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Irony in American Postmodern Cinema

Kandidat: Juraj Martelanc

Mentor: Jelena Šesnić, dr.sc., Lada Čale Feldman, dr.sc.

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1. Introduction

If irony has historically been a tool for the subversion of a dominant cultural order, it has also been complicit in a reactionary politics. In the last century, irony has been read as the central figure of fascist aesthetics and politics—as a figure which, in fact, aestheticizes politics—and, at the same time, as a figure central to the articulation of the trauma of the Holocaust. It has been praised as a weapon against imperialist culture while at the same time being criticized as a champion figure of the conceptual 'freedom' of the global market and a liberal bourgeois force of the mystification of history. This precarious, unstable (see Booth 1974), transideological (see Hutcheon 1994) nature of irony accounts for the critical dissent over works of art which are perceived ironic. The aim of this text is to analyze the ways irony (as theorized in chapter 2.1.) is encoded in cinema (as theorized in chapter 2.2.), the ways it has been received in criticism of late twentieth century and twenty-first century American cinema, and the ways it changes its ironic potential with regard to context.

In chapter 3, I will use text-to-film adaptations to analyze how verbal ironies are encoded onto the cinematic medium. In addition to these adapted ironies, I will analyze ironies of adaptation: the products of the adaptation itself, a series of deviations from the text necessary for maintaining its coherence in the goal medium.

In chapter 4, the discussion will turn to matters of specific readings of irony within the US, using original reviews and criticism written on *Starship Troopers* (1997) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). These two films have been read both as responsibly dealing with issues of the Holocaust, war and virility, and as reactionary to the point of fascism. Conflicting criticism will be used to point out different readings of irony and try to enumerate the ideologically soaked interpretive positions critics take when reading these ironies.

In the final chapter, I will focus on ironies found when watching Steven Soderbergh's films in parallel. Having detailed ways in which a filmmaker might choose to encode an irony in chapter 3, and discussed an example of the inherently unstable position irony takes in the ethico-aesthetical configuration of a film in chapter 4, this chapter will serve to demonstrate how any claim about the ironic or non-ironic nature of a frame, shot, or sequence can be contested when its individual logic is exposed as artifice by an intertextual relation.

2. Irony in cinema

2.1. A brief history of irony

2.1.1. Instrumental irony

A similar thing happens to every idea presented by an interlocutor of Socrates. Through a series of seemingly banal logical permutations, all posed in the form of questions and accepted as true by the interlocutor, Socrates grounds the idea within a structure of corollaries and oppositions. At a certain point in the dialogues, however, this structure collapses in on itself, having to accommodate within itself the original idea and one of its postulated oppositions, and giving rise to a gradual but sure process of logical unravelling. As an example, in the *Symposium*, the idea in question is that of the Eros:

> Remember further what you said in your speech, or if you do not remember I will remind you: you said that the love of the beautiful set in order the empire of the gods, for that of deformed things there is no love—did you not say something of that kind?
>
> Yes, said Agathon.
>
> Yes, my friend, and the remark was a just one. And if this is true, Love is the love of beauty and not of deformity?
>
> He assented.
>
> And the admission has been already made that Love is of something that man wants and has not?
>
> True, he said.
>
> Then Love wants and has not beauty?
>
> Certainly, he replied.
>
> And would you call that beautiful which wants and does not possess beauty?
>
> Certainly not.
>
> Then would you still say that love is beautiful?
>
> Agathon replied: I fear that I did not understand what I was saying (Plato 201a-b).

The rhetorical method employed by Socrates in the preceding quote is the place most commonly referred to in criticism as the birthplace of irony or *eironeia* (Quintilian IX.2.46.). Historically, it was directed against Sophist rhetoric; specifically, against the fusion of a presence of meaning—the ideals of truth, virtue, and justice—and the manipulation of language through wordplay; or, as Isocrates put it in his speech *Against the Sophists*, against "applying the analogy of an art with hard and fast rules to a creative process" (Isocrates 171). This anti-Sophist dismantling of meaning and play, which postulates the possibility of a production of meaning outside of a single inherent meaning already present in language, intersected the problem of politics, i.e. the problem of authenticating the sincerity of speech. But if there were such a distinction between what one could term "meaning" on the one hand and "play" on the other, subsequent critics of Plato could not agree at which pole Socratic irony was directed.

The first noted critics of Socrates were Quintilian and Cicero, and their conceptions of irony remained dominant until the nineteenth century. Cicero used the term dissimulation when discussing irony. His objections to Socrates grew out of reading Socratic irony as a rhetorical device for unearthing the pre-existing meaning behind language. According to Cicero, Socrates' insistence on pre-existing meaning resulted in a repression of rhetoric, a severing of thought from action, and a subordination of creative language to the intuition of truth: "in his discussions [Socrates] separated the science of wise thinking from that of elegant thinking, though in reality they are closely linked together," and this effected "the undoubtedly absurd and unprofitable and reprehensible severance between the tongue and the brain, leading to our having one set of professions to teach us to think and another to teach us to speak" (Cicero 60). Cicero's conception of Socratic irony is further elaborated by Claire Colebrook as a repression of literature in favor of philosophy: "There are those who regard the *repression* of Socratic irony as both the birth of philosophy and the death of style and rhetoric" (Colebrook 36). This repression, according to Colebrook, supplants "the dynamic and creative power of literature with a fixed, necessary and transcendent body of law. Language was no longer a force that *created* order and differences; language was subordinate to an eternal truth—the representation or mirror, rather than production of, truth" (ibid).

Following Cicero, Quintilian made a distinction between irony as a trope and figure, i.e. a figure of speech and a figure of thought. He also offered the first working definition of irony—the art of saying one thing and meaning another—still popularly repeated today:

> That *eironeia*, then, which is called a figure, differs but little, as to kind, from that which is called a trope; for in both the contrary to what is said is to be understood […] In the first place, the trope is less disguised; and though it expresses something different from what it means, yet it can hardly be said to pretend anything different; for all that accompanies it is generally plain […] But in irony considered as a figure, there is a disguise of the speaker's whole meaning; a disguise rather perceptible than ostentatious; for, in the trope, some words are put for others, but, in the figure, the sense of a passage in a speech, and sometimes the whole configuration of a cause, is at variance with the air of our address; nay, even the whole life of a man may wear the appearance of a continued irony, as did that of Socrates […] Thus, as a continued metaphor constitutes an allegory, so a continuation of ironical tropes forms the figure irony. (Quintilian IX.2.45-46.)

Both Quintilian's and Cicero's accounts of Socratic irony remain firmly within the domain of rhetoric. The place of irony is among other figures of speech, all utilized by thinking subjects in different situations for different reasons, aimed at different rhetorical outcomes. Irony is a tool to be used by man, and a precise tool at that, since it redirects rhetoric to a pure pre-existing meaning like the one attacked by Cicero. These are some of the earliest postulates of what I would term instrumental or stable irony: irony as an intentional, self-conscious and rational archaeology of meaning. Quintilian and Cicero were not the only proponents of the instrumental understanding of irony, which extends to the present day; however, in the nineteenth century, problematizing this reading becomes the central preoccupation of a whole generation of philosophers and poets: the Romantics.

2.1.2. Unstable irony

Romantic scholars—notably the Schlegel brothers and Ludwig Tieck—were concerned, in the broadest sense, with the fixity of truth. Focused on life as a continual process of creation, they would actively skirt any claims to or guarantors of a meaning that would pre-exist human praxis. This thought is best condensed in a quote by Friedrich Schlegel: "If every infinite individual is God, then there are as many gods as there are ideals" (Schlegel 92). In other words, it is humanity itself—the human ability to create, communicate—that contradicts a fixed nature, for any single formulation of its own nature will be just one more creation, which can never exhaust the infinite possibilities of future creation. As M. H. Abrams writes, "[romantic irony is] a mode of dramatic or narrative writing in which the author builds up artistic illusion, only to break it down by revealing that he, as artist, is the arbitrary creator and manipulator of his characters and their actions" (Abrams 83). This is why, as Walter Ong writes, "with the Romantic Age […] art no longer reflects nature, but illuminates nature with its own artistic lights" (Ong, 12). It is not what the imagination represents but the fusion it effects, its internal life principle, which constitutes the work of art. One could wonder, then, whether Cicero would be critical of Socratic irony had he conceived it as the Romantics did.

The acknowledgement that there is no singular, authoritative ground apart from language which the rhetorical use of irony can exhume puts irony in a peculiar position. If there is no stable meaning, then the Socratic irony of Quintilian or Cicero would lose all of its identifying attributes as a rhetorical tool. Rather than say that irony loses all force in this radically heterogeneous conception of life, however, the Romantics elevated it from a rhetorical figure to a condition of human life itself, a universal and ubiquitous human predicament. Irony is not a tool that man uses; it is the human mode of being. Wayne C. Booth defines Romantic ironists as "those who also celebrated, rather than deploring or lamenting or cursing, the ironic universe— that 'infinite, absolute negativity,' as Kierkegaard called it, the ironic principle that always lurks ready to expose our finitude" (Booth 2006, 113). In this sense, the Romantic reading of Socratic irony sets the figure not against rhetorical play, as the classical model did—accusatorily so in Cicero's case—but against that other pole of Sophist philosophy: the stable, present, pre-existing meaning itself. The ultimate goal of Socratic irony in the Romantic account, therefore, is not to

convert falsities into truth, to exhume meaning; it is to achieve paradox, gaze at two dissenting viewpoints at once, tie a neuralgic knot that cannot untie itself.

The Romantics would find this history of irony itself ironic, as irony was conceived both as a tool for the severing of meaning and play which founds philosophy and as a mode of life whose differential characteristic is precisely that it is outside of philosophy where meaning and play converge. For example, one could compare Colebrook's comment on irony's relation to literature and philosophy quoted above, and the following statement by Schlegel: "Where philosophy stops, poetry has to begin" (Schlegel, 98). If the classical reading of Socratic irony defines it as instrumental or stable, then the Romantic reading of irony is the earliest instance of its complement: unstable or transideological irony. The word 'ideology' is used ahistorically here, as the question of irony's relation to ideology does not appear until Marxist thought; however, it is a term used by Linda Hutcheon, borrowed from Hayden White (White 38), in her discussion of postmodern irony (Hutcheon 1994, 10), and it should be read for now as a marker of a specific discourse on irony—as coherent and self-regulated as the one on instrumental or stable irony—whose first instance comes in the form of romantic irony.

2.1.3. Fusing ironies

Marxist scholars Terry Eagleton and Jerome McGann criticized the Romantic account of irony as corresponding to a reactionary, quietistic and failed politics (see Eagleton 1990). According to these scholars, the eradication of pre-existing meaning, and the refocusing of irony from an uncovering of meaning to a creative procedure amounts to an eradication of context. By attempting to detach itself from a context of representation, Romantic irony fails to question its own historical epoch. Positing irony as a ubiquitous human mode of life prevents the Romantics from perceiving their own historical contingencies. Effecting an eradication of historical difference, the Romantics make a transcendental move, and the way to combat it is to read the Romantics as located in a historically specific context of political satire. The path that the two critics then set for themselves is to study Romanticism not "on its own terms [but] in context and *as* context" (Colebrook 90).

In *The Romantic Ideology* (1983) McGann finds the source of what he terms the Romantic "mystification of the human condition" in the reaction to the failure of concrete

political revolutions. The reference to a romantic *ideology* already bears the form of a questioning of the universalist tendencies of romantic irony, i.e. it is opposed to a transideological view of irony. McGann defines ideology as "a coherent or loosely organized set of ideas which is the expression of the special interests of some class or social group" (McGann 5). This synthetic account of ideology, however, is a reductive one according to authors like Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Rancière. For Bakhtin, a singular and structured account of ideology such as the one offered by McGann is necessarily responsible for the "verbal-ideological centralization of life" (Bakhtin 2008, 272). Bakhtin made a case study of Dostoevsky's novels to demonstrate how a plurality of discourses can coexist within the same text. According to Bakhtin, however, their coexistence is not synthetic or dialectic in the Hegelian sense, i.e. they do not form a greater unity or a new center when combined. Instead, Bakhtin termed it dialogic. It was based on a fundamental disagreement between the individual discourses, a fragmentation of a world in common—in which interlocutors communicate through a shared language with a present, intersubjective meaning—in favor of multiple coherent modes of representation which do not obey the same logical rules:

> Dostoevsky's novel is dialogic. It is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other; this interaction provides no support for the viewer who would objectify an entire event according to some ordinary monologic category (thematically, lyrically or cognitively) —and this consequently makes the viewer also a participant. (Bakhtin 1983, 18)

Rancière, like Bakhtin, insists on a heterogeneity within culture and politics whose eradication in favor of an ideological centralization is seen as a transcendental move just like the one the Romantics are perceived to be making from Eagleton's or McGann's perspective. The transcendental move in question is the establishment of a context—a coherent socio-political and ideological structure—as a stable analytical ground from which, among other things, irony's direction and instrumentality can be deduced.

Politics is commonly viewed as the practice of power or the embodiment of collective wills and interests and the enactment of collective ideas. Now, such enactments or embodiments imply that you are taken into account as subjects sharing in a common world, making statements and not simply noise, discussing things located in a common world and not in your own fantasy. What really deserves the name of politics is the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world. Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking. (Rancière 152)

In the tradition of historical materialism, therefore, there is a divergence caused by the problematic concept of ideology and its analytical use in the conception of culture and politics, a divergence between McGann's critique of the romantic effacement of ideology and Rancière's critique of an ideological and political consensus.

Jacques Derrida is aware of this divergence, and addresses it with the idea of necessary impossibility. In the Derridean concept of writing, for example, what is crucial is this double bind. On the one hand, writing must amount to more than the marks on a page: to read and write, we must conceive of a proper meaning that is to be read from the marks, i.e. we must accept that the marks intend a proper meaning that is irreducible to the marks themselves. On the other hand, we must also recognize the irreducibility of the marks themselves, the absence and continual deferral of meaning from those marks, the survival of those marks beyond the present context:

We said: *independently of all determinable contexts*. Does one have the right to read like this? No, certainly not, if one wishes to imagine a sentence or a mark in general without any context, and readable as such. This never occurs and the law remains unbreachable. But for the same reason, a context is never absolutely closed, constraining, determined, completely filled. A structural opening allows it to transform itself or to give way to another context. This is why every mark has a

force of detachment, which not only can free it from such and such a determined

context, but ensures even its principle of intelligibility and its mark structure—

that is, its *iterability* (repetition *and* alteration). A mark that could not in any way

detach itself from its singular context— however slightly and, if only through

repetition, reducing, dividing and multiplying it by identifying it—would no

longer be a mark. (Derrida 1988, 216)

What this principle of necessary impossibility means to a study of irony is that we must always work within a necessary but impossible distinction between the ironic and non-ironic. It also paves a path between the seemingly radically disparate worlds of instrumental and transideological irony. This is achieved through, on the one hand, a reconceptualization of context, not as "some positivistic entity existing outside the utterance, but rather [as] constructed through interpretive procedures. And these procedures, in turn, have been formed through our prior experience with interpreting other texts and contexts" (Hutcheon 1994, 139); and, on the other hand, through a poststructuralist model of language as irony: "given the impact of poststructuralist theories of the impossibility of univocal and stable meaning, irony has achieved a somewhat privileged status […]: its overt production of meaning through deferral and difference has been seen to point to the problematic nature of all language." (55) In this way, the concept of a context demanded by an instrumental understanding of irony can effectively be fused with a wider Romantic and transideological appropriation of irony as a model of language in general.

2.1.4. Postmodern irony

Nowhere is this necessity for a link between instrumental and transideological irony more obvious than in the discussion of postmodern irony. In *Irony's Edge*, Linda Hutcheon writes about "Into the Heart of Africa," a 1990 exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto showing the African collection of the museum. The ambition of the exhibition as stated by the organizers was to "expose the imperial ideology of the people—Canadian soldiers and missionaries—who had borne them and who had brought back to Canada many African objects which, over time, found their way into the museum" (170). For example, one image was, using

quotation marks, labelled as "a white woman educating the indigenous population in the art of hygiene" and supposedly relied on the viewers to recognize the patronizing tone of both the image and the title. However, the exhibition ended up being picketed by the African Canadian community for racism, injunctions by the museum against protesters were made, some protesters' encounters with the police led to criminal charges etc. The central question was whether imperial racist attitudes were ironized or simply repeated through the style of the exhibition. Hutcheon tries to enumerate the contexts—as defined above—in which viewers could have seen the exhibition:

> For some—anthropologists, museum workers—the exhibit might have been viewed as an example of the "new" museology, revealing the changes in the discipline of ethnography over the last decades. For others, the frame of viewing might have been the challenges to the cultural authority of museums as institutions of "modernity." For still others, it was the current postcolonial interest in the material and cultural consequences of Empire that might have been the focus of attention. The general debates over multiculturalism in Canada and the more specific ones over the relations of the Metropolitan Toronto Police and the black community provided still other contexts for Canadians and Torontonians. In addition, the positioning of this exhibition within the museum and the display conventions of the rest of the institution were important framing elements for most viewers. (171-72)

Everything in the exhibition was criticized, from the subject matter and presentation to the title itself, "Into the Heart of Africa," which is reminiscent of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, itself an object of a similar debate over Chinua Achebe's critique of the novel (see Achebe 1977). Hutcheon writes how depending on "how you interpret Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* the echoing of the novel's title in 'Into the Heart of Africa' is going to suggest either an adventurist/imperialist perspective or a critique thereof" (Hutcheon 1994, 178-79).

In "The Empire of Irony," Wayne C. Booth writes that due to the ambiguity of the word irony, a critic faces not "a single creature […] but rather many different creatures that share at best only a family resemblance." (Booth 2006, 104) In the same vein as the distinction between

instrumental and transideological irony, he makes a distinction between stable and unstable irony, the former characterized by "some stopping point in the act of interpretation", the latter "with the hermeneutical act inherently, deliberately endless." (105) The poststructuralist and postmodern view of irony, as well as Hutcheon's exhibition example, having theorized a necessary but impossible fusion of the instrumental and transideological mode, would, however, ultimately find issue with this analytical distinction. Stanley Fish, in "Short People Got No Reason to Live," discussing a debate similar to the one on "Into the Heart of Africa," only this time involving a Randy Newman song and the ironic or non-ironic treatment of little people, insists that the ironist cannot be certain whether any given reader will be directed to the ironic meaning intended. The distinction, Fish writes, is ultimately impossible as it presupposes an interpretation already: "whatever one rests on in the course of identifying an irony will have exactly the same status as the reading that follows from it; that is, it will be a product of an interpretation" (Fish 177). Booth's project is much more ambitious than a theorization of irony, as the shoring up of stable irony carries with it the shoring up of meaning itself: "if irony is, as Kierkegaard and the German romantics taught the world, 'absolute, infinite negativity,' […] then all meanings dissolve into one supreme meaning: No meaning!" (Booth 1974, 93).

The history of irony, therefore, ends in a meta-ironic barb. On the one hand, there is the recognition that all we have is the plurality of conflicting contexts and discourses, forming each other as each other's "others" which are themselves only specific contexts and discourses. In other words, it is the recognition of the end of the meta-narrative. On the other hand, there is the recognition that any such formulation of the end of meta-narratives is itself a meta-narrative, because any reduction of the world to language-games or relative perspectives would establish a position of recognition. It is the irony of this contradiction that will form the basis of my discussion of irony in postmodern American cinema.

2.2. Cinematic irony

2.2.1. Cine-semiotics and the discourses of positionality

So far, I have focused on the history of reading verbal irony. This chapter will deal with the ways in which irony is achieved on film. Walter Ong writes that "the clue to the ironic

potential in movies seems to be their overwhelming visualism, which keeps them all but totally non-participatory […] The oral coefficient in movies in minimal. What counts most when movies are movies is the sequence of visual events rather than any vocal exchange as such." (Ong 17) This leads Ong to conclude that since irony "depends on tone and distance […] movies cannot achieve the tonal complexities of literature, so cinematic irony can never reach the height of verbal irony" (18). In order to theorize cinematic irony, then, one should take account of precisely those signs and, in turn, "tonal complexities" that cinema has at its disposal in encoding irony.

Since the question of cinema's viability to be ironic, according to Ong, seems to hinge on its resemblance and difference from the tonal complexities of language, the extent to which film can be understood as a language should be probed. In the late 1960s until the mid-1970s, this 'language question'—to what extent does film constitute a language?—was a predominant concern in film studies. The question went hand in hand with the general preoccupation of semiotics with the linguistic structure of different sign systems. This is why semioticians like Juri Lotman thought of art as a "secondary modeling system constructed on the model of language" (Lotman, 16). In cinema, one could therefore theorize semiotic objects which provide the differentiation necessary for the establishment of a system of communication which orders them and employs them. The discipline of cine-semiotics converged around this question, as did its seminal text, Christian Metz's *Language and Cinema* (1974).

Metz's project consisted in appropriating the Saussurean model of language to the cinematic medium. However, Metz also adapted some Saussurean theory to accommodate the new question of cinema. He saw that the Saussurean "langue" (see De Saussure 1983, 9) was a void concept when it came to cinematic communication, as the "language" which is at work in cinema does not operate through a language system. Metz, therefore, proposed a conception of cinema as a uni-directional textual system (Metz 288). This system imagines a "closed discourse" (17) which shuts off dialogism by making the spectator a passive, non-participatory witness to spectacle. The filmic text communicates its filmo-linguistically encoded meanings to the spectator with no response. This configuration, then, cannot accommodate what Linda Hutcheon observes as the contextually heterogeneous and transideological acts of irony like the ones present around "Into the Heart of Africa." The early Metzian cine-semiotic conception of film presents the possibility of instrumental irony alone, as intrinsically coded meanings can be

made—through shooting, framing and editing—to become "self-evidently," stably ironic and received as such by the audience. Metz goes so far as to offer a "Grande Syntagmatique," a structuration of filmic narrative into a hierarchical system starting from the shot and rising to the sequence.

The problem of the "closed text" also persists in apparatus and subject-positioning theories of the 1970s. The "discourse of positionality" (Stam 1989, 53) in film studies predominated late 1970s theory and influenced the next decade. It was predicated on the positioning and emitting of desirable images to the receptive consumer by the dominant—and coherent—cultural order. Both as "apparatus" (Baudry 1968) and as "gaze" (Mulvey 1999), film was conceived as a vehicle for the social conditioning of the viewership through the iteration of ideology. From this subject-position tradition, the concept of the "mass audience" arises. Apparatus theory, like the name suggests, strips the viewer of a response; the viewer has nothing "to do" in the construction of the signifying discourse. This regime leaves no space for an "Into the Heart of Africa" scenario as the decoder is left out of the process of identifying ironic speech or moving image.

Laura Mulvey, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," focuses on the masculinized system of identification within mainstream cinema (Mulvey 1975). Mulvey writes how this system of identification, an encoded ideology, is possible in narrative cinema because of a repressed economy of looks. The three looks involved in the cinematic act for Mulvey are the camera's look at the pro-filmic event; the audience's look at the finished product; and the characters' looks at each other. The third look, in narrative cinema, subordinates the other looks (Mulvey 1975, 61). This, in turn, achieves the petrification of the spectator in a fixed position to the cinematic event, as the potential of his own gaze and the camera's as operative elements in the hermeneutic process remain obscured to him. It is easy to see, then, how both these theories, just like cine-semiotics, maintained a configuration that could accommodate an instrumental understanding and appropriation of irony, as in the homogenization of both culture and audience, one could construct a code able to be read by all, and sanction their use of irony by referring to this singular, coherent understanding of the cinematic code.

2.2.2. Repositioning, dialogism, intertextuality

The negation of the possibility of ideological resistance by the spectator is later criticized by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (1996). Answering the work of theory in general in film studies, Bordwell and Carroll propose the concept of "resistant readers" (Bordwell and Carroll, 8). Robert Stam writes about what can be identified as the distinct "dialogical angle" of such resistant viewing: "the textually constructed reader/spectator does not necessarily coincide with the sociohistorical reader/spectator" (Stam 1992, 43). The viewer, no longer petrified in place by the uni-directional filmic discourse of cine-semiotics or the ideological force of the apparatus, is now free to position himself in parallel to the film's own narrative repositioning:

> While I, the reader, exist in dialogic relationship with the text, I am nevertheless *positioned* by it, and the challenge and excitement of the reading process depends on my not knowing, in advance, if it will embrace or reject me: position me as an ally or an antagonist […] Even as the text positions me, so may I (re)position my relationship to it. (Pearce 1995, 92)

Bordwell offers the idea of a "montage of voices" (Bordwell 1985, 17) as a corrective to postulations of a singular metalanguage dominating the aesthetic operations of cinema. He insists that narratives can be composed to "defeat the perceiver's search for coherence" (38) as well as facilitate it. The apparatus of signification is thereby replaced by the notion of the retrieval of referential and explicit meanings, interpretation differentiated from comprehension. This leap is made possible by a recognition of the constructed and aestheticized nature of context which enters into a dialogical relationship with other contexts like in the case of "Into the Heart of Africa," potentially producing an irony identifiable to a specific "discursive community" (see Hutcheon 1994, 87). This proliferation of contexts is by no means a simple pluralism of equal and undifferentiated readings. It could perhaps best be summed up in Bakhtin's concept of "structured polysemy," i.e. a conception of differential readings in which the ideologically soaked, transformative effects of communication and representation upon reality can be glimpsed.

For the establishment of a multiplicity of contexts interacting in the act of irony, cinema must have systems of signs, of marks like those described by Derrida: intended specifically but continuing to exist after any singular utterance. The most notable example of such a system in cinema is the Star System. A performer's previous appearances are fodder to the creation of an irony resulting from the tension between those appearances and the nature of the role that is being performed. For example, in Ernst Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* (1939), the levity of Greta Garbo's performance was so at odds with the severity of her previous ones that the poster for the film itself acknowledged this ironic discrepancy with the tagline: "Garbo laughs!" In Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012), four young actresses with popularly recognizable roots in Disney-produced TV shows, pop music and teen musicals were given roles which can produce an ironic tension with the institution from which their own work originates. The tension need not even result from previous performances but from the actors' own lives, as when Stanley Kubrick cast the married couple Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise to portray a married couple in *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). These resemblances enable the creation of contexts from which a cinematic irony can be identified.

Of course, it is not just the actors that inhabit the role of cinematic sign. The same, in less simplistic terms, could be written about the shooting locations, the framing etc. A film can position itself—and be positioned in turn—ironically in relation to other films or works of art intertextually, through these sign systems, in the same way a novel can. On the example of two versions of *Henry V*—Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989) and Laurence Olivier's *The Chronicle History of King Henry the Fift with His Battell Fought at Agincourt in France* (1944)—Hutcheon notices that, as a spectator, she "interprets or 'performs' the interplay of that film, its predecessor, and its source text. […] [Hutcheon is] attributing irony to the textual interaction of the two films as [she reads] them together with the play" (Hutcheon 1994, 65).

2.2.3. Postmodern cinema

Having now constructed both the concept of irony and the basic model of its functioning in cinema I will be using in my readings of specific films, I will turn to the problem of postmodernism in late twentieth-century American cinema, and qualify why I have chosen to

focus on postmodern cinema; more importantly, qualify what I mean by "postmodern cinema" for the purposes of this discussion.

If postmodernism has been criticized, it was primarily for its association with irony. Fredric Jameson writes of postmodern parodic art as narcissistic: "[a] terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself—or at the very least, an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (Jameson, 117). Eagleton similarly criticizes the pluralistic tendencies of postmodern irony:

> Postmodernism, among other things, concerns the cherishing of cultural
> difference; it is therefore an irony beyond anything flaunted by its own fictions
> that it is now actively contributing to the remorseless cultural homogenization of
> the globe, exporting a philosophy of difference as, among other things, a mode of
> Western cultural integration. (Eagleton 1997, 5)

However, if critics like Eagleton and Jameson view postmodernism's implication in late capitalism—via irony's production of multiple and supposedly undifferentiated readings—as the proverbial worm in the apple, critics like Hutcheon see it as an ethical affirmation of the work of art's own positionality:

> Postmodern film does not deny that it is implicated in capitalist modes of
> production, because it knows it cannot. Instead it exploits its 'insider' position in
> order to begin a subversion from within, to talk to consumers in a capitalist
> society in a way that will get us where we live, so to speak. […] What postmodern
> parody does is to evoke what reception theorists call the horizon of expectation of
> the spectator, a horizon formed by recognizable conventions of genre, style, or
> form of representation. This is then destabilized and dismantled step by step.
> (Hutcheon 2001, 114)

In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (2001), Hutcheon notices that where cinema is concerned, the qualifier "postmodern" has come to signify a specific group of films: "in some art forms, such as film, the word postmodern is often restricted to avant-garde production" (9). This

is why Hutcheon then goes on to theorize postmodern film, and it is her conclusions that I will use when discussing specific films: "the kind of film I would label as postmodern: parodic, metacinematic, questioning. Its constantly contradictory, doubled discourse calls to our attention the issue of the ideological construction – through representation – of subjectivity and of the way we know history, both personal and public." (116) Hutcheon is aware of the divergence between her own approach and that of, for example, Eagleton and Jameson. She attributes it to "the fact that if only one side – either – of the postmodern contradiction is seen (or valued), then the ambivalent doubleness of the parodic encoding can easily be resolved into a single decoding" (117). When this doubleness is reified into a single encoding, art's implication in capitalist modes of production can only be seen as complicit.

In the ensuing analyses, I will read various American films as postmodern in the sense Hutcheon has given to the term in Film Studies. I will look for ways in which irony is employed by reading the films in parallel to source texts in the case of adaptations, other films by the same director, other films of the same genre etc. I will be doing so by employing a postmodern understanding of irony as neither reliably instrumental nor disinterestedly unstable, but both directed and giving itself up to the decoder's adaptation. I will also necessarily use Bordwell's understanding of the operation of cinema in which resistant viewership and a dialogic montage of voices are both available for repositioning themselves with regard to each other. Finally, I will read them bearing in mind Hutcheon's diagnosis of irony's implication in postmodern film:

> Postmodern film is that which paradoxically wants to challenge the outer borders
> of cinema and wants to ask questions (though rarely offer answers) about
> ideology's role in subject-formation and in historical knowledge. Perhaps parody
> is a particularly apt representational strategy for postmodernism, a strategy once
> described (Said 1983, 135) as the use of parallel script rather than original
> inscription. Were we to heed the implications of such a model, we might have to
> reconsider the operations by which we both create and give meaning to our
> culture through representation. (Hutcheon 2001, 117)

3. Ironies of adaptation and adapted ironies

3.1. Dangerous Liaisons*: Pierre Choderlos De Laclos, Stephen Frears*

The epistolary novel is always structured by irony. The combination of assembled letters, written by different authors and addressed to different recipients, constructs a specific readerly perspective which one can conceive of as a horizon of expectation or a "discursive community" (see Hutcheon 1994). De Laclos's epistolary novel *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782) is structured by the interaction of two ironies. The first of these is an irony we could most easily conceive of as instrumental—it is rooted in the rhetorical prowess of Marquise de Merteuil and Vicomte de Valmont. To quote Roland Barthes, it is a Voltairean irony, "the narcissistic product of a language with too much confidence in itself" (38). For example, in the forty-eighth letter, Valmont writes a message to Madame de Tourvel while in bed with Émilie and sends it to Merteuil to read over. Merteuil is tasked to provide a Parisian postmark and send it to Tourvel so that Valmont might keep his affair with Émilie a secret:

> It is after a stormy night, during which I have not closed my eyes; it is after having been ceaselessly either in the agitation of a devouring ardor, or in an utter annihilation of all the faculties of my soul, that I come seek with you. […] In truth, the situation in which I am, whilst writing to you, makes me realize more than ever the irresistible power of love; I can hardly preserve sufficient control over myself to put some order into my ideas; and I foresee already that I shall not finish this letter without being forced to interrupt it. (De Laclos, 151)

When the reader is reading the letter, he is aware of the multiple contexts it is being read in by different characters. Firstly, there is Madame de Tourvel, who receives the letter as a testimony of Valmont's heartbreak. Secondly, there is Valmont, who writes it intended as irony directed at two discursive "communities," Tourvel and Merteuil. Language is doubled, but there is a hierarchy between the two readings in the intent. Tourvel's reading is intended by Valmont as the literal reading, while Merteuil's reading is the intended ironic reading. The reader,

therefore, having access to the rest of the letters in the novel, can identify the irony as well as Merteuil or Valmont.

The double letter is a model of irony that applies to every other letter: in reading the novel, the reader is continually put into the role Merteuil has in the double letter, a decoder of multiple meanings. When reading any letter, the reader is forced to read in parallel: on the one hand, what is being said, and on the other, why it is being said. The dialogical relation between the individual letters is what enables this double vision, as the letters provide context for reading each other. Valmont and Merteuil, through their personal backchannel, as well as individual confidences and deceits, achieve the same horizon of expectation as the reader himself.

Merteuil's downfall is caused by the displacement of the physical letters, i.e. by bringing other characters up to the reader's horizon of expectation as well. They could then complement their awareness of the situation with the uncovered letters from Merteuil and Valmont and even physically assemble the letters into the form of the novel. This is where the second irony occurs. It is not instrumental because it is not hierarchical in intent in the way Valmont's double letter is. The irony is unstable in the sense that a change of perspective enables it to be read *as* ironic; the instrumental irony's unintended discursive community refigures its own reading into a critical one. In effect, it relocates the reader whose horizon of expectation ends up corresponding to the Parisian aristocracy at large, Valmont and Merteuil ironically being the only ones excluded.

An important point is that if there had not been the initial instrumental irony, the unstable irony could not have been identified either. In order for his horizon of expectation to be displaced, the reader first had to settle into a horizon of expectation. In this way, the configuration of these two ironies, only analytically separable in the end, corresponds to a Derridean conception of writing intentional marks which have the potential to outlive their intention. Also, it can be articulated as Rancière's concept of the "mute letter": "The 'mute letter' was the letter that went its way, without a father to guide it. It was the letter that spoke to anybody, without knowing to whom it had to speak, and to whom it had not. […] [The] 'mute letter' determines a partition of the perceptible in which one can no longer contrast those who speak and those who only make noise, those who act and those who only live" (Rancière, 160).

Having offered a reading of irony in De Laclos's novel, I will now turn to Stephen Frears' film adaptation of the novel, *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), to see if and how this ironic configuration which structures the novel has been encoded in the cinematic medium. It is

important to note that the film's screenplay was penned by Christopher Hampton and adapted from his own adapted 1986 play.

First, there is the question of adapting a material that seems to hinge on its written nature. As I have shown, it is the textual material of the novel, the letters, which give themselves over to the logic of the mute letter; that is, the fact that the letters serve as guarantors of both instrumental and unstable irony underscores a need to provide a similar material through which the shift from instrumental to unstable irony can be observed. An adaptation is necessarily selective, and so, as Hutcheon notes:

> Christopher Hampton's 1986 play translated the novel's letters into spoken dialogue, and, in the process, changed the focus from the extended ironies of a decadent aristocracy to the more intense intellectual battles of two mutually manipulative characters. But when Hampton wrote the screenplay of his own stage work for Stephen Frears' (1988) film, the story became a more straightforward moral one of evil punished. (Hutcheon 2006: 40)

Merteuil and Valmont's proficiency in writing had to be replaced with a proficiency in physical performance, which includes speech. Instead of a language "with too much confidence in itself," the film places emphasis on Valmont's and Merteuil's speech, expression and movement. All three are linked to the motif of the gaze in different ways.

Where speech is concerned, the transposition from text to screen is done effectively by bringing the characters together and letting them enact a written correspondence in spoken dialogue. In other words, the letters are dramatized, the characters placed in the same place at the same time. This is done carefully to preserve the element of a private, personal space enabled by the form of the letter, an element of confidences and secrets. Most of the shots are interior, with exteriors being minutely decorated gardens and walkways, always parts of private residences, which signal a sense of interiority nonetheless. Valmont and Merteuil's written backchannel is turned into a series of visits. Instead of readers, they serve as each other's spectators, as in the scene where Merteuil tells Volanges that Cécile had confided to her where she hides her letters from Danceny. Valmont is positioned in the shot behind a partition, watching the scene and the women's performances unfolding like a screen play. If writing here is appropriated as speech and

physical performance, then reading is what is at stake in Valmont's gaze. The scene is an inverted version of the double letter by Valmont in the novel. The model provided here works opposite: Merteuil is the one performing, and Valmont is the viewer. However, the model remains true to the novel as the viewer positions himself next to Valmont, shares his horizon of expectation rather than Madame de Volanges'.

Movement becomes a necessary skill for the protagonists, especially Valmont, as well. The film spends a lot of time establishing how difficult it is for these characters to physically interact, as the novel could, due to its epistolary form, always skirt these problems. The action of sending and receiving a letter or a visit from a character becomes especially challenging, as witnessed by the scene in which Valmont walks in circles around a room with Rosemonde, Madame de Volanges and Cécile, waiting for the perfect opportunity to hand Cécile a letter without being spotted by the other women. The significance of the letter here becomes its physicality, in addition to its textual content. The scene becomes a visual analogy of Valmont's instrumental irony: his intention is to send a certain message to an individual discursive community (Cécile) without letting the others catch on.

Finally, expression becomes the most important tool for Merteuil, who excels at both encoding and decoding it. She confesses to Valmont how she used to train herself to separate her expression from her emotions: this is effectively the separation that enables an ironic use of physical performance that the viewer can then use to view doubly, in parallel, just like he did in the novel. In other words, Merteuil teaches herself how to encode meaning into her own physical expression. On the other hand, she uses expression to decode the secrets of others; she finds out about the genuineness of Valmont's love for Tourvel through their expressions when they look at each other.

Through the examples of speech, movement and expression, I've tried to describe how the film uses the gaze as a material that takes the place of the letters, i.e. of writing/reading, in the novel. Even so, the letters remain a part of the film both as text and as physical object. It is not a matter of a perfect one-to-one translation; rather, the cinematic medium adapts parts and assimilates others, encodes the text doubly within itself (see Kafalenos). The most explicit and clear use of the gaze happens in the first and last shot of the film, which can also serve to identify how the ironic configuration of the novel gets adapted through the medium of the gaze.

The first shot of the film finds Merteuil glancing at herself in the mirror, the viewer looking at the reflection of her face—literally, the way she sees herself—and even makes eye contact with the smiling image of the woman. The sentence which describes her gaze in the screenplay for the movie reads: "The gilt frame around the mirror on the Marquise de Merteuil's dressing-table encloses the reflection of her beautiful face. For a moment she examines herself; critically, but not without satisfaction." The mirror serves as a signal of the viewer's horizon of expectation, which is eye-level with Merteuil's, just like in the novel. The complacency of the eye contact performed by Glenn Close suggests a relation of accomplices between the viewer and Merteuil, and enables instrumental irony. Merteuil has the expression of a camera-facing character who shares a metaleptic inside joke with the audience, a cinematic convention well established by 1988. This enables the instrumental irony, a sense of complicity produced through the operation of the gaze. Another example is the first scene at the opera, where we see through Merteuil's binoculars as she ignores the stage and inspects the members of the audience. We are looking through her eyes in this scene, even the image takes the form of binoculars, and observing everyone looking at something in the distance, no one returning the gaze. This, again, is an example of how the sense of instrumental irony is achieved through a complicity of the gaze.

In the last shot of the film, the viewer can see Merteuil taking off her makeup, looking at herself in the mirror. What the viewer sees this time is not the reflection, but the woman herself, her face, unaware of the camera's gaze, not making any eye contact with the viewer. Before the shot, there is a scene at the opera, in which everyone turns their head to stare at Merteuil as she walks in. It is the gaze that prevents her from gazing herself, and thereby tears the viewer from her perspective and places her in the position of the object. This is, inversely, how the film encodes its unstable irony. It takes the gaze that had been in Merteuil's favor, the instrument with which she could use irony and act, and gives it to the Parisian society at large—in the place of the physical letters in the novel—who can then use it to imbue her image with their own knowledge, a knowledge she has no control over.

The ironies encoded in the movie therefore depend on the gaze and not text. This is obvious in the discussion of Merteuil's and Valmont's irony in which the gaze becomes both weapon and weakness. But it is also evident in the changes made by the adaptation which stem from the differences between the source and goal medium. In adaptations, therefore, we can

distinguish between the former—an adapted irony, already present in the novel and transposed by using the gaze in place of text—and the latter—an irony of adaptation, one that is a product of the adaptation itself, caused by a divergence in the logical structures of the two media.

One of these ironies of adaptation is Valmont's walking scene, a scene whose conflict is constructed by the gaze, but which couldn't have occurred in the novel. The irony of the scene is only apparent to the reader of the novel; the scene depicts the unflatteringly clumsy nature of the characters' communication, an issue the novel completely skirts through its epistolary form, as it necessarily avoids the circumstances in which the letters are sent and received, and only offers the tidy self-presentation of a constructed text. Valmont's walking scene reads like an ironic corollary of adapting the novel to incorporate the gaze, and deals with the issues this approach must tackle in order to remain coherent. Another example is Merteuil's expression when she realizes Valmont's love for Tourvel is genuine. The camera focuses on her face, in private and unseen by the other characters, and the expression remains purely cinematic, as no letter from the novel could coherently depict such a private moment. A similar moment happens after Valmont's death, in the shot of Merteuil destroying her belongings in a rage.

In this way, by using the gaze, the film retains the double ironic configuration of the novel and, additionally, encodes ironies through the interaction of text and moving image, by extending the logic of the gaze through the entire story and seeing the problematic consequences such a refocusing entails, and the cinematic solutions it necessitates. These ironies of adaptation are then apparent to the reader of the novel, but remain undetected, or only vaguely comedic, in the eyes of the non-reader viewer.

3.2. Cosmopolis*: Don De Lillo, David Cronenberg*

There is a structural similarity between *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Cosmopolis* (2003). It exists aside from tentative comparisons of the protagonists' worldviews, respectively French libertine (see Singerman) and American neo-liberal (see Varsava). The similarity is the tragic fall of the protagonist, a journey from subject of knowledge and action to object in the vein of Merteuil. This fall in *Cosmopolis*, I will show, happens due to a similar ironic configuration to the one in *Dangerous Liaisons*.

Just as Merteuil sharply divides the spheres of human action and reproductive life—in other words, thinks herself a subject capable of directed, instrumental irony, and thinks of others as passive—so does Packer make a similar distinction between those who can decipher and influence the global cyber-capitalist system and those who live under its shadow:

> People hurried past, the others of the street, endless anonymous, twenty-one lives per second, race-walking in their faces and pigments, sprays of fleetest being.
> They were here to make the point that you did not have to look at them. (DeLillo 20-21)

The only practice Packer identifies as human action is economic speculation. What enables Packer's action is his proficiency in what he calls the chart. His journey is laced with a series of reflections and dialogues about whether certain financial speculations he has made will chart. The threat of losing money, first verbalized by Michael Chin, Packer's currency analyst, arises from the risk inherent in speculative gestures—in this case, betting against the yen—which do not chart. Chin's unease over the yen, therefore, is based on the incompatibility of Packer's actions with conventional interpretive models determining the practice of investment. Packer insists that his actions in fact do chart, making the dialogue in essence a contest in reading ability. The verb "to chart" attains a paradoxical sense: it no longer pertains simply to the representation of certain processes, but also to the incentive for such processes; it charts as it is charted. What is to be discovered in the chart, as Packer later explains, is a pattern that can bring into contact natural and economic processes: "'There's an order at some deep level,' he said. 'A pattern that wants to be seen.'" (86)

Packer identifies a certain progression in his practice of economic speculation:

> [Packer] thought of the people who used to visit his website back in the day when he was forecasting stocks, when forecasting was pure power, when he'd tout a technology stock or bless an entire sector and automatically cause doublings in share price and the shifting of worldviews, when he was effectively making history, before history became monotonous and slobbering, yielding to his search

for something purer, for techniques of charting that predicted the movements of money itself. (75)

Christian Marazzi writes about the way in which a "good" reading of financial data is determined: "in order for it to work, financialization depends on *mimetic rationality,* a kind of herd behavior based on the information deficit of individual investors" (21). The interpretation of financial data is therefore subject to a consensus, which is self-referential in that it itself is what guarantees a favorable outcome: "the dominant interpretive model […], the *convention,* as Keynes calls the opinion that in a certain period has the upper hand over the multiplicity of opinions and that, as the "elect" of the community, becomes *public opinion*" (27); "the price level is driven to a certain extent by a self-fulfilling prophecy based on similar hunches held by a vast cross section of large and small investors and reinforced by news media that are often content to ratify this investor-induced conventional wisdom" (22-23).

The reversal of fate for Eric Packer happens when he erroneously forecasts the movement of the yen. Jane Melman, Packer's chief of finance, tells him about a speech made by the Japanese finance minister:

Some kind of scandal about a misconstrued comment. He made a comment about the economy that might have been misconstrued. The whole country is analyzing the grammar and syntax of this comment. Or it wasn't even what he said. It was when he paused. They are trying to construe the meaning of the pause. It could be deeper, even, than grammar. It could be breathing. (DeLillo 47-48)

The yen fluctuation performs as Packer's confrontation with the mute letter in a similar manner to Merteuil; that is, the chart as text serves both to enable Packer's instrumental irony and enforce its own unstable one. The steady and gradual rise of the yen marks an ironic refiguring reminiscent of the changing horizons of expectation in *Dangerous Liaisons*, as the chart that was his tool in acquiring wealth and fashioning the market to his will becomes something he is subjected to. However, in *Cosmopolis*, Packer never distances himself from the reader's horizon of expectation until the very end, as the second half of the novel focuses on Packer's repeated, and exceedingly desperate, attempts to retain the status of a subject who

performs human actions, i.e. to keep himself in the position of the instrumental ironist. From the yen reversal until the end of the novel, Packer becomes less focused on the totality of the market system and his dominance over it, and more concerned with gaps and asymmetries.

Vija Kinski, Packer's chief of theory, maintains that the market is total: "The market culture is total. It breeds these men and women. They are necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market-driven. They are traded on the markets of the world. This is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system" (DeLillo, 90). Packer, however, focuses on a protester who immolates himself as Packer's car passes him: "Now look. A man in flames. […] What did this change? Everything, he thought. Kinski had been wrong. The market was not total. It could not claim this man or assimilate his act. Not such starkness and horror. This was a thing outside its reach" (99-100).

Led by the example of the self-immolating man, he reflects: "What did he want that was not posthumous?" (209) The novel ends not with the physical death of Eric Packer, but with his descent into the sphere of reproductive life, the moment he can predict the rest of his story: "He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound" (ibid). The discrepancy between the two times reveals an underlying logic to Packer's proficiency in reading, the "secret" to his instrumental irony. Like the discrepancy Merteuil perfects between expression and emotion, Packer perfects the discrepancy between the present and a supposedly calculable, observable and predictable future. When Packer dies "inside the crystal of his watch," it is this future he dies in and, in turn, it is his ability to act, to use instrumental irony, which is at an end, even if his biological life "in original space" continues on for seconds or years.

David Cronenberg's *Cosmopolis* (2012) adapts DeLillo's novel very faithfully, with most of the original dialogue and the scene sequence left unchanged from the text. Like Frears, Cronenberg needs to deal with problems stemming from the difference in the two media.

The most glaring issue for an adaptation of DeLillo's novel is the sense of time that Packer utilizes, discussed above, or as Peter Boxall writes: "*Cosmopolis* explores the possibility that the globalization of finance capital […] has finally produced a weightless temporality that 'has lost its narrative quality' (*Cosmopolis* 77)" (Boxall, 690); that is to say that the Derridean time "to come" (see Derrida 2006) has contaminated the present which, in turn, becomes obsolete. Eric's reading capabilities—his proficiency in reading what charts—involves

habituating this future "ahead of schedule" in order to act/speculate. The last sentence of the novel, quoted above, depicts a moment in one time, but not in the other, and so it presents a unique challenge to a cinematic adaptation. It is filmed so that Richard Sheets never fires the shot, instead ending on a note of ambiguity. The time the filmic narrative inhabits, therefore, is this future present, Eric's own time. This reading of time in the film stems from an irony encoded against the backdrop of the novel, i.e. it is an adapted irony.

Where time is concerned, however, the adaptation serves an additional purpose. On the one hand, as I have suggested, the parallel reading of the novel and the film testifies to the positioning of the filmic narrative in a future present and provides a singular reading only constructible by a discursive community of readers of *Cosmopolis*. At the same time, the final shot follows the film's own logic, rather than produce meaning solely in relation to the novel. Throughout the movie, in scenes of which I will give examples, cuts are used in the same manner to end scenes right after a specific action is planned, but before it is executed.

In the scene with Kendra Hays, Eric's bodyguard, the camera cuts at the moment Kendra is about to shoot Eric with the stun gun. In the novel, the paragraph ends at this moment as well: "Come on, do it. Click the switch. Aim and fire. I want all the volts the weapon holds. Do it. Shoot it. Now" (DeLillo, 115). Then, it retells what happened after a line break: "The voltage had jellified his musculature for ten or fifteen minutes and he'd rolled about on the hotel rug, electroconvulsive and strangely elated, deprived of his faculties of reason" (ibid). The novel can, in this way, appropriate the time jump and still fill the reader in on what occurs after, while the film can only commit to Eric's time, depending rather on the viewer to identify these time jumps and obtain the sense of a premature present from their iteration. In other words, even though the interrelation between the novel and film can create an ironic reading of the time jump scenes, the film also provides its own internal logic through which a different sense of time can be accessed.

The fact that both the film and the novel have ways to deal with the specific conception of time present in *Cosmopolis* enables us to identify another kind of irony of adaptation. In order to encode the sense of a time "to come" impinging on an obsolescent present, the film must sacrifice events and plot points in order to afford itself the cuts between Eric's time and what he calls "original time." Unlike the novel, it cannot couch analepses in scenes that follow the cuts and so preserve both the sense of Eric's time and a relatively more coherent plot. The structural change in relation to the novel affects the film's ethic and aesthetic. The film must adapt and

refigure writing not through analogy, which could only be directed at a specific discursive community, but through the iteration of its own signs.

Ironies of adaptation in cinema, then, stem from the disparities between these ways of producing meanings in the source and goal medium; from the tension between the corollaries of these different internal logics. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon writes: "Adaptation is a kind of extended palimpsest and, at the same time, often a transcoding into a different set of conventions" (Hutcheon 2006, 35). It is the paradox of these two definitions that inhabits ironies of adaptation like Valmont's walk around Madame de Rosemonde's leisure room and Eric Packer's death.

4. Irony, war and the Holocaust: *Starship Troopers* **and** *Inglourious Basterds*

Joshua Hirsch wrote a historical overview and theoretical examination of the ways the Holocaust has been represented in cinema. He writes how debates among critics on the limits of Holocaust representation divided roughly around the point of representability: on the one hand, there were those who argued for an essential unrepresentability of the Holocaust; others argued for melodrama as the best vehicle for the emotional identification of a viewer with the atrocities committed in the Holocaust. Of the former, Hirsch writes:

> The assertion of an absolute unrepresentability, while appealing as a response to the terrible sense of otherness that seems to characterize the Holocaust, implies both a rule of representational transparency to which the Holocaust is exception, and an assertion of an essential truth of the Holocaust known only to witnesses. […] I would argue that no historical representation gives access to essential truth, not even the memories of witnesses. All historical representation is, rather, limited in at least three ways: by signification (the ontological difference between the reality and the sign, including the memory-sign), by documentation (limited documentation of the past), and by discourse (limited framing of documents by the conventions of discourse). (Hirsch, 5)

On the other hand, Hirsch argues that emotional identification via melodrama "forestalls critical discussion of the nature and effects of such a response" (ibid). If this criticism is taken into account, the value of an ironic approach in dealing with the Holocaust and trauma becomes more apparent.

Hirsch documents a progression in historical Holocaust representation. In the first phase, he identifies a model of vicarious trauma (18). In this model, documentary footage of the atrocities disseminate a vicarious trauma stemming from the shock at witnessing the atrocities themselves. In 1941, Reinhard Wiener, a German naval sergeant and amateur cinematographer stationed in Latvia, filmed two minutes of footage of people wearing yellow patches on their chests and backs, running from a truck into a pit and being shot by a firing squad. As Hirsch

writes, when this photographic evidence of genocide first appears, "it may need relatively little narrative support in order to cause vicarious trauma" (18).

In the second phase, however, film must overcome a "defensive numbing […] and invoke a posttraumatic historical consciousness" by using "a traumatic afterimage, an image that formally repeats the shock of the original encounters with atrocity—both the original eye-witnessing of the atrocities themselves, and the subsequent cinematic encounter with the images of atrocity" (19). This means that a posttraumatic cinema, according to Hirsch, must increase in complexity insofar as it not only needs to take account of the images of the Holocaust themselves, but compose them in such a way that formally recaptures both "the senselessness of the initial traumatic encounter and the sense-making apparatus of a fully integrated historical narrative" (ibid).

Timothy Bewes approaches the same problem from a perspective of what he terms "postcolonial shame." Shame, according to Bewes, has become inseparable from writing. This inseparability has become an object of awareness since World War II, but has been present in Europe since the 1910s and 1920s. Bewes lists the historical factors for such a fusion: "crisis in national consciousness, ideological posturing between the Wars, revelation of obscenities committed in the name of those ideologies, decolonization, mass migration and culture-mixing, commodity culture and the polarization between 'entertainment' and 'art' […]" (Bewes, 12).

Shame is not the same as guilt, Bewes points out. Shame "results from an experience of incommensurability between the 'I' as experienced by the self and the self as it appears to and is reflected in the eyes of others" (18). While guilt presupposes responsibility, i.e. an ontology of the subject, shame is an experience of the subject's dissolution, of "the fundamental complicity that, in the modern world, constitutes living" (19). What is shameful is the simultaneous obligation to write and the impossibility of writing innocently.

What is at stake, then, is an "interruption of the ethical as a permanent rendering inadequate of form" (21). This is reminiscent of Hirsch's description of the essential unrepresentability argument in Holocaust cinema. The incommensurability between the drive to expression and the available forms of representing that experience serves to underscore the argument that the eye-witness account occupies a sacred position in a representative hierarchy.

Similarly to Hirsch, Bewes tries to resolve this issue by refocusing the way meaning and truth are encoded in a modern text. In this account, shame would represent "an approach to

reading that understands that the truth of the text cannot be present in it as a positive entity […] The text is not a vehicle (of ethics), but an event" (32). In this refocusing from a presence of meaning to an event, or play, irony can be encoded and read. Or, to quote Linda Hutcheon again: "Perhaps parody is a particularly apt representational strategy for postmodernism, a strategy once described … as the use of parallel script rather than original inscription" (Hutcheon 2001, 117).

When it came out in 1997, Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* opened to a mixed critical reception. The reviews were mostly negative, the criticism converging on a single point: the movie was deemed fascist. Stephen Hunter in "Goosestepping at the Movies: *Starship Troopers* and the Nazi Aesthetic", writing for the *Washington Post*, writes how "*Starship Troopers* [is] commandeering 22 million American dollars in its first weekend and certain to make gobs more, while secretly whispering, 'Sieg Heil'" (Hunter 1997). Similarly, Roger Ebert called the film out for its "quasi-fascist militarism" (Ebert 1997). Paul Tatara, in his article "Fascist *Starship* troops lacking in irony" for CNN.com, wrote:

> Director Paul Verhoeven (who's also brought us gruel like *Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls*) has made the world's first winkingly fascist film, and I'm not over-analyzing to come to that conclusion. […] Not only is *Starship Troopers* vapid and manipulative, it's actually arrogant about its own emptiness. Verhoeven (who truly ought to be ashamed) throws in the occasional silly joke, which is his way of saying that this is all in good fun, but that stretches our definitions of both "good" and "fun" to the outer limits. The idea is that this is a parody of a war movie. Fascism, being a great deal less than pure evil, is really just silly. All these beautiful young people line up to die for their country, then they do so, and hardly anything is left. Isn't that a scream? (Tatara 1997)

The fascism Hunter, Ebert and Tatara are referring to is perhaps most clearly noticeable on a formal level once the opening sequence of the movie is viewed alongside Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*. This is a shot-by-shot comparison of the opening sequence in *Starship Troopers* and a Reichsarbeitsdienst depicted in *Triumph of the Will*:

First, there is a static shot of national symbolism.

Then, there is an aerial shot of neatly organized military regiments on a large field.
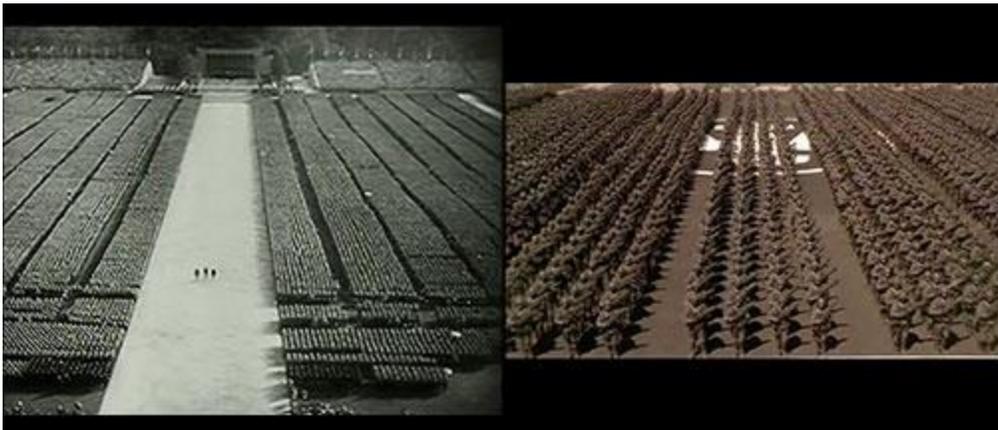
The camera then uses medium shots to focus on individual soldiers within the army, who proclaim their allegiance to the homeland. There are three of these shots in sequence in *Triumph*

of the Will, the soldiers calling out names of the towns where they are from; in *Starship, Troopers*, two soldiers are filmed, both shouting "I'm doing my part!" The two sequences are filmed identically, in shot/reverse shot: first, an angled shot, and then immediately a shot from the opposite angle to indicate the form of a conversation. This shot is also used intermittently throughout both movies as the troops address their generals. Hitler and Jenkins are filmed from one angle, and all the troops addressing them from the other one.

Then, there is a shot of a young boy admiring the troops from a youth regiment on the sidelines.

The camera then switches to the flags, both filmed billowing in the wind.

Finally, the viewer is presented with a dissolve shot from a flag to the troops assumedly fighting for it.
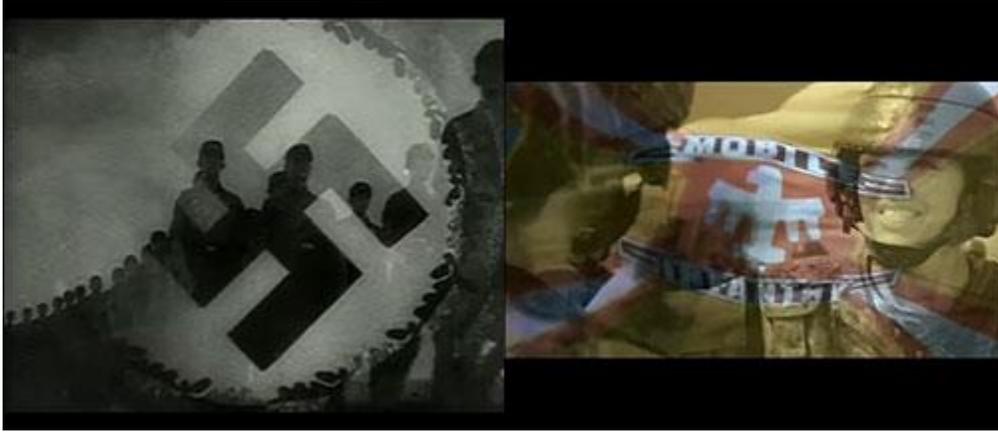
On a narrative or dramatic level, the film follows a group of soldiers fighting an intergalactic war with a species of giant insects in an asteroid field far away from Earth. Pieces of the asteroids are being projected in the Earth's direction and, as the propaganda implies, the bugs are behind it. The film is mostly comprised of action sequences where the human armies wipe out bugs, and ends with the capture of "the brain bug," a supposed leader. The rest of the bugs are exterminated, their asteroids destroyed.

Even in 1997, there were critical reviews opposed to this general indictment for fascism. Ever since 2013, however, fueled by a series of remakes of Verhoeven's early films, there has been a call for "a critical revision," as Calum Marsh called it in his article "*Starship Troopers*: One of the Most Misunderstood Movies Ever" for *The Atlantic*. Marsh's critique is based on the notion that "*Starship Troopers* is satire, a ruthlessly funny and keenly self-aware sendup of right-wing militarism. The fact that it was and continues to be taken at face value speaks to the very vapidity the movie skewers" (Marsh 2013). In other words, he opens a discussion that is in essence about irony.

Critics Michael Carson and Tim Napper embody this debate in their opposing articles; respectively, "The Successful Fascism of Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers*" (2014) and "V for Vagina: why *Starship Troopers* is the greatest sci-fi satire of all time" (2014). Napper uses a model of instrumental irony to interpret the movie, calling out the "obviousness" of the satire:

> Take the character of Colonel Jenkins (Neil Patrick Harris) as an example. Over
> the course of the film, Jenkins makes the transition from high-school nerd to Nazi
> mad scientist. He becomes something of the Heinrich Himmler of the future.

At the end, Jenkins, dressed in what looks like a gestapo uniform, puts his hand against the brain bug and uses his psychic reading ability to learn what it is thinking. His conclusion, yelled to the assembled troops: "It's afraid. It's afraid!"

As the troopers fire their weapons into the air in response, the viewer is left with one inescapable conclusion: *these* people are the monsters. (Napper 2014)

Carson, however, takes up the issue of fascism's already symbiotic link to irony, and criticizes it as implicated in fascism and itself compromised:

[…] the problem with movies like Starship Troopers, which attempt to treat war and fascist ideologies similarly, is the fact that fascism is already a variety of camp. The fascist has, as Walter Benjamin famously pointed out, aestheticized politics. Fascist aesthetics are already achieved through ironic choice—in the idea you can create a new morality and a new type of people through a carefully cultivated, exaggerated and self-aware aesthetic of violence and manhood. It is not simply reactionary, but reactionary modernism, part of the same aesthetic world of the surrealists and the "degenerates" they despised. Thus, when a director attempts to mock it through hyperbole, the director reproduces not only the image of fascism but its substance. (Carson 2013)

The dissensus is reminiscent of "Into the Heart of Africa" in the sense that there is clearly both agreement and disagreement over certain elements of the film. For example, no one questions the undeniably fascist symbolism in the movie. Marsh himself writes that the "rhetoric throughout is unmistakably fascistic: Earth's disposable infantrymen, among whom our high-school-aged former-jock hero naturally ranks, are galvanized by insipid sloganeering, which they regurgitate on command with sincerity as they head to slaughter. ("The only good bug is a dead bug!" is the chant most favored.)" (Marsh 2013). Similarly, all the critics agree on an ironic intent, usually citing interviews with Verhoeven or the appearance of the main cast much like Napper does with Colonel Jenkins and his leather coat. The point of disagreement is irony itself,

its subversive or transgressive potential, specifically with regard to fascism. Is *Starship Troopers* a blockbuster that unwittingly propagates militaristic fascism or a satire thereof?

Starship Troopers is hardly the only Hollywood blockbuster mired in charges of cultivating fascist ideals of virility, military might and the glory of war. For some critics, however, there is a certain amount of insidiousness in the self-aware and ironic way these ideals are presented that separates the film from other action titles; for others, it is this same irony that is the operation by which the film breaks the viewer's glorification of these ideals. Going back to Bewes, Verhoeven's film could be read as an affirmation of its own shameful complicity in an already ethically compromised enterprise.

In Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), fascism and the Holocaust are much more explicitly the subject matter. The film cannot be called an action blockbuster by any standard, and it is the subject of the Holocaust that connects it to Verhoeven's film. There is no precarious connection to Nazi Germany in Tarantino's film; it is very explicit. However, an ironic configuration still exists. While in *Starship Troopers* the (debated) irony could be identified when the reader saw the giant insects as victims of human terror, in *Inglourious Basterds* the Nazis themselves are the ones made into victims of the characters'—and viewers'—bloodlust.

Lieutenant Aldo Raine leads the titular Basterds, a group of Jewish soldiers dedicated to terrorizing and killing Nazis. Their plan to assassinate Hitler and other senior Nazi figures in a Parisian cinema runs parallel to a plot concocted by the owner of the cinema, Shoshanna Dreyfus, a sole survivor from a French Jewish family, to burn the theater down and assassinate the Nazis. The screening is a premiere of the Nazi propaganda film *Stolz der Nation,* starring Frederick Zoller, the soldier on whose life the film's narrative is based. Throughout *Inglourious Basterds*, Raine's Basterds are frequently seen killing and scalping Nazis, Nazis often plead for their lives to no avail, and the movie ends with the theater going up in flames and killing Hitler, Goebbels, and the rest of the Nazi leadership.

Jonathan Rosenbaum called the film "morally akin to Holocaust denial" (2009). Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* wrote "Tarantino is really only serious about his own films, not history" (2009). In other words, it did not escape the indictment for a flagrant disregard of the seriousness of the subject matter it was representing. Of course, there were positive critiques, such as Roger Ebert's, where he praises Tarantino as "the real thing, a director of quixotic

delights" (2009). Still, most critics felt an ambivalence, best articulated by David Denby when he writes "whether the Basterds are Tarantino's ideal of an all-American killing team or his parody of one is hard to say" (2009).

Going back to Hirsch's model of a posttraumatic cinema which has to formally repeat the vicarious trauma felt by seeing the original footage of Holocaust atrocity and Bewes's model of the text as event, Tarantino's film can be read as an event in which the viewer participates and either recognizes or misses his own complicity in a fascistic rationale disguised on a thematic level—in an irreverent way expected of Tarantino—into Jewish revenge and anti-fascist sentiment. The non-Nazi characters in the film like Shoshanna are also complicit, as she burns an entire auditorium from the projection room while watching the formally similar film-within-the-film *Stolz der Nation*, in which Zoller is holed up in a tower, shooting and killing wave after wave of attackers from a place of relative safety. The analogy, of course, is readily applicable to the viewer in the cinema as well. This radical movement is due to the defensive numbing to the footage and narratives surrounding the Holocaust identified by Hirsch. These narratives were vicariously traumatic not only because of the horror they depicted, but because their viewership was contemporaneous and complicit, in one way or another, in those horrors. In 2009, Nazism is a paradigm imbued with countless representations from popular culture, art and the history curriculum. For a posttraumatic cinema to be effective, for the viewer to be shown his complicity in these horrors again—as opposed to simply affirmed in a familiar disgust—the artist must iterate and ironize certain signs in order to activate the viewer, to pull him out of a *Stolz der Nation*-type place of complacency and back in the middle of the fray.

Hirsch's and Bewes's arguments reveal some points of disagreement in *Starship Troopers* and *Inglourious Basterds* criticism. On the one hand, the argument seems to go back to the discussion on the representability of the Holocaust, and Hirsch tries to resolve it by offering a model of a posttraumatic cinema. On the other hand, the argument can be seen from the perspective of representability after the event of postcolonial shame, as Bewes argues. Even within these arguments, other strands of thought are mentioned. Hirsch, for example, mentions the championing of melodrama, an argument which could be used to argue for *Starship Troopers* as fascist.

The models used to approach reading textual or cinematic material like the two films mentioned in this chapter are therefore plural and different, but in some respects similar. Irony

stems from these disagreements between the logical structures that pilot a reader or a viewer. Because of this, precariousness and instability are its conditions of existence. Irony, in this sense, serves as a trace of sorts, a testimony to the varying conflicting narratives and perspectives the textual material gives itself over to. To identify it, to belong to a certain discursive community, is to belong to multiple discursive communities, i.e. to understand what is being ironized and how it is being ironized is already to belong to two or more discursive communities overlapping and intersecting. Hutcheon writes:

> Irony is inclusive and relational: the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the other because they literally "interact" to create the real "ironic" meaning. The "ironic" meaning is not, then, simply the unsaid meaning, and the unsaid is not always a simple inversion or opposite of the said: it is always different—*other than* and more than the said. (Hutcheon 1994, 12)

This is why, for some viewers, the opening sequence of *Starship Troopers* is so terrifying. As the stream of images ripped directly from Leni Riefenstahl go by, the viewer who identifies the fascistic undertone is faced—whether he later watches it as satire or fascist-complicit—with the precariousness of irony, an uncanny lack of a sacred ground or a fundamental level on which to read, watch, or play; he is activated into a participant—he recognizes his shameful complicity in the narrative, as Bewes might phrase it—and the work is not complete without him.

5. Ironic networks: the films of Steven Soderbergh

On the example of the Holocaust war film, I have shown how a multiplicity of discursive communities "reading" the film stand in disagreement and block the way for a single metanarrative which could interpret the events on its own terms. What one is left with is a dissensus, a fragmented and dialogized narrative with the individual voices competing for visibility. In this chapter, I will show the ways Steven Soderbergh's films fragment and dialogize an assumed filmic metanarrative—by which I mean, an assumed shared horizon of expectation— and how ironies of the opus emerge from the similarities and differences in the ways this dialogizing takes place across several films.

5.1. Traffic *(2000)*

In 1971 President Nixon declared a war on drugs, sharply increasing the size of federal drug control agencies and introducing mandatory sentencing. While its enforcement has never faltered, the war itself has received numerous criticism and unfavorable scientific research surrounding its practices and rationale. In his *New York Times* article "Colombian Coca Survives U.S. Plan To Uproot It" (2006), Juan Forero likens the effects of the war on drugs to "squeezing a balloon," as the overall acreage reserved for the production of coca remained the same after Plan Colombia, a six-year mission to eradicate coca production in the country. The cultivation moved to more remote parts of the country, as well as the neighboring Peru and Bolivia. The war was also criticized as founded on ethnic bias and propagating ethnic bias in turn, as the history of its gradual rise includes reactionary responses to Chinese immigration in the 1870s (opium), African-Americans in the South in the 1900s (cocaine), and Mexican-Americans in the 1920s Midwest (marijuana). Despite this criticism, a general deafness to these problems could be seen in the legislature, and was attributed by NRC chair Charles Manski to the fact that "the drug war has no interest in its results" (Manski 2001). The self-evidence of the necessity of the war on drugs, in other words, has become a metanarrative.

In Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000), two men on opposite sides of the American-Mexican border work to eradicate two dominant Mexican cartels. Javier, a policeman, infiltrates the cartel undercover while conservative judge Robert is named the US drug czar. Their two

stories are visually separated with a color filter; Javier's sequences modified with a yellow sheen, while Robert's are colored blue. The men, nonetheless, are seemingly on the same side; that is, they are both engaged in a war against a concrete enemy, their goals having to do with putting an end to the two cartels' trafficking.

As the film progresses, however, their actions complicate the situation further and further, and the effects of the drugs start affecting them personally. Robert's daughter becomes addicted to heroin herself, a fact her father feels obligated to partly ignore in the light of his public duties. Javier, on the other hand, is haunted by the damage drugs had wreaked on his hometown and his country.

By the end of the film, it is clear that the two men will not be able to effect any kind of fundamental change, and the film ends with a pair of compromises. Robert quits his post to go find his daughter and help her with rehabilitation. Javier makes a deal with the DEA to bring down one of the two cartels, effectively—and consciously—doing nothing but giving its competitors a monopole that could end up being more detrimental in the long run. The deal he makes enables him to install lights in his hometown's baseball field so that the children could play in relative safety. The effect these compromises have is a certain frustration in the viewer, as the ethical other of the film, the dominant cartel, never gets its due. What the viewer gets instead are singular, fragmented and dialogized discourses by a number of characters, which take account of themselves while being at the same time inter-connected and mutually implicated in various conflicting discourses in the film. What is neutralized is the metanarrative, a shared horizon of expectation, or at least a certain type of metanarrative, one which would iron out into a coherent ethical stance on the war on drugs. This is achieved by frustrating the reader's desire to economize the ethical and political complexities of the war on drugs into a dialectical rather than a dialogical model.

The final scene of the film is an ironic one in this sense. Javier watches a game of baseball on his lighted stadium, the two teams playing against each other. Scored brightly, yellow-hued as always, with close-up shots of Benicio Del Toro's face suggesting a satisfied disposition, the scene unfolds in a triumphant manner, even though the lack of triumph for a viewer remains grating. The ethico-aesthetical composition of the scene, therefore, effects a discrepancy between the viewer's horizon of expectation and the character's, not unlike the workings of unstable irony in the two examples of ironies of adaptation.

While the two men are engaged in winning the war on drugs, Helena, a California-based housewife witnesses the arrest of her husband who had, unbeknownst to her, implicated himself in the drug trade with the cartels. Her story, being set literally on the border of the two countries, is not color-filtered, but utilizes the full spectrum of color. Helena's arc is different from the two men's in that she crosses the line between a staunch opponent and a drug dealer. Helena's story retains a similar frustration in the viewer's eyes as she seems to leave behind her characteristic anger at her husband to pursue the very activities that had landed him in jail.

Just like Javier and Robert, Helena is not able to view herself the way the viewer sees her because they do not share a common horizon of expectation. To the character, there is nothing frustrating about her own actions because her orienting point is not the filmic metanarrative but her own interest which leads her to adapt and change. In this way, Helena serves as a middle character—both in a geographical and ethical sense—who enters into a dialogical relation with the metanarrative. However she also enters in a dialogical relation with the viewer, and so none of the characters end up caring for what the viewer cares for; there is no one who has the scope of action to envelope the whole metanarrative, just certain fragments of it.

Traffic encodes its irony in between the dialogized discourses of the characters, their relations with each other and the constructed metanarrative. By frustrating the reader's need to share his horizon of expectation with a hero-character, by disabling identification and intersubjectivity, the film makes itself into a spectral metanarrative perceived by no entities from within the film, producing dialogized relations between the characters' discourses and between the viewer and the characters, placing the viewer in a participatory rather than a passive role of affirmation.

5.2. Contagion *(2011)*

In *Contagion* (2011), a global plague jumpstarts multiple narratives: Mitch, an American whose wife Beth becomes patient zero; Ally, a scientist at the Atlanta-based U.S. Centers for Disease Control working on the vaccination; Krumwiede, a blogger who uses the situation to sell Forsythia, an alleged cure; Erin, a doctor arranging triage centers in Minnesota; Leonora, a Swiss doctor for the World Health Organization who is sent to Hong Kong to investigate the cause of the outbreak; and others. Just like in *Traffic*, these characters are all cut off from the

metanarrative, none of them share the viewer's horizon of expectation. However, in this film, what complicates things is that we cannot even speak of a single horizon of expectation the viewer could share with a given character, because unlike a drug cartel, the contagion is something that keeps trying to be defined and reified, but skirts every attempt to.

The film moves chronologically with intermittent paratexts informing the viewer how many days have passed since the outbreak. The film starts with day two, and ends with an analepsis of day one. As the narrative progresses, two questions come to the fore: "How did the plague start?" and "Can we survive?" The viewers are tasked with thinking about both questions. I will analyze the ways in which the characters are disjointed from the filmic metanarrative(s) by their relation to these two questions.

Erin, whose job and training for the CDC made her more prepared than others, shows an unreserved initiative to go into the field and help before she herself succumbs to the illness. Her actions follow a protocol with the goal of quarantining the infected and putting the outbreak under control. After she discovers that she is infected, it is this goal that remains a constant as she shuts herself into her hotel room and later checks into a triage tent. Erin is not concerned with the causes of the plague, just its effects and ways of curbing them. She is wholly committed to the second question, and working under the premise that there is a chance of survival. Even after her illness, when there is no question of her individual survival, she follows procedure to minimize risk to others. What cuts her away from the viewer's horizon of expectation is her imminent death before the narrative ends, but also her reactionary character: while the viewer is trying to actively figure out the timeline and workings of the plague, Erin is stuck in a maintenance position, simply holding the disease at bay. Her death comes before she understands what is happening and before she can effect any kind of dramatic change in treatment or quarantine, leaving space for other characters to tackle those questions, but unable to share the viewer's horizon of expectation herself.

Ally, on the other hand, is positioned in the relative safety of a CDC research center, working to understand where the virus came from so that she can produce a vaccination. For her, unlike Erin, deaths are not people dying in front of her, but a chart on the screen which signals to her the time she has left to come up with an answer to the first question. After finding the cure and administering it to her father, she lives through a personal victory having been the one who won the race against time. The relation of her story with the others, however, makes this moment

feel less triumphant for the viewer, who cannot but see her as only a part of a rapidly collapsing machinery made by the other—mostly dying or dead—characters. In other words, the viewer does not share a horizon of expectation in which what is at stake in *Contagion* is personal triumph.

In Hong Kong, Leonora is kidnapped for ransom and taken to a village in China by her Chinese liaison who demands treatment for his family and hometown. Her arc begins similar to Ally's, looking for answers to the outbreak for the sake of a cure. However, there are also elements of Erin's arc as she travels to the field, and risks infection. After Ally finds the vaccine, a case of placebos is sent to the Chinese for her return. When, at the airport, Leonora finds out that the delivered vaccines are not functional, she chooses to go back to the village. We can view Leonora's arc, therefore, as crossing the line between Erin's and Ally's, as her starting interest in producing answers turns into a drive to save as many as she can.

Krumwiede views the outbreak as an opportunity to gain influence and wealth, presenting conspiracy theories involving the government hiding a cure. His actions are cynical, as he consciously promotes Forsythia in the media and even crafts a story how he himself was cured by it. Forsythia goes on to cause massive demand, lootings, violence and increased rate of the contagion's spreading. Neither of the two questions figure into Krumwiede's interests as he repeatedly proclaims himself simply a blogger, or a man who tells the truth. He is meticulous about keeping himself safe and skirts the disease entirely. By the end of the film, when a vaccination is found, he continues to turn people away from it, his narrative coherent, and partly succeeds. Krumwiede is the character most noticeably removed from the questions plaguing the other characters in *Contagion*. This is why he is also radically removed from the viewer's horizon of expectation. It is not a matter of the viewer making judgments about the character's cynicism, it is a matter of the character acting as a hindrance to the viewer's, and the other characters', search for answers.

Finally, Beth, who flies back to Minnesota from Hong Kong and becomes the first known person infected, dies without answering lingering questions about her movements and activities on the first day of the outbreak. Her husband Mitch is left, uncannily resistant to the disease, to dwell on the first question on a very personal level. His investigations come across a man his wife had been seeing, and saw in Hong Kong on the day of the outbreak. The cause of the outbreak for him starts becoming mixed with questions of his wife's fidelity and sin. This is one

of the ways in which the contagion tries to be reified and understood: if, for Ally, it is a triumph over her personal fears; for Krumwiede, an opportunity that knocks only once; and for Leonora, a change of perspective; for Mitch, it attains an ethical dimension, a sense of a punishment or redemption he starts associating with it, inferred from his wife's betrayal.

The film ends with an analepsis of the day of the outbreak. By the first third of the movie, Ally already knows that the disease must have started spreading after "the wrong pig came in contact with the wrong bat", as the DNA markers of the virus suggest. As the analepsis unfolds, the viewer can see bats flying over a pig sty, one of them defecating on the pig feed. Then, they can see the pig being slaughtered and processed, prepared by a chef in the Hong Kong airport, and served to Beth. This moment is even photographed, and at a certain point in the film, Mitch sees this documented moment of infection. The answer to the first question is given by Soderbergh with a clinical precision, but it does not account for the viewer's whole horizon of expectation. Even when aware of the steps that happened for the disease to spread, the individual stories of the characters seem to finally supersede the first question about the reasons for the spread. Or, rather, no reasons are given, just a chain of events.

The second question is answered as well. After Ally discovers the cure, mass vaccinations are organized and humanity is seen surviving after a great cost in human lives. The disease does not conquer humanity as an all-powerful force, but affects it in such a way that its impact on every aspect of society is unquestionable. In this way, the contagion resists reification into an other, a cartel as in *Traffic*, an agent that pursues interest and design, even though each individual character interprets it as such in their own way.

Just as in *Traffic*, the ironies of the film are encoded within the dialogical relations between the characters' viewpoints; that is, between the differing ways to reify the contagion in the minds of different characters. However, we can also identify a secondary irony, one which comes from the intertextual relation between the two movies in Soderbergh's opus. The dialogizing of a coherent metanarrative in *Contagion* reflects *Traffic*'s model by utilizing a central other that cannot be reified in the way similar to the war on drugs. In *Contagion*, even though the disease cannot logically be reduced to an instrumental action—except as Krumwiedean conspiracy theory—in the way the war on drugs could be reduced in Javier's and Robert's mind to the actions of specific cartels, this reification nonetheless happens in the minds of each individual character. It is this reification, this construction of a personal narrative that

always stands in contrast to the viewer's narrative, which enables the dialogic and ironized structure of the film. An irony found in *Contagion* that is only visible when seeing it through the prism of *Traffic*, is that even an other without the face of a cartel don, something as volatile and irrational as a virus, will trigger the same kind of narrativization and reification in the minds of the characters which will, in turn, dictate how they act and what questions they ask about it.

5.3. Side Effects *(2013)*

Both in *Traffic* and *Contagion*, the viewer is continually faced with characters who are distanced from his own horizon of expectation. In *Side Effects* (2013), Soderbergh inverts this model to keep the viewer in the dark as to what the characters know and what motivates them. This leads the viewer to constantly question whose horizon of expectation most matches their own. In the film, unlike in the previous two, there is an "official story"; that is, the media serve as a platform from which the two main characters try to publish their own narratives of the situation that is unfolding.

Emily becomes depressed after her fiancé Martin comes home from prison and starts seeing Dr. Banks, a psychiatrist. During a conference, Dr. Siebert recommends Banks a new experimental drug called Ablixa to administer to his patient. Soon after he does, Emily starts entering sleepwalking states and murders Martin during one of them. Banks's career is destroyed, and he begins investigating Ablixa and Emily. He finds out that Emily and Siebert had arranged the entire scenario after investing heavily in Ablixa's competitor. He exposes the two, sends Siebert to jail and Emily to a mental facility where he keeps her medicated at all times.

The concentration of scenes a character gets is distributed unevenly in the film. The first half of the film until Martin's murder follows Emily most of the time. The viewer is never given any indication that she is pretending to be depressed and sleepwalking. Banks's character is often cold and disinterested, pushing pills without too much thought on the matter. After the murder, Banks becomes the focus of the film, Emily having been stowed in a mental hospital, and the viewer gets caught up in the story of a man trying to rescue his career.

The shift from character to character is marked by, on the one hand, a growing understanding of the Banks character, and, on the other hand, a disillusionment with Emily as her

act is gradually exposed. The shift also serves as a dialogizing move within the film, as the viewer's horizon of expectation is ripped from Emily's and he is made into a participant, i.e. he cannot align himself with any existing interest or perspective within the film and must rely on his own inferences.

At the end of the film, Banks confines Emily to a mental hospital even though he knows she is only pretending to be clinically depressed, and continues to medicate her against her wishes. This final act of cruelty allows the viewer to resist Banks's horizon of expectation and differentiate it from his own. Jude Law's performance ranges from a disinterested disposition before Martin's murder, to a desperation when his life becomes what is at stake, and back to a familiar jarring indifference at Emily's suffering when his story is taken as the official one by the news media.

The media have a role in *Side Effects* that they, or any other entity, do not have in Soderbergh's other films that I have analyzed. In Emily and Banks's world, since their story is a much more personal one compared to that of a drug czar waging a war on drugs or a doctor for the CDC developing a vaccine to save humanity from extinction, the media serves as a horizon of expectation that is shared with the public and that has the potential to influence every aspect of their lives, as Banks realizes when his practice first starts crumbling. In *Contagion*, it is only Krumwiede who has a connection to the media through his blog, while most of the other viewpoint characters do not take much heed of them. But in *Side Effects*, both Emily and Banks depend on the media in their war against each other: it is the media that ultimately legitimizes one story over the other. In the end, when Banks's story is taken up by the media, it is the contrast between this official story and the viewer's experience that triggers the disjunction between the viewer's horizon of expectation and Banks's.

In three films, Soderbergh plays with the problematic ideal of an intersubjective narrative, a story involving multiple characters who share in a common world or a shared consensus about the things going on around them. Each of the films carries with it encoded ironies by contrasting the characters in a way that shines a light on their fundamental disagreement, their complete self-interest—not selfishness, but a singular and specific mode of thinking about and reacting to things occurring around them—which can never equate to that of the viewer. But new ironies, those I have called ironies of the opus, also emerge when the films are read one against the backdrop of another. These ironies ironize the effort to break with the

metanarrative as a metanarrative itself. In this way, *Contagion* can be read as having an ironic relation to *Traffic*, as the central pillar of *Traffic*'s own irony—the discrepancy between Javier's, Helena's and Robert's attempts to navigate the drug trade and put the Salazar cartel out of business—becomes doubled in *Contagion*, which focuses not on one but a multiplicity of questions, from which I have, for analytical purposes, defined two: "What caused this?" and "How do we survive?/Can we survive?" The foundation upon which *Traffic* can build its ironies is exposed and problematized in *Contagion*. But in *Side Effects*, through the role the news media plays, this pluralization that takes place in *Contagion* is ironized in turn. There is a metanarrative here for all the characters' intents and purposes, and their actions are always determined by the way they make themselves suit this metanarrative; for example, for Banks's story to become believable, he must cruelly imprison and medicate Emily. This exposes *Contagion*'s own metanarrative attempts which hinge on the fact that its characters are free to reify and narrativize the plague on an individual level with no reference to an official story—except in part, as I've mentioned, in the case of Krumwiede—because they live in a world where the sociopolitical system has all but collapsed. *Side Effects*, then, slips into this ironic network with Soderbergh's other films, simultaneously as ironist and ironized; or, in other words, as instrumental ironist with an inherent unstable irony that opens it up to further ironizing.

6. Conclusion

Walter Ong's suggestion that since irony "depends on tone and distance […] movies cannot achieve the tonal complexities of literature, so cinematic irony can never reach the height of verbal irony" (Ong 18) hinges on a conception of the cinematic image as relatively void of meaning and closer to its represented content when compared to written text. Out of a great influx of action blockbusters, however, a film like *Starship Troopers* still stands out as especially precarious—either subversive or quietistic—due to its appropriation of signs ripped from *Triumph of the Will*. These signs are cinematic—conventional ways of framing and shooting, like the shot/reverse shot method used in filming Jenkins and his soldiers—and they do not pertain to any single shot, as no shot has been completely copied from the Riefenstahl film; rather, they refer to the rhythm and sequence of the propaganda shots that are repeated to provoke a specific cinematic memory. The "tone and distance" needed for irony reside in this cinematic intertext.

In fact, Ong's insistence that cinematic irony depends on its "overwhelming visualism" (17) testifies to what Noël Carroll calls the "medium-specificity" fallacy. (see Carroll 2008) In *Dangerous Liaisons,* for example, the gaze is used as a tool for adapting the text into the cinematic medium, but the letters are preserved as well, both as text—via voiceover and the actors reading them out aloud—and as physical object. By being encoded within the film, they become cinematic elements as well. In *Traffic* and *Inglourious Basterds*, the use of color filters and familiar Nazi imagery, respectively, help construct a hierarchy or a difference which, at first, appears to anchor the viewer in a specific ideological perspective. As the films progress, however, a Bordwellian reader resistance comes into play, and this anchoring visualism ends up being the very thing ironized. Cinematic vision is text, they seem to say, and just as vulnerable to irony's instability.

Irony is unstable, but also directed. When someone identifies a cinematic irony, they are constructing an intertextual network like the one described by Hutcheon in the case of *Henry V* and its film adaptations. (see Hutcheon 1994, 65) An author like Steven Soderbergh can even use this knowledge to create a filmic opus that is dialogized not only within the diegetic universe of a specific film, among the characters—like in *Contagion,* which I've tried to demonstrate by analyzing which questions each character is asking about the central plot device—but also within

the film's intertextual network, as it challenges (and is challenged by) other films' logical structures—like when the viewer's desire to reify the cartels in *Traffic* as the ethical "other" is put in contrast to the various ways characters in *Contagion* narrativize the plague to themselves.

Hutcheon (1994) uses the term "edge" when discussing defining characteristics of irony. It is a metaphor for the instability of irony and points to the effect of irony on those ironized. It also points to a certain risk inherent in irony, as what is at stake in it is never a specific meaning, but an "inclusive and relational" (12) meaning: inclusive because it is not a matter of one meaning displacing another, but of multiple meanings being present at once; relational because the individual meanings present in the ironic meaning are constructed differentially, in relation to each other. Ultimately, any dismissal of cinematic irony or championing of verbal irony like Ong's fails to see these two characteristics, and instead conceives of irony as fundamentally instrumental, a tool that either exhumes a present meaning behind a given sign or engages in a politics of displacement of meaning; of course, in this conception, verbal irony is seen as the finer tool. But irony is unwieldy, and always gets unwanted results, precisely because results are not what is at stake in irony: what is at stake is an inclusion, an opening up, an affirmation of the plural, playful, dynamic and dialogic nature of any sign, be it word or image.

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to analyze the ways irony is encoded in cinema at a time when its subversive potential is being questioned through discussions of postmodernism's implication in the capitalist mode of production, and it is more than ever clear that irony has a transideological politics, i.e. can be taken up by a variety of conflicting perspectives; employed and read both structurally and anti-structurally. Irony has historically been a tool whose double-voicing proved an asset in subverting imperial culture; it was a way to deal with the cultural trauma of the Holocaust; but it has also been read as a liberal bourgeois force of relativization and mystification, and a champion figure of the 'freedom' of the global market. The discussion starts with a historical overview of irony and its many conceptions—Socratic, Romantic, Marxist, Poststructuralist—as well as a historical overview of film theory since the 1960s focusing specifically on the "language question," i.e. the extent to which cinema constitutes a language. In order to analyze how specific ironies are encoded in cinema as opposed to a written medium, I focus on text-to-film adaptations: Stephen Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) and David Cronenberg's *Cosmopolis* (2012). Then, in order to see how entire films can be read as ironic or non-ironic, I turn to Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997) and Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), two films which have sharply divided their critical reception specifically with regard to their ironic potential. Finally, by using the examples of three films directed by Steven Soderbergh—*Traffic* (2000), *Contagion* (2011) and *Side Effects* (2013)—I focus on the intertextual networks that enable cinematic irony by simultaneously providing a space to ironize and be ironized.

Keywords: irony, cinematic irony, postmodernism, film adaptation, posttraumatic cinema, contemporary American cinema