Structurally Bent on Self-Destruction: Paul Schrader and the Decomposition of Contemporary Society

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Abstract: In this essay on Paul Schrader, I take seriously Theodor Adorno's claim that the film industry is internally antagonistic, thus containing the antidote to its own lie. I argue that Schrader's films are ideally placed, within contemporary mass-produced cinema, to reveal the inherent contradiction and self-sabotaging of the film commodity. Precisely on account of its formal tendency to endorse its commodity status, while attempting to subvert it from within, Schrader's auteurial cinema manages to produce symptomatic significations that reach beyond the director's conscious narrative control. As a rule, Schrader's mindful emphasis on subjective despair and self-destructiveness redoubles into the partially disavowed denotation of an increasingly substanceless socio-historical constellation seemingly destined to implosion. The focus of this essay rests on the dialectical claim that subjective negativity in Schrader's films is strictly correlated to the theme of the decomposition of contemporary society. Schrader's world is from the beginning populated by characters whose personal crises are rooted in the loss of symbolic efficiency of their social environment.

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1. Adorno, critical theory and the film commodity

In his 1966 essay "Transparencies on Film", arguably his most consistent critical incursion into the seventh art, Theodor Adorno vied for a cinematic avant-garde not supported "by the power of capital, technological routine and highly trained specialists".[2] Such cinema would privilege anti-realistic awkwardness, improvisation,[3] and more generally a subjective representation of the world that would solicit unconscious conflicts and contradictions: "As the objectifying recreation of this type of experience, film may become art".[4] To exemplify his stance, Adorno mentioned Alexander Kluge, Michelangelo Antonioni, and experimental filmmaker/composer Mauricio Kagel.[5] However, despite the above recommendations, he concluded his essay on a (typically) pessimistic note, highlighting the impossibility for cinema to carry "purely aesthetic values" due to its *inherently objective character*: "The photographic process of film, primarily representational, places a higher intrinsic significance on the object, as foreign to subjectivity, than aesthetically autonomous tech-

2 T. Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London and New York: Routledge), 2001, p. 178.

3 Adorno places his stakes in a "comparatively awkward and unprofessional cinema, uncertain of its effects" since there "is inscribed the hope that the so-called mass media might eventually become something qualitatively different." He adds that "works which have not completely mastered their technique, conveying as a result something consolingly uncontrolled and accidental, have a liberating quality." And again, liquidating realism: "Film [...] must search for other means of conveying immediacy: improvization which systematically surrenders itself to unguided chance should rank high among possible alternatives" (*Ibid*., pp. 178-79).

4 *Ibid*., p. 180.

5 In 'Transparencies on Film', Adorno first praised the un-cinematic aspects of Antonioni's *La notte* (1962) and then, returning to the central concern of his book with Hanns Eisler (*Composing for the Films*, first published in 1947), suggested how "film's most promising potential lies in its interaction with other media, themselves merging into film, such as certain kinds of music. One of the most powerful examples of such interaction is the television film *Antithese* by composer Mauricio Kagel" (*Ibid*., p. 183).

niques; this is the retarding aspect of film in the historical process of art".[6] Through these views, Adorno expressed his rejection of mimetic realism and its presumed objectivity. Back in 1934, after visiting the Babelsberg studios in Potsdam, he had written to Walter Benjamin that "reality is always constructed with an infantile attachment to the mimetic and then 'photographed'".[7] For him, mimetic realism is in fact constitutive of the filmic medium, while its exploitation by the film industry is responsible for the weakening of subjective imagination, expressivity and the capacity to reflect, thereby contributing to cementing the dominant ideological order. This diagnosis is echoed in a well-known passage of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

> "The more intensely and flawlessly [filmic] techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on screen. […] Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies. The sound film, far surpassing the theater of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, who is unable to respond within the structure of the film, yet deviate from its precise detail without losing the thread of the story; hence the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality."[8]

Against the defence of realism propsed by his friend Siegfried Kracauer (in his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, first published in 1960), Adorno argued that cinema by definition tends to 'confiscate

6 *Ibid*., p. 181. Immediately after he claims: "That which is irreducible about the objects in film is itself a mark of society, prior to the aesthetic realization of an intention. By virtue of this relationship to the object, the aesthetics of film is thus inherently concerned with society. There can be no aesthetics of cinema, not even a purely technological one, which would not include the sociology of the cinema" (182).

7 T. Adorno and W. Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, edited by Henri Lonitz (Cambridge: Polity Press) 1999, p. 131.

8 T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London and New York: Verso), 1997, p. 126.

the imaginary'. With reference to crime films, for instance, he claimed that the representations of tragic or antisocial personalities contributed to assuaging or even eradicating rebellion within late-capitalist societies.[9] Similarly, he rejected *auteurial* tendencies within the film industry, arguing that they provide a liberal deviation *within* the norm, aimed at a devilish affirmation of the ideological message: "Whenever Orson Welles offends against the tricks of the trade, he is forgiven because his departures from the norm are regarded as calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system".[10] Along the same lines, in *Composing for the Films* he emphasised his dislike for "pretentious grade-A films" produced by the industry.[11]

It is worth recalling that already in 1926 Max Horkheimer had indicted technology (photography, telegraphy, and the radio) for desensitising people, thus reducing their reflexive capacity.[12] In fact, the critique of the ideological triumph of instrumental rationality, in a world increasingly saturated with technology, is arguably the central theme in traditional critical theory. In this respect, the ideological purpose of film in the age of technological reproduction was supposedly that of reconciling the masses with the status quo. As is well known, initially Walter Benjamin proposed a different take on technological reproduction,[13] believing in the subversive potential of cinema as a politicized art form capable of exerting a direct influence on the masses. In this and other respects, he followed Bertolt Brecht, who, despite his personal frustrations with the film industry,[14] was also sanguine about the subversive potential of cinema.

9 See *Ibid*., pp. 151-56.

10 *Ibid*., p. 129.

11 T. Adorno and H. Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (London and New York: Continuum), 2005, p. 16.

12 M. Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline: Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1969* (New York: Seabury Press), 1978, p. 19.

13 See W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana Press), 1992, pp. 211–44.

14 Brecht had been bitterly disappointed by Georg W. Pabst's 1931 film version of his *Threepenny Opera*, to the extent that the disagreement between the two had led to a lawsuit. For a comparison of play and film, see T. Elsaesser, *Wei-*

Adorno and Benjamin kept disagreeing on the role of film until less than two years prior to Benjamin's death, when Benjamin concurred with his younger friend that the advent of the talkies had stifled the revolutionary potential of silent cinema.[15]

While Adorno's analysis is theoretically sound and no doubt consistent with avant-garde filmmaking, it seems to me that it risks jettisoning the crucial dialectical issue concerning the inherently contradictory dimension of the film commodity. This is all the more surprising when, in "Transparencies on Film", we come across the following remark:

> "In its attempts to manipulate the masses the ideology of the culture industry itself becomes as internally antagonistic as the very society which it aims to control. The ideology of the culture industry contains the antidote to its own lie. No other plea could be made for its defence."[16]

This is no small plea. In its radical self-reflexivity, it is a point that deserves more sustained critical exploration than Adorno was prepared to grant it – predictably, he ended his piece by re-emphasising the reactionary nature of film within the culture industry, insofar as the latter "is not the art of the consumer but rather the projection of the will of those in control onto their victims."[17]

My overall argument in this essay is rooted precisely in the dialectical claim that the film industry is internally antagonistic and thus, to use Adorno's own words, it "contains the antidote to its own lie". If, paraphrasing Adorno, the aim of avant-garde cinema is to break away

mar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary (Oxford and New York: Routledge), 2004, pp. 311–29.

15 In a letter of 9 December 1938, Benjamin wrote to Adorno: "I see more and more clearly that the launching of the sound film must be regarded as an operation of the film industry designed to break the revolutionary primacy of the silent film, which had produced reactions that were difficult to control and hence dangerous politically" (T. Adorno and W. Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-*1940, p. 295).

16 T. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 181.

17 *Ibid*., p. 185.

from the iron cage of commodified and thus ideologically-laden entertainment, one perhaps should also be aware that, in dialectical terms, the frontier separating 'ideological' and 'non-' or 'extra-ideological' is internal to ideology itself, not merely external. Precisely because linguistically structured, any symbolic and therefore ideological field by definition generates its own excess, or surplus of meaning, which it struggles to integrate or repress within its *dispositif*. If there is a lesson to be learned from dialectical thinking, it concerns the intrinsic self-sabotaging of any power mechanism. Adorno's rejection of the film industry often fails to confront the elementary principle of dialectics, namely the imperative to locate antagonism not only where it is fully embraced and solicited, but *especially* where it is muted.

In what follows, I consider the example of Paul Schrader's cinema in order to discuss how the film commodity today might be seen to engage with its self-generated contradiction. I contend that Schrader's films are ideally placed, within contemporary mass-produced cinema, to reveal the inherent self-sabotaging of the film commodity. This argument is premised on the assumption that Schrader is highly representative of that group of contemporary directors who have to negotiate the stifling commercial rationale of the film industry while also challenging it from within. The result are films that consciously explore, and expose, their own contradictory nature from within their commodity form. While they never really overcome their commercial imprimatur, they display a high degree of self-awareness, which lends them a distinctive *auteurial* and to an extent iconoclastic quality. As a film critic as well as a scriptwriter and director, Schrader is arguably the epitome of the self-conscious contemporary filmmaker, which is probably why his work has remained at the margins of the critical debate: in a way, his films already contain their own critique.

As a contemporary *auteur*, Schrader is certainly not alone, although one would be hard-pressed to find other filmmakers who are more obstinately conflictual in their relationship with the film industry.[18] The focus

18 Schrader played a significant role within the so-called 'New Hollywood' or 'American New Wave' (late 1970s and early 1980s), which included also

of this essay, however, lies in the claim that to get more 'critical joy' out of Schrader's *auteurial* stance, the emphasis should be placed less on the consciously recalcitrant side of his filmmaking than on his partly disavowed allegiance with mainstream cinema. Precisely on account of its formal tendency to accept its status as a filmic commodity, Schrader's cinema produces symptomatic significations that challenge the director's aesthetic and narrative control of the films. I claim that what is antagonistic in Schrader's work is best explained by reference to the elementary Hegelian dialectic of *subject* and *substance*.[19] If as a rule Schrader explicitly immerses his characters in an atmosphere of existential despair that they are unable to transcend, this *subjective* condition redoubles into the representation of an increasingly *substanceless* socio-historical microcosm, seemingly destined to self-annihilation. Thus, the mindful emphasis on subjective negativity tends to obfuscate this cinema's denotation of the 'self-contraction of substance' – the increasing loss of symbolic efficiency of our world.

Perhaps the clearest example of this logic can be observed in the final sequence of *Affliction* (1997), generally regarded as one of Schrader's undisputed masterpieces. A hybrid between a neo-noir and a family drama, this film focuses on Wade Whitehouse's (Nick Nolte) journey of self-de-

Robert Altman, Brian De Palma, Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola. Today the list of Hollywood *auteurs* could be extended to the Coen Brothers, David Fincher, Steven Soderbergh, Christopher Nolan and Quentin Tarantino. For the overlap between 'New Hollywood' and mainstream commercial cinema see Jon Lewis' "The Perfect Money Machine(s): George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Auteurism in the New Hollywood", *Film International*, 1 (1), 2003, 12-26.

19 I am referring to the famous passage of the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where Hegel claims that 'everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*' (G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1977, p. 10), insofar as 'what seems to happen outside of it, to be an activity directed against it, is really its doing, and Substance shows itself to be essentially Subject' (21). By affirming the speculative identity of substance and subject, Hegel argues that the subject is by definition included within substance as its constitutive gap, its radical inconsistency, the empty kernel around which any socio-symbolic, substantial meaning or sense is erected.

struction in a small and stagnant New Hampshire town, his profound sense of worthlessness being explicitly associated with the abuse suffered as a child from his alcoholic father Glen (James Coburn). Following a recurrent theme in Schrader's works, masculine violence in *Affliction* is linked to feelings of deep inadequacy, which here have a precise cause: an unresolved oedipal conflict, which is what triggers Wade's personal *via crucis*. The film's narrator Rolfe (Wade's brother, played by Willem Defoe), whose voiceover opens and ends the story, makes this link explicit in the final sequence:

> "Our stories, Wade's and mine, describe the lives of boys and men for thousands of years, boys who were beaten by their fathers, whose capacity for love and trust was crippled almost at birth and whose best hope, if any, for connection with other human beings lay in an elegiac detachment, as if life were over".

By privileging the oedipalisation of a fairly conventional subjective drama (the legacy of violence passed on from father to son), Schrader here de-emphasises the socio-symbolic 'substance' in the background. I am referring to the claustrophobic microcosm of a bleak, financially destitute North American small town caught in a (metaphorical) winter freeze, where 'new money' from Boston is mysteriously manipulated to serve the interests of a few powerful people. While Wade's subjective despair takes on almost universal value, as in a Greek tragedy, the disintegration of the small community, where human relations are literally frozen by the abstract and invisible rationale of economic value, is powerfully affirmed but in a disavowed mode. It is this crucial symptomatic dimension of Schrader's cinema that I intend to examine in this essay. Given the limited scope at my disposal, in what follows I have chosen to focus primarily on one Schrader's latest works, *Dog Eat Dog* (2016), a film underrated by critics and seemingly belittled by the director himself.[20]

20 The title of the interview to Paul Schrader appeared on *The Guardian* on No-

2. The decomposing body of contemporary society

Three quarters into *Dog Eat Dog*, when Diesel (Christopher Matthew Cook) and Mad Dog (Willem Dafoe) are about to leave Mike Brennan's (Louis Perez) dead body in an abandoned military base, which already hosts two more bodies in a state of putrefaction, the loquacious, coke-addict Mad Dog says to his slightly nauseated partner in crime: "Aw, shit, bro, haven't you ever done sanitation? It's a fuckin' fact in forensic science that when things begin to rot, they're at their least toxic for you because they are structurally bent on their own self-destruction". This seemingly inconsequential line presents us with the key to access the partly unconscious dimension of Paul Schrader's mercurial crime-caper, a deranged, claustrophobic thriller almost entirely focussed on three psychopathic oddballs who would feature comfortably in a Tarantino film, were they not totally wanting in coolness and dexterity. The central point is that Schrader works, as he has done throughout his filmic career, with a *decomposing body*, which I claim speaks, ultimately, for the *decomposing body of contemporary society*. Of course, the body under scrutiny in *Dog Eat Dog* is also, metaphorically speaking, cinema itself, inasmuch as Schrader is aware that technological innovation has ushered in what he calls, in filmmaking terms, "the post-rules generation".[21] Yet, his lucid meta-cinematic awareness, always displayed throughout his filmmaking career, does not obscure the underlying existential and, to a different degree, political concerns that his film exudes. The point is that the three ex-cons in *Dog*

vember 13, 2016 reported the following quotation from the director: "I've made some important films. *Dog Eat Dog* is not one of them".

21 See interview in https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/may/27/paul-schrader-willem-dafoe-dog-eat-dog, where he further comments: "You can do most anything now," he says. "You can shoot a scene in black and white, one in colour, one tinted and the audience will say, 'Hey, cool.' Animation. Stop–motion. We have a generation of viewers that have been rewired and re-educated on multimedia technology. Their brains fire at a different rate. When they see those movies from the 70s they think, 'Oh my God, that's a slow movie.'"

Eat Dog, brutalised by life in prison, inept and utterly unredeemable, are unable to relate to anyone outside 'the joint', including, ultimately, each other. They are unable, in other words, to normalise their lives for the simple reason that normality itself is nowhere to be found in the outside world, i.e. among the cold, flashy, disconnected, and deadly microcosm of strip malls and dive bars in post-crash Cleveland – which is where Schrader transposes the original setting (Los Angeles) of Edward Bunker's 1995 novel of the same title. These characters' *individuality* is reduced to its etymological root: an indivisible, atomistic self-concern with no room for any social relation. They are, then, contemporary versions of Leibniz's monad: windowless and self-contained bundles of uncoordinated libidinal drives. Their infantile regression leads them back to the state of "polymorphous perversity" of which Freud spoke.[22]

Schrader's film, and his cinema as a whole, seems to me a particularly powerful example of how cultural commodities today – including seemingly less accomplished films endorsing the hyper-fragmentary post-rules scenario – are able to evoke reflections on questions that our post-modern sensitivity was hoping to have evicted forever from the arena of intellectual discussion. I am referring to a type of critique that, feigning compliance with the relativistic blackmail of our times, stubbornly holds on to the old Hegelian insight that socio-historical formations possess a dialectical substantiality, or essence, whose pervasiveness extends to all aspects of social life. In this respect, the dialectic should be restored to its original signification within Hegelian critical theory: not the postmodern declension of a systematic theory aiming at recomposing a whole out of its original fragmentation, but a modality of thought acknowledging, and tarrying with, contradiction as the essential correlative feature of the unity of opposites. Against this understanding, postmodernism qua logic of late-capitalism (Fredric Jameson) – and, closer to us, of hypermodernity (Gilles Lipovetsky) – thrives on a staunchly anti-dialecti-

22 S. Freud, 'An Outline of Psycho-Analysis', in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, Vol. XXIII (1937-1939) (London: The Hogarth Press), 1964.

cal narrative, upholding irreducible individuality and the production of subjectivities in the name of a compulsive "desire to differ" that provides a perfect fit for our ideological regime of flexible production, market research and hyper-individualised consumption. If postmodern thought and sensibility focus at best on power relations and their constructions or deconstructions, thus (unwittingly) re-substantialising the bourgeois notion of the individual qua self-entrenched, privileged observer, a film like Schrader's *Dog Eat Dog* unwittingly unravels for us the dialectical co-dependency of subject and 'external' substance, their unity being sanctioned by their overlapping inconsistency in a historical context traversed, saturated and finally emptied by the mythologeme of economic value.

Here we should recall that Marx considered the main contradiction of the capitalist mode of production to reside neither in the conflict between capital and workers, nor in the competition among capitalists. Rather, for him the key impasse concerns the relation between the social power of capital and society as a material entity:

> "Capital shows itself more and more to be a social power, with the capitalist as its functionary – a power that no longer stands in any possible kind of relationship to what the work of one particular individual can create, but an alienated social power which has gained an autonomous position and confronts society as a thing, and as the power that the capitalist has through this thing."[23]

Our historical constellation in disarray gives us the opportunity to reformulate what is worth saving in Karl Marx's work: the centrepiece of his *critique* of the political economy, namely the analysis of the value-form (*Wertform*) assumed by our individual and collective existence in modern societies. The value-form is more than just money. As understood by Marx, it is a social totality larger than its empirical quantifica-

23 K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy,* vol. 3 (New York: Vintage Books), 1981, p. 373.

tion, an invisible and intangible network of forces and effects that plays a constitutive role in the formation of our subjectivity and related social bond. Value, then – inasmuch as it is objectively embodied in each individual commodity – designates the historically specific *form* that our social being takes in modernity. It originates from human labour (work) and manifests itself as money (price) and money-generating money (capital). As such, it constitutes the formal condition through which modern societies reproduce themselves.[24] In Hegelian parlance, we would say that the value-form is the subterranean Spirit (*Geist*) of our times, insofar as it weaves itself silently into anything we do or think, sparing nothing. However, precisely as a manifestation of what Hegel called Spirit, we should insist on the inwardly self-destructive character of the value-form: its 'mission' is not merely to substantialise itself qua social formation, but also, conversely, to cause its own collapse by undermining the invisible foundations of the social structure that carries its weight. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes the "silent, ceaseless weaving of the Spirit in the simple inwardness of its substance" as inextricably linked with Spirit's self-relating negativity, as in the following passage where he quotes Diderot's *Nephew of Rameau*:

> "Rather, being now an invisible and imperceptible Spirit, it infiltrates the noble parts through and through and soon has taken complete possession of all the vitals and members of the unconscious idol; then 'one fine morning it gives its comrade a shove with the elbow, and bang! crash! the idol lies on the floor'. On 'one fine morning' whose noon is bloodless if the infection has penetrated to every organ of spiritual life. Memory alone then still preserves the dead form of the Spirit's previous shape as a vanished history, vanished one knows not how. And the new serpent of wisdom raised on high for adoration has in this way painlessly cast merely a withered skin."[25]

24 For a detailed analysis of this, see Feldner and Vighi, 2015.

25 G. F. W. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 332.

Contemporary capitalism's vanishing capacity to produce economic value – an issue I will briefly address later in the essay – is today's counterpart to Hegel's description of the vanishing of Spirit in its specific historical form. Dialectically speaking, the vanishing coincides with the power of its own self-causation out of nothing, since there is no outside to Spirit and therefore no guarantee of its ontological consistency. It is this vanishing as radical self-contraction of the value-form of capital that contemporary cinema has a chance to reflect on by way of its specific capacity to mediate the real, that is to say its particular modality of aesthetic sublimation.

3. Subject is Substance: a common destiny

It might not seem particularly revealing that the dissolution of the social bond in Schrader's *Dog Eat Dog* is represented through what is often regarded as the overarching feature of contemporary American cinema: graphic violence. However, unlike much of the spectacularisation of screen violence that began to characterise mainstream Hollywood since 1968 – the year the last vestiges of the Production Code were abolished – Schrader's representation of 'ultraviolence' works *explicitly* as a cinematic metonymy for the self-destructiveness of the social link. In this respect, it is not only *Dog Eat Dog*'s graphic violence that matters but also its unencumbered and unapologetic nastiness, which is particularly palpable in its display of racism and sexism. Reflected in the film's hallucinated and fragmented aesthetics, the display of unmitigated viciousness would seem to incarnate today's version of what Jacques Lacan called *jouissance*, the unconstrained, painful yet untranscendable pulsation of a libidinal affect that pertains to the register of the Real and, as such, defies symbolisation. It is in relation to its own *jouissance* that *Dog Eat Dog* provides an exemplification of the Hegelian theme of the speculative identity of *subject* and *substance*: the 'world' whose substance is the acephalous drive of capitalist accumulation, coincides with the psychopathic subject whose life is increasingly ruled by the stolid pursuit of commodified, *ersatz* enjoyment. 'Subject' and 'substance' coalesce around the *identical*

compulsion to repeat an unmediated gesture whose only aim is to perpetuate its senseless loop. It is no surprise that, at one point, the three hapless criminals in *Dog Eat Dog* comment somewhat nostalgically about life in prison and its code of honour: once released back into the 'community', they sense that their compulsion to 'enjoy life' constitutes an even stricter form of captivity masqueraded as freedom.

Schrader's most accomplished cinematic characters are by definition caught in the loop of *jouissance*, which, however, far from exhausting itself in subjective excess, dialectically illuminates the crumpling monolith of our socio-symbolic life-space inasmuch as it is entirely given over to the self-referential and destructive flow of capital. In this sense, the cinematic subject that Schrader presents on screen is always 'identical' to the imploding social bond in which s/he dwells. We would be hard pressed to find other directors whose cinematic inspiration is so pervasively dominated by this foundering dialectical link. From this angle, his most accomplished and intriguing characters are all variations of the paradigmatic figure of his cinema, namely Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*, 1976), the very incarnation of the implosion of the Hegelian dialectical figure of the subject-substance: the subject unable and obstinately unwilling to create enduring liaisons within 'a world at the end of the world', whose structuring principle is itself fundamentally psychopathic. Critics are generally aware of the death-driven character of Schrader's heroes,[26] but as a rule fail to grasp the speculative identity with social substance.

Let us take Julian Kay (Richard Gere) and his hustler's underworld in Schrader's *American Gigolo* (1980). The hero's cool self-assurance within his Beverly Hills boutique microcosm captures a subjectivity entirely defined by the value-form, down to its innermost intimacy. As a sexual service that can be bought and sold, Julian embodies to perfection the

26 For instance, back in 1981 Bill Nichols wrote: "Whether in *The Yazuka*, *Hard Core*, *Taxi Driver*, *Blue Collar*, *Obsession*, *Rolling Thunder*, *American Gigolo* or *Raging Bull* the central character's idée fixe pushes him toward a point perilously close to the bounds of sanity, a point well beyond the limits within which most of us choose to live" (B. Nichols, '*American Gigolo:* Transcendental Style and Narrative Form', *Film Quarterly* 34 (4), 1981, pp. 8-13).

psychopathic ideology of the 1980s brave new world of neoliberal individualism, where discipline and self-control became key attributes of a self-made man with no time for empathy with community members. With Julian, in fact, it is not merely that sexuality is reduced to a business transaction, but more importantly that such equivalence is deliberately rendered as an illusion of individual freedom and even emancipation. The film's dénouement clearly indicates that this illusion is nothing but the obverse of the obscure and fundamentally self-destructive trajectory of the value-form in our specific historical constellation. Despite the film's transcendental finale, where redemption from the tyranny of compulsive self-valorisation is linked to the possibility of love – to be intended, however, in Lacanian and therefore strictly anti-Hollywood terms, i.e. as an encounter between two radically inconsistent human beings –[27] the narrative remains defined by negativity, that is to say by the speculative coincidence of the subject's downward spiralling trajectory and the gradual vanishing of the socio-symbolic substance. Although in *American Gigolo* Schrader would seem to explicitly endorse the transcendental pattern inherited from his models Jasujiro Ozu, Carl Theodor Dreyer and Robert Bresson,[28] famously quoting the final scene and line of Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959),[29] his film is conceived in an entirely different context, and remains largely conditioned, also stylistically, by the contradictory nature of the value-form, which infiltrates every pore of its narrative. What remains central to *American Gigolo*, in line with Schrader's filmography as a whole, is the theme of *subjective self-empting*, which mirrors the self-contraction of the socio-historical substance. Only after his self-damaging journey (Julian's eventual debasement and psychological annihilation) can redemp-

27 Julian is framed for a murder he did not commit and ends up in jail. However, in the final scene he is paid a visit by his lover Michelle (Lauren Hutton), wife to a powerful politician, who tells him she has provided him with an alibi, sacrificing her marriage and wealth to save him.

28 See his *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer* (New York: Da Capo Press), 1988.

29 Similarly to the endings of Schrader's later films *Patty Hearst* (1988) and *Light Sleeper* (1992).

tion be entertained as a Christian alternative to the self-assertive, merciless logic of a world totalised by economic valorisation.

Schrader's vision stages a psychopathic world, as such increasingly deprived of that protective layer of virtual density (the invisible socio-linguistic 'cover' framing our existence) that Lacan called 'the big Other'. In other words, it stages the *loss of a world*: the progressive depotentiation and dissolution of the socio-ontological processes that accompany the capitalist dynamic. The dominant theme is thus our civilisation's progressive loss of 'symbolic cover' in the face of the shattering force of the economic drive over traditional religious, political or more generally ideological narratives (the phenomenon famously described by Karl Polanyi as "disembedding").[30] It is a cinema whose trajectory goes hand in hand with the valorisation crisis that accompanies the global triumph of contemporary capitalism – a crisis that originates precisely in the 1970s. To put it in Jeremy Rifkin's words: "What's undermining the capitalist system is the dramatic success of the very operating assumptions that govern it. At the heart of capitalism there lies a contradiction in the driving mechanism that has propelled it ever upwards to commanding heights, but now is speeding it to its death. [...] Capitalism's operating logic is designed to fail by succeeding."[31]

In this respect, the transcendental character of Schrader's cinema can only be posited as the outcome of the self-destructive socio-economic dynamic in its contemporary context. Transcendence is strictly correlative to an instance of embedded negativity; it is the painful cipher of this cinema's *impotence* in directly aspiring to an alternative social model. Qua impotence, transcendence registers the historical aporia of the valorisation dogma: on the one hand, this dogma misfires in practice, miserably failing to deliver the promised goods; on the other hand, it continues to

30 See K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (London: Beacon Press), 2001 [1944].

31 J. Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society. The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 2014, p. 2. While I do not share Rifkin's optimistic vision of the transition to a Collaborative Commons, his initial diagnosis is well founded.

reign undisturbed as a system of social reproduction, *as if* it was delivering those goods. This aporia suggests the dominance of a particular type of denial, whose object is the terminal malady of our economy and, consequently, of our society insofar as it is pervasively defined by the combustion of economic value. Capitalism's growing inability to engender economic value out of human labour, its lifeblood, on account of its ever-more ubiquitous reliance on automation, has been explored from a variety of perspectives.[32] What remains largely unaccounted for is the specific helplessness of our contemporary society and political class *vis-à-vis* this self-evident valorisation deadlock, inasmuch as the latter is positively obscured by the totalising grip of a global economic mandate by now fully internalised as destiny. Because the blind, self-referential expansion of abstract value has finally become what it always-already was, i.e. the single developmental driver of modern life, its victory is matched by an age-specific attitude of perverse disavowal in relation to its historical impasse, which we are currently experiencing. I claim that contemporary cinema is one of the key sites where the specific dialectical constellation in which we dwell can be critically scrutinised.

Increasingly unwilling to immunise itself against the acephalous drive of the capitalist mode of production, which ushers in the decay of its social form, Schrader's world is from the beginning populated by characters whose personal crises are rooted in the loss of symbolic efficiency of the social. Already *Blue Collar* (1978), his directorial debut, introduced us to the inseparability of subject and substance by highlighting their 'speculative identity' in both conflict and crisis. *Blue Collar* focusses on the deterioration and final dissolution of working class solidarity while also demolishing the American dream of the 'hard work society'. From

32 See for instance E. Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: NLB), 1975; R. Kurz, *The Substance of Capital. The Life and Death of Capitalism* (London: Chronos), 2016; J. Rifkin, *The End of Work. The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York: Putnam and Sons), 1995; P. Mason, *Postcapitalism. A Guide to Our Future* (London: Allen Lane), 2015; H. Feldner and F. Vighi, *Critical Theory and the Crisis of Contemporary Capitalism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury), 2015.

the start, then, Schrader aims at the interconnection between the decomposing body of contemporary (industrial) society and the crisis of the individual whose identity depends on the invisible dogma of the incessant valorisation of value. In this respect, his interest in pornography is telling, for it stems from his sensibility toward the implosive mechanisms characterising the universe of the value-form. As with *American Gigolo*, the theme of the economic valorisation of sexuality allows Schrader to confront directly the self-dissipation of human relations under the aegis of contemporary capital. Although underpinned by a reflection on the different communicative technologies that have characterised the history of modern cinema, which is part of Schrader's long-standing engagement with film history and film aesthetics,[33] works like *Hardcore* (1979, tradi-

33 Schrader's interest in the aesthetics of cinema initially emerged with his 1972 monograph *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, and Dryer* (1988). More recently, he has contributed to the debate on the 'end of cinema': "Movies have owned the 20th century. It will not be so in the 21st century. Cultural and technological forces are at work that will change the concept of 'movies' as we have known them. I don't know if there will be a dominant art form in this century, and I'm not sure what form audiovisual media will take, but I am certain movies will never regain the prominence they enjoyed in the last century"(P. Schrader, 'Canon Fodder', *Film Comment*, 2006, p. 35). He himself seeks a way out of the current strictures of cinematic production by using, for instance, crowdfunding platforms such as 'Kickstarter', deferred salaries, free locations and no costume department. In agreement with Dudley Andrew (*The Image in Dispute*) and Walter Benjamin ("The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction"), Schrader summarises his point this way: "Motion pictures are but a way station in the cavalcade of art history, a stopover en route from 19th-century written narrative to the 21st-century world of synthetic images and sounds" (Ibid, p. 41). More explicitly: "The future of audiovisual entertainment (I hesitate to use the term 'motion pictures') will be determined by technology. The technical means of capturing, producing, and distributing moving images has always defined the 'art' in film art. The nickelodeon determined a certain type of cinema, as did the process of projecting images across a darkened room—as did television. The art of audiovisual storytelling has been redefined by every technological innovation: sound stage, crane, color, widescreen, high-speed film, radio microphone, video camera, Steadicam, digital editing, digital images. The movies have never stopped morphing. Technology has defined the art of film as much as its social context. The current uncertainty about the nature of cinema—and its future—cannot be resolved by artists or financiers; technology will accomplish that task" (Ibid, p. 42).

tional film theatres), *Auto-focus* (2002, TV home videos) and *The Canyons* (2013, digital revolution) are especially eloquent in offering a declension of pornography within the increasingly valueless social sphere. Pornography, then, becomes one of Schrader's favourite metonymies to illuminate the loss of symbolic efficiency in the epoch of neoliberal capitalism, insofar as this loss triggers a strategy of perverse (exhibitionistic) submission to the gaze of the camera. As the virtual cover of the big Other evaporates, the subject's best chance to achieve identification would seem to lie with submission to the mediatised eye. In this reading, the reflection on the progressive dematerialisation of cinema (from 'heavy' analogical apparatus to 'light' digital platform), which self-reflexively accompanies Schrader's work, functions as an unconscious metaphorical rendition of his 'dialectic of dissolution', where the focus lies firmly on the self-deployment of the contemporary decomposition of the substance of value.

Auto-focus (2002) is a perfect case in point of the above logic. The crucial feature of Bob Crane's pathology is not his voyeuristic accumulation of pornographic material, but rather *his strange desire to appear in it*, to the extent that his arousal eventually coincides with recording and watching his sexual escapades rather than in simply having them. The term 'auto-focus' should be understood literally: it speaks to the subject focusing on its own image mediated by the ready-made technological eye. Within this self-reflexive loop, sexuality provides the contemporary subject with the ultimate illusion of *being*. How? Precisely through perverse self-externalisation: 'I have sex in front of a camera, therefore I am'. The fundamental principle of contemporary perversion resides in making one's self available for technological reproduction and sharing. In *Auto-focus*, then, Schrader captures the psychic structure that defines the contemporary subject at its historical inception. The libidinal compulsion to appear in a technological image offered up to limitless circulation, which characterises the use of popular social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, begins with Bob Crane's fascination with the possibility of watching himself in a homemade video. In this context, the

pornographic dimension highlighted by Schrader makes the perverse nature of the above attitude explicit. With the progressive evaporation of the virtual eye of the big Other, inaugurated by the 1968 liberation movements and continuing throughout the 'post-ideological' era, individuals are increasingly deprived of their symbolic shield, and consequently use technology to assuage their anxiety. Today, perversion does not necessarily need sexually explicit content, since technology is everywhere and guarantees immediate visibility. However, the general psychic attitude remains pornographic (flat, self-referential, utterly unable and unwilling to transcend itself), whether explicitly or implicitly.

In light of this reading, the ideal sequel to *Auto-focus* is no doubt *The Canyons* (2013), which openly displays the dialectical dissolution of subject and substance, narrating the death of desire and correlative disappearance of humanity as we (still think we) know it. Although the meta-cinematic concern is self-evident in practically every scene of the film, what is truly at stake here is the self-contraction of modern individuals into zombified, interchangeable fetishes whose machine-like movements are nothing but a pale replication of the cold and manipulative microcosm in which they live, itself the cipher of the big Other's vaporisation. The casting of Lindsay Lohan (self-destructive celebrity) and James Deen (ex porn actor) carry explicit extra-textual evidence, sanctioning the film's concern with a Real that is juxtaposed to a battered and broken-down reality. As always unafraid to swan-dive into the sleazy underworld of contemporary degradation, Schrader and screenwriter Bret Easton Ellis deliver a story of human ruins in the age of the radical dissolution of social bonds. The film's characters are self-obsessed, cynical, soulless parodies of subjectivity, incapable of connecting with one another if not through perverse manipulation and empty, funereal sexual rituals. The film's message is political in the widest sense of the word: this, it tells us, is our world; the deluge is here with us, although we seem unable to see it. By rejecting all illusions, and obstinately embracing the senseless core of our epoch, *The Canyons* captures the short-circuiting decadence of our post-Empire world ruled by the naked, gargantuan appetite of an economic body quickly turning bulimic.

4. Immanent eccentricity

Schrader is particularly aware of the problem of human finitude. The death-drive of our civilisation, he surmises, should we observed and understood with a degree of philosophical poise – just like the death-drive of cinema:

> "I kept returning to Hegel's insight that the philosophy of Aesthetics is the history of Aesthetics. That is, the definition, the essence of Aesthetics, is nothing more or less than its history. The philosophy of Aesthetics equals the mutation of the Aesthetic Ideal—understand the mutation, you understand Aesthetics. By extension, the philosophy of Religion is the history of Religion, and so forth. […] The much-debated 'end of Art' is not the end of painting and sculpture (they abound), but the closing of the plastic arts' narrative. Life is full of ends; species die or become outmoded. There are still horses, but the horse's role in transportation has come to an end. Likewise movies. We're making horseshoes. […] All with beginnings, middles, and ends—at an ever-accelerating pace. I agree with Kurzweil that humankind is on an evolutionary cusp. We can foresee both the end of the 20,000-year reign of Homo sapiens and the beginnings of the life-forms that will replace it (something Kurzweil and Garreau predict will happen in the next hundred years). Art looks to the future; it is society's harbinger. The demise of Art's human narrative is not a sign of creative bankruptcy. It's the twinkling of changes to come. Such thoughts fill me not with despair but envy: I wish I could be there to see the curtain rise".[34]

Schrader's futurism, however, should not overshadow his cinema's intrinsic 'passion' for the Real dissolution of the value-form. The com-

34 P. Schrader, 'Canon Fodder', p. 34.

mon denominator of his films is the recording of this process of implosion, which has to do with subjectivity only if intended dialectically as inseparable from substance. In this sense these films are precisely "society's harbinger".

As anticipated, it would be naive to ignore how impatiently meta-cinematic Schrader's intentions are. He makes it exceedingly clear, for instance, that *Dog Eat Dog* is a film about the end of cinema 'as we know it', brought about by new technologies that destroy and reassemble the old rules of filmic representation. Irrespective of traditional film continuity, almost all sequences here constantly jump across registers and codes, scrambling canons, shifting hyperactively between aesthetic perspectives. The schizophrenic dimension of editing includes the constant alternation of slow and fast motion, Tarantino-like 'pop bloodbaths', voluptuous and melancholic black-and-white, first person narrator noir scenes, and even experimentation with multiple endings. It is not accidental that for the making of this film he surrounded himself with a young troupe of 'post-rules' technicians.[35] On the other hand, we would be twice as naive to ignore how the ultimate target of Schrader's high-octane vision is the fictional fabric of our own social constellation. As a spectacle of self-destruction, *Dog Eat Dog* invites us to reflect on the irredeemable disintegration of the world sustained by and organised around the increasingly unreliable, indeed vanishing, value-form of capital. This collapse invests everyone, including the director (Schrader plays 'El Greco', the gangster who employs the three criminals), the police (depicted as sadistic in the

35 "We met at a diner every week or so for the summer, and just discussed it — those are the heads of my departments, and it was a first credit for all of them. They'd come from video games, documentaries, commercials. I didn't want them to think out of the box; I wanted people who were *already* out of the box — didn't know where the box was! So that's just how we went about it, and it was very invigorating that way. Because I no longer believed in the monolithic style, the unified style. Today, you could shoot different sequences different ways, it doesn't matter anymore. You know, shoot a Cassavetes scene, shoot a Godard scene, shoot an Errol Morris scene — put them all together" ('Interview: Paul Schrader on 'Dog Eat Dog'', available at https://outtake.tribecashortlist.com/interview-paul-schrader-on-dog-eat-dog-a34247db02db [last accessed 24 September 2017].

scene of Troy's torturing), and the gun-crazed society (as stressed in the TV debate that opens the film) including the black reverend and wife kidnapped by Troy in the final scene, since they also have a gun and are ready to use it.

The collapse of the cinematic grammar joyously endorsed in *Dog Eat Dog* is the collapse of the Lacanian big Other of our global society lacerated by crisis, which stretches individuality to the point of rupture – the *independent* bourgeois-capitalist individuality as opposed to the *dependent* personhood of pre-capitalist societies. We should not forget that *in-dividuus* means 'not divisible' (Latin), in direct equivalence to the Greek 'a-tom'. Modern individualism is synonymous with atomism, which translates as social fragmentation and lack of organic cohesion. Modernity, insofar as it is sustained by the capitalist mode of production, begins with this atom-like concept of the individual, which shatters previous organicist forms of social life. Capitalism recognises individuality only if submitted to the value-form, only if colonised by value. The capitalist mode of production socialises the economic dimension of the human being, reducing them unilaterally to what they are able to express in terms of economic valorisation. Schrader's cinema displays the paroxistic form of atomistic individuality that captures today's social condition. It follows that an emancipated society should free individuality from the specific alienation (economic valorisation) imposed by our mode of production.

The question to ask when watching *Dog Eat Dog* is not whether it conforms, or should conform, to shared moral standards, but whether it manages to disturb us into perceiving the close link between character and social space, or more precisely between the psychopathic structure of the character's mind and the dominant *form* of the social space in which he moves. Because of its complex and magmatic language, to which many a voice contribute, cinema is endowed with the rare gift of anticipating (often unwittingly) the mind's conscious realisation of a given state of affairs that has to do with the society in which we, viewers, are immersed. In this respect, Mad Dog's rebuke to his accomplice Diesel

("when things begin to rot, they're at their least toxic for you because they are structurally bent on their own self-destruction") is more sophisticated and worthy of philosophical investigation than we might think: it is not merely a matter of emphasising how a rotting body is organically focussed on accelerating its own self-destruction; this, as we have seen, is central to Schrader's conscious reflection. What is surprising in Mad Dog's display of scientific knowledge is the reference to the peripheral positioning of the subject who directly witnesses the rotting: paradoxically, that subject is spared the toxicity of the putrefying body. How are we to understand this claim? Is it not the claim of a psychopath who fails to realise how deeply implicated he is in the consequences of his own actions (literally, as he has killed the people in question)? Precisely on account of his 'madness', Mad Dog is able to appreciate what can only appear as absurd or strangely counter-intuitive to someone who is fully immersed in his or her symbolic space: he "knows", in other words, that the self-captivation of a collapsing system offers the subject an unheard of chance for redemption, or else for the radical reconfiguration of the social link itself.

It is this flickering hint at redemption, which again takes a meta-cinematic turn in Troy's (Nicolas Cage) final Humphrey Bogart impersonation, that allows Schrader's Christian inspiration to illuminate the rotting fabric of the social bond. It is no surprise that, released into a collapsing society, the three characters choose to rely on either the accentuation of their psychopathic personality traits (Diesel and cocaine-addict Mad Dog) or a delusional, solipsistic and nostalgic retreat into old-movie suavity (Troy). If the latter no doubt qualifies as poetic license, the former should be taken as a metonymic reminder of what I am tempted to call the 'psychopathic turn' of the contemporary socio-symbolic order hit by a devastating, probably terminal valorisation crisis. In this respect, the meaning of the term 'crisis' is twofold: first, contemporary capitalism's vanishing capacity to generate economic value; second, and contrastingly, its blinding, desensitising dominance as the only legitimate mode of social reproduction (the well-known 'end of History' scenario). If we

read the two definitions of crisis together, we get precisely psychopathy as the prevailing *form* of social life, which contemporary cinema is able to capture so vividly. Today's ascendancy of the psychopathic structure should be understood as a dialectical figure that illuminates the ongoing, unstoppable decomposition of the value-form of capital, as well as the type of subjectivity that confronts such decomposition through adaptive and/or profoundly delusional strategies of denial.

Schrader's film would then seem to invoke the coincidence of redemption and folly, intended as a state of eccentricity through which freedom qua substantial negativity may lead to progressing away from an imploding socio-symbolic structure. Here it is worth insisting on the dialectical (Hegelian) character of this configuration: the subject encounters its traumatic freedom (to re-invent the dialectical link) in the self-contraction of substance. Put differently: precisely because substance and subject are two sides of the same coin, when substance dissolves, the subject has a chance to acknowledge the empty cause of its own social conditioning, which on the one hand causes anxiety but on the other can (potentially) be liberating. The film's insistence on subjective over-determination (to the point of madness) is indicative of its ultimate message: the only way out of the socio-economic predicament in which we languish, and the apocalyptic scenario it prefigures, does not reside in denying or minimising its actual impact, or counteracting it by embracing old stances and moralistic principles, but rather in acknowledging the paradoxically liberating potential of that collapse insofar as it returns the subject to its original and grounding inconsistency, which has no alternative but to feed the demand for a different (better) form of socio-symbolic alienation. The vindication of this passage through the empty (and traumatic) core of subjectivity does not, of course, amount per se to a viable political position vis-à-vis the crisis of contemporary capitalism. However, facing the hopelessness of our condition constitutes the indispensable presupposition for the construction of a political alternative to the status quo insofar as it heeds warnings about the true content of a crisis like ours: not only that the expiration date of 'our world' is fast approaching, but

more importantly that coming to terms with the fundamental fragility or fictional inconsistency of our ego, insofar as it is shored up by the value-form of capital qua receding social substance, is the only *rational* way of avoiding a relapse into barbarism.

In line with this reading, and returning to Schrader's film, perhaps Mad Dog's garrulous madness and final demise are more instructive than we could possibly think. We should not forget that Diesel 'wastes' his friend Mad Dog (thus reproducing the 'dog eat dog' scenario of the title) out of sheer psychological exhaustion, that is to say at the end of Mad Dog's relentless monologue about his aspiration to redeem himself, to make a fresh start after a futile life squandered in utter degradation.[36] It is the possibility, however highly unlikely, of the *clinamen* (unpredictable swerve, change of direction) voiced by Mad Dog that drives Diesel to blow his head away, breaking the oath of mutual support previously sanctioned by the trio of thugs. The possibility of this *clinamen* is the only glimmer of 'liberating' contingency in the lugubrious hymn to self-destruction that pervades Schrader's determinism. The dialectical struggle between necessity (determinism) and contingency is crucial if we are to appreciate the critical significance of the film, and contemporary cinema more generally. For redemptive contingency here is not merely the alter-

36 Whilst driving to the military base with Mike Brennan's dead body in the boot, Mad Dog begins his redemption speech to Diesel, which apart from a few action breaks is as follows: "I wanna make a strong action and fuckin' change some things so I could be the person that I know I could be… You'll help me do it, yeah?... You'll fuckin' help me untangle my life and make myself a person that doesn't make me fuckin' wanna throw up every time I pass a mirror?... Tomorrow, clean slate. End of all of this shit. So can I just ask you, and I want you to be frank 'cause I really do respect you. I mean, do you think people can change? I mean, like, if your behaviour's one way, that you can, like, alter it?... I wanna, you know, sit down, and I want you to give me five things, five character flaws that I can do a reboot on. You know, a do-over on, amend my character flaws, as it were. Like, you know, I mean, just sit down and really go with candour, whether it's my fuckin' mother's fault or my father's fault, it doesn't really matter…. Oh, you know, it doesn't really make any difference because I'm willin' to alter those things because I believe in redemption, right? And I'm willin' to do that." It is at this that point Diesel puts a violent end to his friend's annoying tirade.

native to the necessary path of self-destruction followed by our civilisation. We should not fall into the trap of considering contingency and necessity as a binary. Rather, following Hegel's lesson, we should perceive them as two dialectical sides of the same coin, whereby contingency is always-already inscribed in necessity.