpan becomes *a political act* that

[...] incites political questions about personal style in relation to social action. Expression always denotes a register of vulnerability in the social, a recognition of relationality: the conventional whiteness of deadpan, deadvoice, and deadeye in dramatic and passive aggressive performances of withholding points to the power of a dramatized withholding as an esthetic machinery of normative social reproduction. (Berlant, 2015, p. 197)

A closer look at *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* suggests that deadpan performance can indeed invite political reading. I understood the emergence of the supernatural in the film as a metaphor for the impossibility of contemporary political action. That is, in the film magic, as

a form of ritualized religious practice, is depicted as the only (im)possible source of political action.

This film highlights ironic narration not only in its acting style but also in its framing. Often, we see pivotal scenes from a distance in very long shots, emphasizing the film's detached perspective. The film's ironic tone is the expression of an abstract relationship to the world that prevents sincere and immediate experience. This ironic mode is further emphasized in the film's ambiguous ending. Just before the last scene, we see the body of the now dead boy, after his father has killed him. This image of his dead body is a response to the film's opening sequence where we see an open-heart surgery performed on a still living body. The medical mistake leading to the patient's death created the debt that had to be paid at the end of the film by killing the boy. After his death, we see an establishing shot of the family of now three, sitting in the diner which has served as Steven and Martin's meeting place during the film. The family walks out of the door, but Martin's gaze follows them; and the last picture of the film is a close up of his face. Ambiguity here is also formally expressed with the help of irony. Did Steven settle the debt by his sacrifice, or did he enter a never-ending cycle of revenge while attempting to pay the unaffordable debt? Does their story really end there?

Another striking characteristic of the films with pessimistic endings in the first category is their focus on the representation of violence. Violence in these films is directly and viscerally expressed on the characters' bodies. In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, Martin bites out a piece of his own flesh in order to explain the meaning of metaphors to Steven. In *Raw*, Alexia bites out a piece of flesh from Justine's face. The two young women communicate in the film with the help of their physical bodies, expressing their attachment through their injuries. While the violence in *Amour Fou* happens mostly off-screen, in the end the film does show the two dead bodies of the protagonists and it has a chilling effect. These films address the question of violence on a more abstract level too. *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* argues that offering a human

sacrifice (using violence) is the only possible form of political action. *Raw*, meanwhile, reduces humans to pure animality, depicting a distressing apocalypse where human beings literally kill and consume each other.

The Solution of Critical Analysis

In his book on violence, Slavoj Žižek argues that it is in fact contemporary capitalist ideology that ensures the existence of objective violence (Žižek, 2008a, p. 11), because violence is inherent to its system (Žižek, 2008a, p. 8). Žižek differentiates between subjective and objective violence, arguing that people are generally more shaken by visible subjective violence but in reality, the invisible objective violence claims far more victims.

As opposed to subjective violence, objective violence is invisible and has two forms: language itself, and systemic violence (including political or economic violence) (Žižek, 2008a, p. 1). Žižek argues this objective violence “took on a new shape with capitalism” (Žižek, 2008a, p. 10) and that there is general “blindness to the results of systemic violence” (Žižek, 2008a, p. 12). According to this argument, the “fundamental and systemic violence of capitalism” is far more detrimental than the more visible subjective violence (an identifiable crime with a perpetrator):

[...] it is the self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital that runs the show, that provides the key to real-life developments and catastrophes. Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than any direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their “evil” intentions, but is purely “objective”, systemic, anonymous. (Žižek, 2008a, p. 11)

Žižek does offer a solution against violence: in the form of critical analysis. There are certain contemporary political issues, where the only “practical” solution is patient, critical analysis (2008a, p. 6). Žižek writes:

A critical analysis of the present global constellation – one which offers no clear solution, no “practical” advice on what to do, and provides no light at the end of the tunnel, since one is well aware that this light might belong to a train crashing towards

us – usually meets with reproach: “Do you mean we should do nothing? Just sit and wait?” One should gather the courage to answer: “YES, precisely that!” There are situations when the only truly “practical” thing to do is to resist temptation to engage immediately and to “wait and see by means of a patient, critical analysis”.
(Žižek, 2008a, p. 6)

I argue that this critical perspective is conveyed through the ironic mode of the European films under discussion. Critical analysis however only offers one type of solution. The second approach requires more active engagement and this other perspective brings me to the second category of films with more optimistic endings.

The films in the second category have also established an absurd worldview, however, their main comic mode is different from irony. Even if they use irony, they focus on contrasting it with a different mode of expression. Magic, the fantastic, and awkwardness offer antidotes to ironic detachment. In Paolo Sorrentino’s films, the protagonists are defined by an ironic outlook, whereas some of the secondary characters are magical. As mentioned previously, magical characters express themselves literally and embody a yearning spirituality. Sometimes even ironic characters can become magical: Jude Law’s character, Lenny Belardo, represents this yearning irony in *The Young Pope* (2016). *Toni Erdmann* also resists ironic detachment by inviting the viewer to laugh with its characters in a shared experience of awkwardness. Most of the film’s humour is created by highlighting a clash between the expected social conduct and how the characters actually behave in the situations they find themselves in.

Some of these endings keep the viewer in a suspended, uncertain state, wondering whether the film truly relies on magic or what she sees is just a trick. In the end of *Wild* it is not certain whether Ania has truly succeeded in leaving the world of humans behind. I have argued that the film is an illustration of a dualistic way of thinking about ourselves, where consciousness is linked to the human, because without the mind humans are reduced to pure animality. This duality becomes clear if we look at the film’s beginning together with its ending. In the opening scene we see Ania talking to her sister in a video call. The sister says

goodbye to her and starts having sex with her boyfriend, however she does not end the call. Refusing to watch them, Ania closes the laptop down. The sister represents excessive behaviour, the kind of lifestyle Ania is desperate to get away from. By the end of the film, she leaves the world of excessive humans behind.

The difference between the human and animal worlds is also suggested in the images of the opening scene. We see two tunnels that are very similar in their shapes but the worlds that they represent are completely different. The first tunnel is an arc of trees in the park. This is where Ania sees the wolf: the world of nature, free of excess. The next tunnel is her building's corridor, representing human life. Underneath all of its excesses, it is completely empty.

The criticism these films with more positive endings express is more social than political. These films illustrate Todd McGowan's theory of comedy. As opposed to everyday life, comedy always reveals the interconnected nature of lack and excess. Comedy has a unique capacity to show that our enjoyment is not about overcoming but enjoying lack (2017, p. 46). This means that comedy has revelatory power, because the subject recognizes that her enjoyment can only be traumatic.

Can the Absurd Be Funny?

Comedy can have both a socially critical function and political power, because comedy reveals both the flaws and the potential for transcendence in the subject matter. McGowan claims that certain philosophers can make their audience laugh, whereas some can never be perceived as funny (McGowan, 2017, p. 106). The philosophers who paved the way for Existentialist thinkers, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, were both funny philosophers. This is because in McGowan's interpretation comedy always requires the intersection of finitude and transcendence (McGowan, 2017, p. 104). In the case of Kierkegaard, transcendence is represented by God (according to Kierkegaard human beings are infinite because of their

constant struggle with faith); while in the philosophy of Nietzsche, transcendence is represented by the idea of the Übermensch (Nietzsche does not believe in God, but argues that humans can reach an elevated state themselves).

On the other hand, in McGowan's interpretation, Sartre and Camus cannot be funny, because the idea of the absurd itself is never funny. According to Sartre's and Camus's Existentialist philosophy, humans are finite beings. Since these philosophers only concentrate on finitude, they cannot be funny; without anything to transcend, there is no room for comedy (McGowan, 2017, p. 105). Debating this idea, my thesis has redefined concepts of the funny and the humorous according to the absurd, by differentiating between the interpretations of the absurd as ridiculous and the absurd as meaninglessness.

According to McGowan, Christianity is a philosophically comic religion and Christ is a ridiculous figure, because he embodies god in human form (McGowan, 2017, p. 94). Christ's earthly existence is inherently funny, because a man's physical body (the finite) is incongruous with divinity (the infinite). Luis Buñuel's films often reflect on this comic incongruity. *The Milky Way* (1969) for example shows Christ taking part in mundane human activities. In this way the film emphasizes the idea that divinity in human form is essentially funny (McGowan, 2017, p. 96). This leads McGowan to conclude that Christianity (the only religion where god appears in human form) as a religion is also inherently funny, because it highlights the incongruity between transcendence and finitude (McGowan, 2017, p. 97). Developing this idea, the selected films reflected on the inherent humour of this bodily perspective in their absurdist worldviews.

The thesis has combined psychoanalytic and Existentialist approaches in its analysis. While thinking about death is of central importance both in psychoanalytic theory and Existentialist philosophy, there is a fundamental difference. While Freud's theory is based on the existence of the unconscious (the id is an unknown but inseparable core of human

existence), Sartrean Existentialism (“existence precedes essence” [Sartre, 1946/2007, p. 49]) argues that there is no pre-existing, defining quality: character is built through action.

Happiness Is a Fantasy

On Body and Soul offers both a psychoanalytic reading and also invites the viewer to experience the film phenomenologically. In this way the film illustrates the two opposing ways of thinking which psychoanalysis and phenomenology represent, by combining their opposing viewpoints into one film. In the beginning, *On Body and Soul* offers a critique of psychoanalysis, as if emphasizing that the representation of dreams in this story will have an unusual function. This criticism is clear in the blatantly ridiculous character of the psychologist (Réka Tenki), who implies a psychoanalytic method in her investigation into the abattoir employees’ dreams. She seems to enjoy asking inappropriate questions from the employees under the guise of examining a ridiculous crime that is never truly explored in the film.

The main difference between psychoanalysis and phenomenology revolves around experience. In psychoanalysis the unconscious is an inherent, however unknowable part of every individual. Phenomenology focuses on direct experience; and the unconscious can never be accessed directly. That is, from the point of view of psychoanalysis, phenomenology can only tell us something about superficial experiences and nothing about what really matters.

From the point of view of phenomenology, we cannot have an experience of the world outside of our own body. Applying a phenomenological filmmaking style, the film in certain scenes acts as a human body by conveying Mária’s sensations. Because we humans can only perceive other things as bodies, the viewer interacts with the film as if it were a body.

However, *On Body and Soul* also embraces a psychoanalytic reading in its depiction of a fantasy world. According to McGowan’s reading of psychoanalysis, we must look at fantasy as a social reality, because our social reality is already a fantasy. Fantasy involves us more than

our real social interactions, because we always base those fantasies upon those social interactions.

The idea that you have to fantasize yourself *not* having your object of desire in order to have it is expressed in the film in the image of the empty dream world at the end. The ideal world of the snowy forest and the majestic deer disappear. Fantasies are always created based on how interactions with other people are imposed upon an individual. This is what happens in the film, where one person's dream is shared and changed by the other.

Concluding the Conclusion

Examining notable representatives of European cinema, I have argued how these films use absurd black comedy as a method of “social criticism” to highlight injustice. Each chapter has focused on one specific theme regarding absurdity: sexuality, politics, identity and death; exploring how each film presents a critique of the prevalent neoliberal ideology. Depicting different themes of social crisis, grotesque death, and taboo-breaking (disobedience, transgression, mental illness and social dysfunction) the films of European cinema are metaphors of crisis as the normal functioning of the neoliberal system. Through an exploration of the political and aesthetic solutions offered to crisis within my film corpus, I analysed the relationship between current events and film as an artform, with special emphasis on how the comic and the absurd are used as tools to represent crisis on screen. These films act as social criticism by both reflecting on and engaging with the debates around contemporary crisis. While they are indubitably symptoms of crisis, they also seek to shine a light on the latter and effect change: through their socially critical approach, they endeavour to shape society's opinion of and reaction to crisis.

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Filmography

2012 (Roland Emmerich, 2009)

8½ (Federico Fellini, 1963)

Adam's Rib (George Cukor, 1949)

After Life (Ricky Gervais, 2018)

Alps (Alpeis), Yorgos Lanthimos, 2011)

Amour Fou (Jessica Hausner, 2014)

Attenberg (Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2010)

Awful Truth, The (Leo McCarey, 1937)

Bandits (Katja von Garnier, 1997)

Bastards (Les salauds), Claire Denis, 2013)

Black Peter (Cerný Petr), Miloš Forman, 1964)

Blind Chance (Przypadek), Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1987)

Blood of the Beasts (Le sang des bêtes), Georges Franju, 1949)

Blue Mountains, or Unbelievable Story (Tsisperi mtebi anu daujerebeli ambavi), Eldar Shengelaia, 1983)

Body (Cialo), Małgorzata Szumowska, 2015)

Borgman (Alex van Warmerdam, 2013)

Brand New Testament, The (Le tout nouveau testament), Jaco Van Dormael, 2015)

Bringing Up Baby (Howard Hawks, 1938)

Chevalier (Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2015)

Closely Watched Trains (Ostre sledované vlaky), Jiří Menzel, 1966)

Clowns, The (I clowns), Federico Fellini, 1970)

Daisies (Sedmikrásky), Věra Chytilová, 1966)

Divo, Il (Il divo - La spettacolare vita di Giulio Andreotti), Paolo Sorrentino, 2008)

Dog (Chien), Samuel Benchetrit, 2017)

Dogtooth (Kynodontas, Yorgos Lanthimos, 2009)

Earthquake (Mark Robson, 1974)

Everyone Else (Alle Anderen, Maren Ade, 2009)

Family Friend, The (L'amico di famiglia, Paolo Sorrentino, 2006)

Favourite, The (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2018)

Field in England, A (Ben Wheatley, 2013)

Forest for the Trees, The (Der Wald vor lauter Bäumen, Maren Ade, 2003)

From the Life of the Marionettes (Aus dem Leben der Marionetten, Ingmar Bergman, 1980)

Good Night, Nurse! (Roscoe Arbuckle, 1918)

Great Beauty, The (La grande bellezza, Paolo Sorrentino, 2013)

Groundhog Day (Harold Ramis, 1993)

Heart Is a Dark Forest, The (Das Herz ist ein dunkler Wald, Nicolette Krebitz, 2007)

His Girl Friday (Howard Hawks, 1940)

In a Year of 13 Moons (In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1978)

In My Skin (Dans ma peau, Marina de Van, 2002)

In Order of Disappearance (Kraftidioten, Hans Petter Moland, 2014)

In the Basement (Im Keller, Ulrich Seidl, 2014)

It Happened One Night (Frank Capra, 1934)

Jeans (Nicolette Krebitz, 2001)

Junior (Julia Ducournau, 2011)

Keep an Eye Out (Au poste!, Quentin Dupieux, 2018)

Killer of Sheep (Charles Burnett, 1978)

Killing of a Sacred Deer, The (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2017)

L'Age d'Or (Luis Buñuel, 1930)

La Strada (Federico Fellini, 1954)

Lady Eve, The (Preston Sturges, 1941)

Le feu follet (The Fire Within), Louis Malle, 1963)

Le Havre (Aki Kaurismäki, 2011)

Leaving Las Vegas (Mike Figgis, 1995)

Lobster, The (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015)

Lolita (Stanley Kubrick, 1962)

Loro (Paolo Sorrentino, 2018)

Lovely Rita (Jessica Hausner, 2001)

Loves of a Blonde (Lásky jedné plavovlásky), Miloš Forman, 1965)

Macadam Stories (Asphalte), Samuel Benchetrit, 2015)

Magic Hunter, The (Bűvös vadász), Ildikó Enyedi, 1994)

Melancholia (Lars von Trier, 2011)

Milky Way, The (Luis Buñuel, 1969)

Monty Python's Life of Brian (Terry Jones, 1979)

Mug (Twarz, Malgorzata Szumowska, 2018)

My Favourite Wife (Garson Kanin, 1940)

My Twentieth Century (Az én XX. századom), Ildikó Enyedi, 1989)

On Body and Soul (Testről és lélekről), Ildikó Enyedi, 2018)

Other Side of Hope, The (Toivon tuolla puolen), Aki Kaurismäki, 2017)

Philadelphia Story, The (George Cukor, 1940)

Pierrot le Fou (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965)

Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence, A (En duva satt på en gren och funderade på tillvaron), Roy Andersson, 2014)

Police, Adjective (Politist, adjectiv), Corneliu Porumboiu, 2009)

Raw (Grave, Julia Ducournau, 2016)

Rubber (Quentin Dupieux, 2010)

Run Lola Run (*Lola rennt*, Tom Tykwer, 1998)

Russian Doll (Natasha Lyonne, Leslye Headland, Amy Poehler; 2019)

Schneider vs. Bax (Alex van Warmerdam, 2015)

Seventh Continent, The (*Der siebente Kontinent*, Michael Haneke, 1989)

Sightseers (Ben Wheatley, 2012)

Silence, The (Ingmar Bergman, 1963)

Simon, the Magician (*Simon mágus*, Ildikó Enyedi, 1998)

Sliding Doors (Peter Howitt, 1998)

Somewhat Gentle Man, A (*En ganske snill mann*, Hans Petter Moland, 2010)

Source Code (Duncan Jones, 2011)

Spellbound (Alfred Hitchcock, 1945)

Stranger than Fiction (Marc Forster, 2006)

Talent Competition (*Konkurs*, Miloš Forman, 1964)

Tamas and Juli (*Tamás és Juli*, Ildikó Enyedi, 1997)

This Must Be the Place (Paolo Sorrentino, 2011)

Through a Glass Darkly (*Såsom i en spegel*, Ingmar Bergman, 1961)

Toni Erdmann (Maren Ade, 2016)

Towering Inferno, The (John Guillermin, 1974)

Turin Horse, The (*A torinói ló*, Béla Tarr, 2011)

Un chien Andalou (Luis Buñuel, 1929)

Variety Lights (*Luci del varietà*, Federico Fellini, 1951)

Very Late Afternoon of a Faun, The (*Faunovo velmi pozdní odpoledne*, Vera Chytilová, 1983)

Waterer Watered, The (*L'arroseur arrosé*, the Lumière brothers, 1895)

Weekend (*Week End*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1967)

Wild (Nicolette Krebitz, 2016)

Wild Strawberries (*Smultronstället*, Ingmar Bergman, 1957)

Winter Light (*Nattvardsgästerna*, Ingmar Bergman, 1963)

Witness, The (*A tanú*, Péter Bacsó, 1969)

Young Pope, The (Paolo Sorrentino, 2016)

Youth (*La giovinezza*, Paolo Sorrentino, 2015)

Zizek! (Astra Taylor, 2005)