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Irritation of Life

The Subversive Melodrama of Michael Haneke, David Lynch and Lars von Trier

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Acknowledgements

Profilbereich
Kulturen, Institutionen, Märkte

Universität St.Gallen

The authors wish to express their sincere gratitude to the people who in various ways contributed to the project and helped make this book possible. Thank you Elisabeth Anker, Timon Beyes, Fern Bryant, Valérie Carré, Lisa Cartwright, Thomas Eberle, Thomas Elsaesser, Martin Eppler, Roy Grundmann, Ulrike Hanstein, Sabrina Helmer, Christoph Henning, Vincent Kaufmann, Ulrike Landfester, Tom Mitchell, Fatima Naqvi, Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, Daria Olgiati-Pezzoli, Erik Redling, Karen Ritzenhoff, Alan Robinson, Sophie Rudolph, Maximilian Schellmann, Marion Schmaus, Ulrich Schmid, Anne Schreiter, Franz Schultheis, Jörg Schweinitz, Marq Smith, Chris Steyaert, Julia Straub, Margrit Tröhler, Catherine Wheatley, Linda Williams and Verena Witzig.

We would also like to thank the US Embassy in Berne, Michel Chion and the Internationales Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Peter Müller of the PHSG, Klaus-Detlef Müller and the «Melodrama» workshop at his Oberseminar, our students from the MA courses «New Cinema Auteurism: A Survey of Contemporary Film Directors» and «Economies of Feeling: Melodrama as Film Genre and Global Social Narrative,» the HSG Film Club, The Contextual Studies, and last but not least our families.

1 Introduction: Harnessing the Visible

«Every change in film history implies a change in its address to the spectator, and each period constructs its spectator in a new way.»
– Tom Gunning
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In his essay «The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,» Tom Gunning sketches a genealogy of cinematic spectacle from early cinema and avant-garde art to later avant-garde cinema and contemporary Hollywood film. He makes an essential distinction regarding the spectacle prior and subsequent to the hegemony of narrative cinema, marking this crucial turn with the films of D. W. Griffith. Before 1906, there was a kind of ecstatic fascination with the new medium's potential for the «harnessing of visibility».[1] A heterogeneous early cinema of attractions employed spectacle primarily in the service of affect, as a kind of shock to the human sensorium through the visual. Filmmakers like Méliès and Lumière saw cinema's power of fascination not so much in its potential as a storytelling device but in its capacity for spectacular illusion. Sergei Eisenstein, for a well-known example, sought to localize and systematize basic forms of spectacular illusion in his «montage of attractions.» The effective orchestration of such a montage could «undermine realistic representational theatre,» and produce a «sensual or psychological impact» on the spectator.[2]

This is not to say that the power of spectacular illusion, or Eisenstein's «unit of impression,» becomes obsolete with the rise of narrative cinema between 1907 and 1913, or that the effects of narrative cinema are not also organized by a careful orchestration of sensual and psychological impact via spectacle. Rather, narrative

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1   Gunning, p. 229.
2   Eisenstein paraphrased and quoted in Gunning, p. 232.

cinema employs the tricks of attraction in the service of dramatic expression, contributing to the development of character and other elements of the fictional storyworld. Spectacle becomes orchestrated through and helps to orchestrate diegesis. Even in postclassical cinema, «the system of attraction remains an essential part of popular filmmaking».[3] Think only of the ongoing popularity of the action film, and the dominance of melodramatic aesthetics in and beyond Hollywood.

By contrast, Gunning also sees in the early cinema of attraction a source of inspiration for the avant-garde, with its «accent on direct stimulation» of the viewer as a spectacular assault.[4] In mainstream cinema, the veil of illusion becomes paramount for immersion. Spectacle is no longer presented in a direct address to the viewer, as in early film and theatre, but presented as existing somewhere «out there» independent of though accessible to the viewer. Cinema that maintains the illusion of a discrete, self-enclosed fictional world visible to the viewer but at the same time disavowing her presence places the viewer in a privileged position of voyeur, secretly able to enjoy the spectacle while remaining at a safe distance to it.[5] Where in an early cinema of attraction a direct address to the viewer might function as an unobtrusive solicitation for attention, in later avant-garde cinemas like the French *Nouvelle vague*, and particularly in Godard's work, such an address purposefully ruptures the veil of illusion, implicating the viewer in what is seen and in the secret pleasures of seeing: in a montage of mimetic illusion or narrative realism, «diegetic absorption» can suddenly become an irritating «exhibitionist confrontation.»[6] In the films of Michael Haneke, David Lynch and Lars von Trier, we find an intensification of cinematic experience through a seemingly paradoxical combination of two aesthetic strategies: narrative cinema's immersive potential and art cinema's subversive power of exhibitionist confrontation.

F-U-C-K: Assuming positions in a possible cinema genealogy

There are various positions one might assume in making distinctions between Michael Haneke, David Lynch and Lars von Trier as filmmakers. Their personal backgrounds do not portend a great deal in common: a German-born Austrian from a family of entertainers who always wanted to be a composer; an American from a Presbyterian family in the agrarian North who became a passionate proponent of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation; and a clinically depressive Dane who, without knowing he was a bastard with German roots, grew

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3   Gunning, p. 233.
4   Ibid., p. 232.
5   Cf. Cavell 1971, pp. 119 and 159.
6   Gunning, p. 232

up in a family setting where communism, atheism and nudism were his daily bread. Whatever personal histories, cultural identities or national cinemas set Haneke, Lynch and von Trier apart, their unique styles of cinematic storytelling have established them as three of the most innovative, engaging and renowned filmmakers of our time.

1 Lars von Trier, L'enfant terrible

Part of what makes their respective films so poignant in the era following what W. J. T. Mitchell has called «the pictorial turn»[7] is the ways in which their reflexive engagement with cinematic traditions critically and performatively addresses the spectator's relation to what he or she sees. In the cinematic game-playing they have become known for,[8] the viewer is repeatedly invited to approach the film experience in novel ways. Challenges to construct a meaningful and coherent storyworld are accompanied by demands on the viewer's flexibility and willingness to take part in what might be called *irritating* processes of vision and revision that reposition the viewer not only in relation to what she sees on the screen, but to conventions of seeing.

Known as auteurs for their trade-mark idiosyncrasies, their respective works are highly comparable with reference to the intersection between European and American cinema traditions. Whether it is the early works of Lynch or von Trier discussed in relation to Bergman's or Buñuel's surreal *mise-en-scène*, or Haneke in relation to Bresson's ascetic visual style and acoustic innovations, these three filmmakers are repeatedly designated as inheritors of a European avant-garde cinematic tradition. If the waves of avant-garde cinema in Europe have largely been formed in «viscourse»[9] with what Bordwell, Steiger and Thompson famously called the «classical Hollywood cinema,» it should come as no surprise that the films of Haneke, Lynch and von Trier are no less known for the particular ways they position themselves in relation to mainstream Hollywood cinema: Haneke through his intense polemics against «American ‹barrel down› cinema and its disempowerment of the spectator,»[10] Lynch with his celebratory if disorienting deployment of Hollywood clichés and shrill reiterations of the American *film noir* genre, and von Trier who is somewhere in the middle, both polemic and celebratory, reveling in contradiction and antagonism.

7   Mitchell, p. 11.
8   Cf. Elsaesser 2010; Speck; Elsaesser and Buckland; Orth, Staiger and Valentin.
9   Cf. Knorr-Cetina for one possible source of the term «viscourse».
10 Haneke 1992.

2 Robert Mitchum in The Night of the Hunter

Von Trier's antagonistic disposition can be found literally inscribed on his body: the letters F-U-C-K are tattooed onto the knuckles of his right hand. One blogger has suggested that the tattoo is either meant to pay homage to Charles Laughton's Night of the Hunter (1955), where Reverend Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum) has LOVE and HATE tattooed across the knuckles of his hands, or it is yet another of von Trier's tricks to get a «visceral reaction» from his audience.[11] It is doubtlessly both, and is instructive regarding the cinema genealogies we intend to inscribe Haneke, Lynch and von Trier into: melodrama and the avant-garde.

Night of the Hunter was adapted for the screen from Davis Grubb's novel based on the true story of Harry Powers, a man who courted, defrauded and murdered two widows in 1931. Their bodies were found later that year by police at Powers' home in Quiet Dell, West Virginia, buried along with the three children of Powers' first victim. Laughton's adaptation evinces typical indexes for family melodrama of the classical era in its aesthetic composition and story content. The film's atmospheric and contrastive aesthetic lend it what Thomas Elsaesser has referred to as a «punctuated» visual style, in which visual elements emphasize emotive narrative elements the way music might. There is also a pronounced lyrical quality in the film's use of poetry and song. Laughton worked closely with composer Walter Schumann to foreground the score's affective impact. As for character types, Night of the Hunter has given Hollywood one of its most memorable villains.

As theorists like Peter Brooks and Linda Williams have convincingly argued, melodrama functions on a principle of moral legibility, accentuated through the Manichaean opposition of good and bad, or victim and villain. The narrative content and aesthetic strategies of Laughton's classic construct a high level of moral legibility, with Powell as the ruthless villain, victimizing the innocent widow and her children. Nevertheless, an imbrication of good and evil dominates the tone of the entire film, ultimately working against claims of deeper moral truths—a position antithetical to melodrama. The film's dark aesthetic beauty and narrative ambiguities regarding innocence, victimhood and villainy have made it highly influential, and at the same time position it uncomfortably, or at least unconventionally, in relation to Hollywood melodrama.[12]

11   http://wagneroperas.blogspot.com/2011/05/is-lars-von-trier-nazi.html (29.12.2012).
12   Cf. Cahiers du Cinema: 100 most beautiful films.

In an interview with von Trier for *Time Out Berlin*, Dave Calhoun commented, «I point to the tattoo he has of ‹Fuck› on his knuckles. Somehow, I'd remembered him having the words ‹Love› and ‹Hate› on each hand. ‹Oh no,› he says, ‹but, then again, «fuck» does sit between love and hate.› At which he chuckles. A lot.»[13] The tattoo not only emphasizes his predilection for antagonism; it situates him *between*, as he put it, the opposition of love and hate. On the one hand, von Trier's tattoo points toward melodramatic Manichaeism (of love and hate, victim and villain, good and evil, virtue and corruption, etc.) in its reference to Harry Powell's tattoos in Night of the Hunter, and to a tradition of cinema melodrama whose central plot is invariably constructed around a loss of familial innocence. On the other hand, the tattoo signifies a resistance to reiterate the Manichaean oppositions typical of mainstream Hollywood cinema, but rather establishes an antagonistic position in relation to them: FUCK is neither LOVE nor HATE, nor, as von Trier's sexual innuendo suggests, can it be extricated from either of these.

Von Trier's embodied, film-historical citation with a twist is instructive insofar as it reflects what is most comparable in the narrative and aesthetic strategies employed by Haneke, Lynch and von Trier: they poignantly address and seek to problematize melodramatic conventions. With a characteristic turn of the screw, they also employ the very conventions they seek to critique, a technique Haneke has been criticized for in his own critique of violence in the media. When asked if Funny Games is about the deconstruction of violence, he responded that it is about the representation of violence in the media, in cinema: «It's an attempt to analyze within the film—to give an analysis of the film within the film.»[14] With this reflexive double bind, their respective *viscourses* might be thought of along the lines of Peter Bürger's notion of the avant-garde: as a form of antagonistic self-criticism in the arts.[15] This is of course not to suggest that the avant-garde artifact is self-sufficient, having little relevance to the ‹outside› world it is part of. An active engagement with the spectator's sensibilities is paramount. As Gunning notes in reference to deviant aesthetics in the dramatic arts and their potential for agitation, «Marinetti and Eisenstein understood that they were tapping into a source of energy that would need focusing and intensification to fulfill its revolutionary possibilities. [They] planned to exaggerate the impact on the spectator, Marinetti proposing to literally glue them to their seats […] and Eisenstein setting firecrackers off beneath them.»[16]

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13   http://www.timeout.com/berlin/features/1021/the-time-out-interview-lars-von-trier (30.08.2012).
14   Interview with Serge Toubiana: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5lbMdAuRoQ&feature=rela ted (15.05.2012).
15   Cf. Bürger, p. 10.
16   Gunning, p. 234.

3 CODE UNKNOWN: on the metro – Haneke's signature combination of the deep focus shot with restricted frame

Why Irritation? A note on method

Without refuting Haneke's reputation as a Brechtian,[17] Thomas Elsaesser calls attention to the realist aesthetic (with reference to André Bazin's theories on filmic realism) comprising some of his films' most memorable scenes: «Examples often evoked are the long takes in CODE UNKNOWN, the deep focus in many shots through passageways, or, most often, through open or half-open doors,» which Brigitte Peucker has referred to as «Haneke's signature shots.»[18]

Elsaesser is also quick to note the particular way Haneke joins Bazinian realism with the deceptive quality of what initially appear to be unobtrusive framing devices, but turn out to be something else. The opening of CACHÉ, for example, «obliges the viewer to enter into a series of retrospective revisions that leave him or her suspended, unsettled, and ungrounded, yet powerfully aware of his or her physical presence in the here-and-now of the moment of viewing.»[19]

The temporal, spatial and ontological shifts radically set in motion at CACHÉ's opening partially constitute what we want to call *irritation*, particularly with reference to the etymological Latin root ‹irratus›, which has an adjectival function indicating something is invalid or void. It is only shortly after the opening credits of CACHÉ that the viewer's assumptions are invalidated and reassessment of what one has seen and is seeing is required. Beyond this cognitive aspect, though, ‹irritation› also has ethical, moral and physical implications, as seen in ‹irritare›, a verb meaning to vex or provoke, but also to inflame and physically irritate – all of which are at stake in the films of Haneke, Lynch and von Trier. Elsaesser's insights on framing techniques and *mise-en-scène* in CODE UNKNOWN and CACHÉ can also help clarify how the historical and methodological axes of our interpretive strategy come together.

17 Cf. Metelmann 2003, pp. 153–179.
18 Elsaesser 2010, p. 63; Peucker 2004.
19 Elsaesser 2010, p. 65.

In their book *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses*, Elsaesser and Malte Hagener provide insight into methods for film analysis based on sensory reception and film-specific metaphors, or what we will call *cine-tropes*.[20] The doors and passages mentioned above, for example, are cine-tropes indicating a potential movement into immersive, mimetic space; as opposed to windows and frames, which typically signal artifice and cinematic self-reflection. In addition to reading the films of Haneke, Lynch and von Trier on a horizontal axis of relations to cinematic traditions of melodrama and avant-garde deviant aesthetics, we will apply a vertical axis of interpretive *cine-tropes* to map out an aesthetics of irritation.

Though we hope there is some self-evidence in the usefulness of distinguishing between melodrama and avant-garde aesthetics of deviance, on the one hand, and historical versus theoretical-methodological approaches on the other, we also recognize that there is a great deal of fluidity in these distinctions, and that historic specificity is also native to any methodological axis of interpretation. If we can reasonably be accused of constructing artificially discrete categories of interpretation or generic traditions, we do so with a view to the ways in which the films of Haneke, Lynch and von Trier deconstruct them.

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20   A term we borrow from Jörg Schweinitz.