

**THE CYNICAL PERFORMANCE OF MASCULINITY IN
CONTEMPORARY WESTERN CINEMA:
A LACANIAN READING OF FIGHT CLUB, TRAINSPOTTING AND
SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE**

By

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Abstract

In this paper I identify a shift in Western cinematic discourses of masculinity that happened in the mid 90s focusing mainly on David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). I show how Fincher and Boyle present the male heroes of their films making a journey from a paralyzing failure to comply with normative gender roles towards a socially successful performance of a non identity-based masculinity. I explore the ambiguities of this success, how the main characters, when they move from marginal social existence towards public visibility and confront the hegemonic symbolic order that operates through excluding them, instead of disrupting it end up subscribing to its support. Following Slavoj Zizek, I interpret this process as a form of disidentification¹ with the normative ideals that regulated their earlier, failed, attempts to self-identity. What I'm interested in is how the disidentification of these male heroes differs from the one already included in the traditional modern masculinist symbolic order which I outline using Michael Kimmel's analysis of *Marketplace Manhood*². I argue that modern capitalism still relied on the limitations of a patriarchal ideology, on the necessity to supplement male symbolic authority with a powerful phallic image³. The discourse of cynical masculinity created as the conclusion of these films, on the other hand, moves beyond the reliance on this ideological use of the imaginary that made male dominance vulnerable to criticism. Now patriarchal, bourgeois and heterosexist norms prove to be immune to their subjects' disbelief.

¹ Butler, Judith, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Discourses on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 217.

² Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity" in Michael S. Kimmel: *Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 23-43.

³ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 42.

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Introduction

In this paper I will identify a shift in the Hollywood representation of male antagonists that happened in the mid 90s. Throughout the 80s and early 90s, male “bad guys” were predominantly depicted as figures of phallic authority who stepped over the boundaries of reason in their pursuit of power which eventually lead to their downfall (like Darth Vader in *Star Wars*, Al Pachino in *Scarface* or Michael Douglas in *Wall Street*). They were variations of the Freudian obscene, non-castrated father of jouissance⁴, and had to fail tragically when they were faced with their monstrosity. The new type of anti-hero, by contrast is not very masculine at all, he is androgynous, asexual and often impotent. He seems to be clueless and yet, in the end, he remains the last man standing, a fact that leads to his transformation into a new powerful entity in the eyes of others (see Johnny Depp in *Dead Man*, Kevin Spacey in *The Usual Suspects* or Edward Norton in *Fight Club*).

The three main films I chose to track this shift in Western cinematic discourses of masculinity are David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999), Danny Boyle’s *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). I will show how Fincher and Boyle present the heroes of their films making a journey from a paralyzing failure to comply with normative gender roles towards a socially successful performance of a non identity-based masculinity. I’m interested in the ambiguities of this success, how the main characters, when they move from marginal social existence towards public visibility and confront the hegemonic symbolic order that operates through excluding them, instead of disrupting it end up subscribing to its support. Following

⁴ Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 181.

Slavoj Zizek, I will interpret this process as a form of disidentification⁵ with the normative ideals that regulated their earlier, failed, attempts to self-identity. What I'm interested in is how the disidentification of these male heroes differs from the one already included in the traditional modern masculinist symbolic order which I will outline using Michael Kimmel's analysis of *Marketplace Manhood*⁶. For Fincher and Boyle, it seems, it is the world of global capitalism that changes the rules. Modern capitalism still relied on the limitations of a patriarchal ideology, in Lacanian terms, on the necessity to supplement male symbolic power with a powerful phallic image⁷. The discourse of masculinity created as the conclusion of these films, on the other hand, moves beyond the reliance on this ideological use of the imaginary that made male dominance vulnerable to criticism of those who don't believe in its performed spectacle. In the end of these films, with the birth of the new post-phallic man, patriarchal, bourgeois and heterosexist norms that one could see as socially constructed before, prove to be immune to the subjects' withdrawing their belief in them. This shift is produced by the new cynical male subject of postmodern capitalism who has found a way to perform gender in accordance with social norms, paradoxically, *through* renouncing his former quest for identity. His performance of gender is without any claim to originality and yet it lacks the subversive power Butler would like to associate with it⁸. My aim is to connect this new form of performance to the ideology of

⁵ Butler, Judith, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Discourses on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 217.

⁶ Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity" in Michael S. Kimmel: *Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 23-43.

⁷ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 42.

⁸ Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories/Gay Theories*. edited by Diana Fuss, (London: Routledge, 1991), 13-31.

cynicism based on an “enlightened false consciousness” that Peter Sloterdijk talks about⁹, and show how it leads to the reiteration of existing social and gender hierarchies.

In my critical approach to this new form of masculinity my ultimate research question will be the following: Can the ideology of cynicism compensate for the nonexistence of a gender identity? Can it neutralize the challenge of a performative theory of gender or even serve as its necessary supplement? This means that I will apply Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity¹⁰ to the phenomenon above with the intention to show that it cannot account for a possible cynical gender performance. Besides Sloterdijk, I’ll use Slavoj Zizek’s reimagined concept of ideology to deal with cynicism¹¹. Furthermore, I’ll investigate the formation of the male subject these movies present us with before their cynical dénouement using mostly theories Althusser, Lacan, Butler and Zizek, concentrating the role of the gaze/gazes and belief in the subject’s psychic economy. I’m especially interested in what role the male hero’s homosexual attachment and his relation to women plays in this process and how these change with the cynical turn. I’ll show how the final objectification of the female other and the disavowal of the homosexual one are connected through the cynical spectacle of masculinity where the woman is reduced to a gaze-object observing the male performance whereas the same sex other is the object to be sacrificed for the spectacle to be possible.

⁹ Peter Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), 5.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*

¹¹ Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989)

Chapter 1 - From Phallic Masculinity to the Regulatory Idea of Queerness

1.1 Alienation and Separation of the Male Subject in *Fight Club*

The hero of *Fight Club*¹² is a young white collar professional, played by Edward Norton, who is stuck in a debilitating office job at a big auto company. Being an insomniac, he literally sleepwalks through his life while serving as a drone for the consumerist ideology propagating a boring but comfortable lifestyle for white middle class men. He doesn't know he's missing something until, when complaining about the pain he suffers from sleep deprivation, his doctor advises him to go and see the support group of testicular cancer patients; that will change his perspective. It does indeed, and from then on, he finds himself on a slippery slope leading to an alternative lifestyle that involves squatting, not going to work and founding a men's only secret society where people beat each other up and perform terrorist activities. All this happens under the influence of a mysterious stranger called Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) who he meets on a plane and who from then on becomes his life coach on the path to self-destruction. There is a woman in the picture as well, Marla Singer (Helena Bohnam Carter), who despite being a social abject herself, with one foot in the grave already, ironically serves as the voice of reason for the hero falling deeper and deeper into the abyss. In the end, of course, the heterosexual couple is safe and sound while Tyler turns out to be a mere voice in Edward Norton's head, a tumor to be cut out (literally) so that things can return to normal.

¹² *Fight Club*, DVD, directed by David Fincher (Region 1: 20th Century Fox, 2000).

The focus of this chapter is what I'll call the main character's journey towards the (Lacanian) phallus, towards a normalized social role that creates a firm identity and a powerful position in the symbolic hierarchy. Accordingly, I'll examine the hero's relation throughout the film to the phallus as a signifier, which for Lacan is situated in the big Other, the social-symbolic order of our lives¹³. I will show how Edward Norton's quest can be interpreted as going through the stages in relation to social normativity, stages which Lacan calls alienation, separation and traversing the fantasy, only to end up with a phallic closure that counteracts his otherwise promising liberatory attempts. As a crucial aspect of this process, I will delineate the hero's relation to queerness and how it plays a role in his normalization.

First of all, what is the phallus for Lacan? From the manifold of the possible different formulations, I will work with Bruce Fink's interpretation: "the phallus is the signifier that rigidly (turgidly?) designates the signification process itself; it designates the relationship or, better, the nonrelationship between the signifier and the signified."¹⁴ Lacan's starting point is that there is always a noncorrespondence between the set of signifiers that add up to a certain language (he calls it A, as Other – *Autre* in French) and the meaning they signify. This gap is unbridgeable and leads to the big Other, our symbolic substance being barred, always lacking in some way, unable to fully realize itself, despite being complete by definition¹⁵. The function of the phallic signifier is precisely to suture this lack, to mobilize the power of the signifier to dominate over the signified, not simply by naming everything that doesn't have a name yet but signifying the very inability of the Other to account for everything there is and turning this lack

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), § 693.

¹⁴ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 133.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

into a positive semblance, a pure simulacrum¹⁶. Fink explains this through the child's encounter with the Other's desire, that is, with the desired, socially valued image of him that comes from his parents. In this image, there is a lack of fullness present through the prohibition of masturbatory enjoyment which leads to the child's first lost battle with the Other: if he wants to be the object of his parent's desire, he has to give up part of himself; he has to see himself as fundamentally lacking something¹⁷. This encounter brings the threat of castration, a negation that forces the subject to exist in an alienated form in the Other, completely lost behind the signifier. His being is annulled; he is nothing but a lack in the Other¹⁸.

I would argue that *Fight Club* starts with its hero being submerged by language in the exact same way. He works as a damage assessor in the dehumanized bureaucratic machinery of a big car company, his task is to travel to sites of car crashes, collect data and deliver it back to the office where the company, using a predefined mathematical formula measuring the possible costs of correcting the faulty parts against the expected costs of lawsuits and insurance claims, decides whether they initiate a recall of the given model or not. For the hero, this is nothing but an automatized process of the signifier giving meaning to what was not yet classified before, and he is nothing but a cog in the machine. Here, the place of the subject as outside of the symbolic manifests itself in the voiceover narration of Edward Norton, looking at his life from a distance, expressing his alienation. His voice is tired and seems to be fully aware of the traps of imaginary identification: "I become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. [...] What kind of dining set defines me as a person?"¹⁹ It's important to note that this narrative recapturing, following the film noir genre traditions about the use of voice-over, is performed as a flashback before the

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* § 693.

¹⁷ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 136.

¹⁸ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 52.

¹⁹ Edward Norton in *Fight Club*

decisive moment of phallic identification at the end of the film. For this reason, the voice functions on a meta-level connecting the different stages of the hero's development. That is to say, the meaning of the whole journey is only created retroactively, after he already went through it. The conscious realization and narration of being alienated is not possible in the Lacanian framework, as we will see it comes only with the symbolic identity²⁰. Alienation, as Fink argues, is only the first step towards subjectivity, a step where the subject is nothing but mere potentiality²¹. This potential is represented in the film by the hero's insomnia, his mode of being as not quite awake yet, a metaphor for his being as lack, which then pushes him to seek out the lack in the Other.

This leads to the next stage in the subject's relation to the Other where he realizes that, like him, it is also lacking something. In the case of the child's development, it is the moment when he discovers that the mOther is lacking as well, not only is she physically "castrated" but also her desire is directed always to somewhere else, at something that cannot be accounted for. At this point, the child attempts to fill the mOther's lack with his own, to make their desire coincide (here is where the Lacanian formula of "man's desire is the Other's desire" comes from)²². This way, the subject who lacked being before can now obtain it, but such a being is only a fleeting and illusory one as it is impossible to be the sole object of the Other's desire. In the movie this momentary unity is reached when Edward Norton's character visits the testicular cancer support group where he meets Bob, an ex-steroid addict body builder who, after his testicles were removed, developed woman's breasts from a misfired hormonal therapy: a properly castrated figure of the (m)Other. With him, our hero finds comfort to the problems he

²⁰ As Kaja Silverman explains, the Lacanian mirror stage as such can emerge only from the other side of the lack, when the subject has already gone through alienation. Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 21.

²¹ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 52.

²² Ibid., 54.

never thought he had, he is now able to open up and cry on Bob's shoulders and imagine that they share the pain of their existence²³. The fact that he is only faking being sick shows clearly how this coincidence of their lack is just a temporary illusion waiting to be shattered.

The short time effects of this "therapy" are nonetheless remarkable. Our man is able to sleep again and function as a fully productive member of society. However, his illusory unity with Bob is soon disrupted with the "introduction of a third term"²⁴ to the film's storyline: there comes Marla, another faker who goes to the support groups for the same reasons as our hero does. For him, this means he is exposed, his act doesn't work anymore; his insomnia comes back again. For Lacan, as Fink explains, this necessary final moment of separation, bringing an end to the mother-child unity is brought about by the paternal metaphor, the Name-of-the-Father, which is to substitute the mother's desire. It doesn't simply prohibit incest but also makes it possible to symbolize and thus keep at bay the (m)Other's desire which is potentially dangerous to the child, threatening to engulf him²⁵. From here on, with the Name-of-the-Father at work (which is none other than the phallic signifier), the subject is able to mediate the Other's desire (that of the social-symbolic order) through language: it is translated for him into social norms, ultimately symbolic values attributed to the phallus²⁶. However, the nature of signification, as we have seen already, doesn't make it possible for the Other's desire to coincide with any specific content. There is always an excess, always something more in it that is not accounted for. For this reason, the introduction of the paternal metaphor splits the subject in two, into ego and unconscious, the latter being the remainder that escapes every specific articulation of the Other's desire; this is what Lacan calls *object a*. Resisting symbolization, it belongs to the domain of the *real*. To

²³ Significantly, this is the point of emergence of the hero's desire for the same sex Other in the film.

²⁴ Ibid., 55.

²⁵ Ibid., 58.

²⁶ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 137.

overcome his inherent split, the subject turns to fantasy to fill out this gap in a way that answers the question how he would like to position himself in regards to the Other's desire. This doesn't mean that this desire of the Other (his desire) will give him pleasure, "there being no guarantee that what is most exciting to the subject is also most pleasurable"²⁷. The Lacanian word for this subjective gain that can involve pleasure or pain as well is *jouissance*. It is through this *jouissance*, organized by fantasy that the subject comes to *be*. In this context, the phallus "comes to represent place of *jouissance*", in a way that turns the former negativity, the prohibited of the imaginary relation, the lack of the subject into a positivity, gives it a positive symbolization²⁸.

Who, then, is the paternal metaphor for Edward Norton in *Fight Club*? Although it is Marla with her disruptive force and unfathomable desire who dislocates his crying therapy, his separation from the big Other is clearly initiated by Tyler Durden, a custom made soap salesman he meets on a flight. He looks like a new wave punk rocker and talks like a self-made anarchist, in short, he is cool and sexy and he doesn't seem to have any worldly concerns. He is, as we get to know later, an alternate persona of the hero himself, who at this point of the film serves as the paternal metaphor in his process of separation. If, as Fink stresses, separation leads to the subject's expulsion from the Other, we can see this depicted in the movie with Tyler's blowing up Edward Norton's apartment, destroying his imaginary relationship to all his beloved IKEA furniture.

²⁷ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 60.

²⁸ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 136-137.

1.2 Anti-capitalism as Queer Politics

And then what? The film's answering this question is ambiguous, to say the least. Our man starts to squat with Tyler in an abandoned house where his ideological reconfiguration to an enraged anarchist begins. Most of the rhetoric is directed against fathers who abandoned their sons, against the empty values of the phallic order that lost its authority: "Our fathers were models for God, if our fathers bailed, what does that tell you about God? God doesn't love you, he hates you! We don't need him!" And the specific content of the patriarchal society criticized is capitalism: "We were raised on television promised to be millionaires. We slowly realize that's not gonna happen and we are pissed!" As an alternative, Tyler suggests self destruction instead of self perfection: "You have to know that one day you're gonna die. Only after you have lost everything are you free to do anything."²⁹ To put his ideas in practice, he organizes fight clubs, secret male communities where the participants are to have bare knuckle fights as a form of therapy, to have their socially conditioned persona literally beaten out of them. As the movement's popularity grows, they start to perform political action against the corporate culture, destroying offices, burning logos vandalizing luxury cars etc. They reappropriate public spaces by breaking the smooth functioning of the normative (capitalist) symbolic that controls them, making visible the glitches in the system.

I'd like to argue that these subversive acts can be interpreted along the lines of queer politics and its undermining of every fixed identity as well as the heteronormative symbolic order that supports them. The billboard slogan "I praise God with my erection" put out by Queer

²⁹ Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*

Nation³⁰ can be read together with one from *Fight Club* that says “Did You Know? You Can Use Old Motor Oil To Fertilize Your Lawn – Environmental Protection Agency”. Both works for the same reason: they enact in public the disavowed fantasmatic underside of the ruling symbolic order. That is, in the US, respectable Christians *already* praise God with their erections, in the sense that there is a jouissance involved in every symbolic (phallic) identification, the real of which is covered over by fantasy. For this reason, a proper critique of ideology should “aim at extracting the kernel of enjoyment, at articulating the way which – beyond the field of meaning but at the same time internal to it – an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a preideological enjoyment structured in fantasy”³¹. In the same way, the motor oil prank can be read as making visible the obscene underside of the seemingly benevolent environmental infomercials, for example their interconnectedness in capitalism with the very polluting practices they openly criticize (car companies giving money for environmental research etc.).

It is along the same lines that Zizek reads one of the film’s key scenes where Edward Norton beats himself up in front of his boss, staging the disavowed fantasy that holds his authority in the office together. He reads this act of masochism as a first step towards the liberation of the subject whereby he, the servant is beating out of himself his libidinal attachment to the master, acting it out publicly thus making the master embarrassed and superfluous³². Leo Bersani comes to a very similar conclusion when he claims that “Phallocentrism is [...] not primarily the denial of power to woman (although it has obviously also lead to that, everywhere and at all times), but above all the denial of the *value* of powerlessness in both men and women. I don’t mean the value of gentleness, or nonaggressiveness, or even of passivity, but rather of a

³⁰ Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, “Queer Nationality” in *The Queen of America Goes To Washington City*, ed. Michèle Aina Barale and Jonathan Goldberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 205.

³¹ Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 125.

³² Slavoj Zizek, “An Ethical Plea for Lies and Masochism” in *Lacan and Contemporary Film* ed. Todd McGowan and Shelia Kunkle (New York: Other, 2004), 183.

more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self.”³³ He then claims that such masochism is an inherent part of male homosexuality and instead of repudiating it one should rather embrace it for the purposes of queer politics. And isn’t this what the assignment Tyler gives to the fight club members to initiate a fight and lose it is about? About the queering of the public space? My point is that the political movement depicted in *Fight Club*, although not being overtly about sexuality, necessarily opens up the way towards a nonheteronormative community, a possibility that, I will show, is then violently repudiated in the film.

That is, there is another competing interpretation of Tyler’s movement that the movie offers and, I claim, finally sides with. According to this, he is not really a revolutionary but an aspiring totalitarian leader who merely talks about the value of self-destruction and sacrifice because he wants to manipulate a whole army of completely obedient soldiers to achieve his own goals. This other persona (of Tyler!) is powerful, hypermasculine, sexually overpotent, and most importantly firmly heterosexual. This side, curiously, starts to appear right after he states: “We are a generation of men raised by women. I wonder if another woman is really the answer we need.”³⁴ It comes about after a phone call from Marla, disturbing the men’s games, ending with Tyler having loud and highly theatrical sex with her while his Edward Norton part, unable to ignore it, sulks in his room and meditates about masculinity. Tyler and Marla start to have a “relationship”, which is particularly difficult since Tyler is really a nonexistent double of the main character, whose lack of knowledge about this can be read as a refusal not just to

³³ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October*, Vol. 43, AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism (Winter, 1987): 217.

³⁴ Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*

acknowledge his desire for Marla but his refusal to put his desire into a heteronormative framework³⁵.

Instead of this latent clash between the hero's homosexual and heterosexual desires, what becomes manifest is radical version of the standard heterosexual Oedipal rivalry between male child and his father over the mother. In this conflict, Tyler starts to signify the figure of the Freudian obscene, noncastrated father of jouissance with the unlimited sexual power, with the real phallus who has in his property all women, and as such, functions as a fantasmatic support of the male phallic symbolic identity where the fullness of jouissance is not possible. As Zizek argues, this figure emerges with the decline of the paternal metaphor³⁶, which in our case would mean that Edward Norton's character is not properly castrated, his separation from the Other never really happened; and, insofar as he is a psychotic with two personalities, that is a fairly obvious reading of the film, considering that psychosis for Lacan means the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father³⁷). We might say that the possibility of homosexual desire is registered in the film as the threat of heterosexual psychosis. Later on, when our hero becomes more and more like Tyler, his heteronormative masculinity manifests itself more overtly. He starts to feel attached to Marla to counter his involvement with the fight club crowd. There is also a crucial scene where he beats a young blonde man almost to death; he just cannot stop hitting him after he is already down, his performance serving as an nice example for what Kristeva calls abjection, here meaning the creation out of the same sex other an abject body through a radical,

³⁵ as Marla offers the proper, heterosexual solution of the hero's Oedipal-complex throughout the film

³⁶ Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 181.

³⁷ Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 79.

violent exclusion while simultaneously being captivated by him, drawn to him³⁸. After the fight he simply says: “I felt like destroying something beautiful.”³⁹

With these two contradictory discourses of Tyler we are introduced to two separate concepts of queerness. On the one hand, we have the masochistic self-disintegration in the service of queer politics, the anti-capitalist terrorist actions of the Fight Club group. What is conspicuously missing from this community is the thematization of sexuality. We have half naked men beating each other up and even more importantly surrendering themselves to other men, letting themselves be beaten up, but all this in the service of an asexual political project. This means that, unlike Queer Nation, the activist group in the film doesn’t aim to reveal the disavowed *sexuality* of a heterosexual culture⁴⁰, rather the unacknowledged *enjoyment* of the corporate-capitalist symbolic normativity, exemplified by the above mentioned self-beating scene enacted by Edward Norton. Subversive as this act is, what is conspicuously missing from it is the acknowledgement of the homosexual desire between employer and employee, master and servant revealed/produced by the masochistic performance. And when such desire does register for the hero, it leads, as we have seen, to the violent psychotic attempt to suppress/foreclose it, under the directions of the hyperphallic and heterosexual Tyler. That is to say, the discourse of anticapitalist resistance has a fundamental ambiguity to it. With all its talk about potentially homoerotic self-destruction, it clearly has an element of idolizing Tyler as the heterosexual “real man”.

³⁸ Julia Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection” in Julia Kristeva: *The Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

³⁹ Edward Norton in *Fight Club*

⁴⁰ Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, *Queer Nationality*, 207.

1.3 The Lacanian Elements of Marketplace Manhood

To explain this contradiction, I will turn to Michael Kimmel's *Masculinity as Homophobia...*, where he discusses the emergence of a new type of masculinity in the 19th century US, made possible by the rise of capitalist market relations. This *Marketplace Manhood*⁴¹ is formed by men adapting to the challenges of marketplace competition, where the pressure to accumulate wealth and power knows no limits. In this environment, the best way to be successful for a man is to show independence, strength and calmness to the outside while constantly remaining restless and agitated on the inside, suspicious of any achievement, staying alert, aware of newer and newer tests of one's manhood.

The first of these aspects lead to an increasing "flight from the feminine"⁴², starting with the repudiation of the son's dependency on the mother which then extends to the devaluation of femininity in the self and in the other as it gets marked as sissyness, a sign of failure to comply to real manhood. Kimmel sees the expulsion of homosexuality following the same logic in this gender performance, as homosexual desire is identified as feminine, a part of the self that has to be cut out. This quest for real manhood, however, can never be successful, there is always a remainder of unmanliness that returns which Kimmel explains through Freud's insight that the solution of the Oedipal crisis can never be final, or to use the Lacanian formula, the subject can never fully separate from the big Other, the repressed pre-oedipal desires are always remembered

⁴¹ Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity" in Michael S. Kimmel: *Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 29.

⁴² Ibid., 31.

for the subject by the unconscious⁴³. This ties to the second aspect of the marketplace masculinity, namely that its attempted performance is continuously challenged and undermined by the scrutinizing gaze of the homosocial community. It is for the eyes of other men that men feel obligated to prove their manhood again and again, it is the fear of this “gender police”⁴⁴ that forces them into aggressive risk taking enterprises and repeated exclusions of the emasculated others (women, racial minorities, homosexuals etc.).

We can read the *men only* action groups in *Fight Club* along the lines of Kimmel’s homosocial community. The scenes when a couple of men fight each other in front of their peers is a spectacle of risk taking; what one risks is the specific ego-image he is coming to the club with, the one that positions him in the corporate capitalist social hierarchy of the 1990s. One can be a parking valet or a business executive; it all doesn’t matter when it comes to proving one’s manhood by letting one’s imaginary identity beaten out of him in the arena of the Fight Club. This is the masculinity that I described earlier as politically queer and asexual, and it is clear that according to Kimmel’s model, it is constructed through the “flight from the feminine” and homophobia. In the film this can be seen in Tyler’s derogatory remarks about Marla (“We don’t need her.”⁴⁵) as well as his violent attempt to expulse Bob, Edward Norton’s pre-Oedipal same sex love object from the homosocial club (first by denying him entry, then by sending him to a mission which leads to his death).

There is, however, a crucial difference between Kimmel’s account of masculinity and the one depicted in *Fight Club*. Although they seem to be presenting the same phenomenon, Kimmel describes it as a capitalist identification whereas in the film we can see an anti-capitalist

⁴³ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 10.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁵ Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*

disidentification. For Kimmel, the emphasis is on the fragility of the real man's image one tries to perform in front of his peers, on the fact that repudiating sissyness can never be complete. With this analysis he aims to explain the phenomenon why individual men feel *real* powerlessness despite (white, heterosexual, middle class) men's domination as a social group⁴⁶. *Fight Club*, on the contrary, emphasizes the opposite aspect of *Marketplace Manhood*: what is performed for the eyes of other men is an act of disidentification, self-shattering, the renunciation of any kind of imaginary identity. And the lesson of the film is precisely that there is always a remainder, or rather surplus of identity present after this performance, as it manifests itself in Tyler's totalitarian imago⁴⁷. Before the final showdown, he in fact disappears as a person and lives on as a legend, the superhuman savior of mankind, an empty screen that everyone can fill out with his own fantasy. According to Žižek, this is the logic keeping the totalitarian leader in power, whose message to his subjects is: "In myself, I'm nothing, I am what I am only as an expression, an embodiment, an executor of your will, my strength is your strength..."⁴⁸ The trick is, as Žižek emphasizes, that the people who the leader refers to exist only through him, only through his representative power. We've thus reached the opposite conclusion that of Kimmel where it was men's individual feeling of powerlessness coupled with their privileges as a collective. Here we actually have a model for a male community where the collective powerlessness of men is supplemented by their individual abundance of power, where the collective assumption of queerness through disidentification with individual ideal-egos supports an even stronger hypermasculine phallic image. Now I will show with the application of Lacan's

⁴⁶ Michael S. Kimmel, *Masculinity as Homophobia*, 40.

⁴⁷ I follow here Žižek's analysis of how the form of renouncing enjoyment through sacrifice in totalitarianism produces a „surplus enjoyment of its own”. - Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 82.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 146.

theory of the gaze how Kimmel's *Marketplace Manhood* can be seen to produce the same conclusion.

We have seen how phallic signification introduces a split into the subject. Now I will show what kind of gaze of the Other corresponds, according to Lacan, to the two modalities of the subject (the real of jouissance, mediated by fantasy and the symbolic identity). In his analysis of Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, Lacan talks about the blindness of the phallic-symbolic gaze, making enjoyment possible⁴⁹. There is a scene in the short story where the queen receives a letter from her lover just at the moment when the king, her husband walks into the room. Not having enough time to hide it, the queen casually puts the letter on the table, successfully avoiding the king's suspicion. The content of the letter standing for jouissance, the crucial point to make is that enjoyment is not simply outside the symbolic order here, even though it's invisible from within. For enjoyment to materialize through a scene of fantasy, the subject needs first the fiction of the ignorant gaze of the big Other. However, as we have seen, the Other is always also lacking something which means there is always a desire of the Other as well, aiming at the real, looking for something outside of itself. From this, the question: "What does the Other want from me?" emerges, and it can never be answered properly. It is this aspect of the Other, this unbearable enigma that leads to the construction of newer and newer fantasies around the remainder of enjoyment that escapes not just the symbolic but the imaginary as well.⁵⁰ The gaze of the Other imagined to support the subject's fantasy scene of enjoyment, unlike the ignorant gaze of the symbolic, is a gaze that sees, a gaze that knows about jouissance. Here, according to Žižek, an important distinction has to be made. If we look at the subject in terms of visibility, its constitutive lack, the surplus that escapes the sight of the symbolic forms a stain on the big

⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan. *Écrits*, § 38.

⁵⁰ Slavoj Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 118.

Other's (and thus the subject's) visual field. However, the stain is not the same as *object a*, the object-cause of desire; *object a* is "rather the gaze in the precise sense of the point of view from which the stain can be perceived in its "true meaning", the point from which, instead of the anamorphic distortion, it would be possible to discern the true contours of what the subject perceives as a formless stain."⁵¹ This means that a fantasy that organizes the subject's enjoyment/mediates the Other's desire always manifests itself in a scene enacted for a *gaze as the object-cause of desire*, of an imagined "subject supposed to know"⁵²; it means that there is the theatrics of enjoyment supplementing the symbolic theatre, that in Poe's story there is an all-seeing gaze of the blackmailer minister behind the ignorant gaze of the king enabling the love letter to materialize⁵³.

Where, then, is the homosocial gaze Kimmel talks about situated in this Lacanian framework? He talks about it as an all seeing gaze, keeping the subject under scrutiny all the time, penetrating through the mask of manliness he tries to put on, uncovering the hidden weaknesses in the core of his subjectivity. This seems very much like the Lacanian gaze that knows, the gaze of the subject supposed to know. What is missing is its necessary counterpart, the ignorant, blind gaze that of the king on Poe's short story, the gaze that doesn't know about jouissance, the gaze associated with the symbolic order. I would say that the performance of *Marketplace Manhood* is addressed to this imagined entity for whose eyes the construction of this masculinity seems complete and successful, who doesn't see the cracks on the symbolic masks, who doesn't see the fear and anxiety of the subject. It is this gaze in front of whom the members of the Fight Club don't talk about the Fight Club, who only sees their daily mask of a

⁵¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 66.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* § 15.

proper bourgeois citizen/employee etc.⁵⁴ The temptation here is to identify this gaze with the feminine other, of the one who is excluded from the games of men and is allowed to see only the facade of masculinity from the outside. However, I think it's more productive to apply another Lacanian concept, that of the subject supposed to believe to describe the role the feminized other plays in this setting. While the gaze of ignorance is the direct addressee of the male performance, the supposed subject of belief serves as the audience who believes that the man believes in the existence of the symbolic gaze⁵⁵. It is worth underlining that the role of women here is not to take the spectacle of male identity uncritically but rather to believe that such an identity is what men are looking for⁵⁶. Thus, paradoxically, their gaze is trapped the moment they express disbelief in the successful construction of masculinity as this framework presupposes their belief in men's belief. This is how the symbolic efficiency can be upheld despite no one actually believing anymore directly⁵⁷.

What in my reading is crucial about *Marketplace Manhood* is that beyond the symbolic spectacle it involves a process of disidentification with the very symbolic identity it openly assumes (as we have seen in the *Fight Club* manifesto of self-destruction). This is what's going on in the homosocial site of apparent surveillance where the knowing gaze of the Other is evoked in the form of the male community. In this environment, true, the subject's inadequacies are revealed and anxiety is produced. What Kimmel doesn't address however, is the possibility of using the revelation of individual weaknesses for bonding purposes, the fact that the homosocial community can function as a site of intimacy for men where they can speak about their "real" self openly precisely because the imagined gaze supporting this sphere is the one that *knows*. The

⁵⁴ "The first rule of the Fight Club is that you don't talk about the Fight Club etc." – Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*

⁵⁵ my reading of Slavoj Žižek, *How To Read Lacan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 29-31.

⁵⁶ this is pretty much the role of Marla in *Fight Club* until the final scene of the film

⁵⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *How To Read Lacan*, 31.

message is that we, men, among ourselves know very well that the ideal of real manhood is impossible⁵⁸ but *they* (the feminized others) don't know that we know and we have to keep it that way.

This insight also helps to clarify the difference between the symbolic and the imaginary aspects of an identity-performance. According to the Lacanian account, symbolic (castrated) identity, as Žižek puts it, is based on the “gap between the symbolic place and the element that fills it”⁵⁹. This means for instance that the symbolic power of a judge will be effective not because of the physical appearance of the actual person playing the role but despite of it. On the other hand, there are certain culturally constructed imaginary conventions supporting the symbolic mask, racial or gender restrictions, dress codes etc. The two aspects always go together, but it makes sense to differentiate between them based on the addressee of the performance. Whereas the symbolic mask is addressed to a nonexistent gaze (of the big Other that doesn't exist), the imaginary one is for concrete individuals interpellated⁶⁰ as the subjects supposed to believe. By contrast, the homosocial gaze could be called the subject supposed *not* to believe, the one in front of whom the male subject performs the disruption of his imaginary persona.

⁵⁸ as Tlyer's „they lied to us” speech clearly reveals - Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*

⁵⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 272.

⁶⁰ to use Althusser's term which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter – Louis Althusser. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in Louis Althusser, *Essays On Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1984)

1.4 Beyond Marketplace Manhood: *Fight Club's* Subversion of the Penis – Phallus Equation

The men only secret societies in *Fight Club* thus fit the description of the sites of disidentification that Žižek talks about when he says “what [symbolic] universality excludes is not primarily the underprivileged Other whose status is reduced, constrained, and so on, but *its own* permanent founding gesture – a set of unwritten, unacknowledged practices which, while publicly disavowed, are nonetheless the ultimate support of the existing power edifice. The public power edifice is haunted also by its own disavowed particular obscene underside, by the particular practices which break its own public rule – in short, by its ‘inherent transgression’”⁶¹. What we have here is a cynical form of disidentification as a male privilege, or to put it differently, a social machinery which creates a collective space for men outside the constraints of symbolic belief, while still remaining partially attached to it (the homosocial gaze of disbelief relies on its opposite, the feminine gaze of supposed belief). What is at stake, however, is more than just gaining some ironic distance towards the symbolic norms regulating men’s gender performances. The externalization and disregard of belief in the symbolic, as the example of *Fight Club* suggests, allows men to create a phallic persona separated from the existing symbolic order, in other words, to resignify the symbolic space⁶². In the case of Tyler, this means first the suspension of the symbolic through his apocalyptic plan *Project Mayhem*, organizing a terrorist attack on the headquarters of major credit card companies to “erase the debt record” and create

⁶¹ Butler, Judith, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Discourses on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 217.

⁶² For the feminine other, this is not an option. To simplify, men can get rid of their identity because it is women who supposedly believe in it for them, but women can only withdraw their own belief in men’s identity, and after this, they will still believe in men’s belief in themselves which ties the feminine form of disidentification to a subordinated place in the symbolic status quo.

social chaos. On the other hand, he himself, with his new imaginary body, in Nietzschean vein, would be the source of the values of the new world. What happens here in the process of symbolic resignification is the temporary suspension of the gap between imaginary and symbolic, that is, to use Kaja Silverman's terms, the equation of penis and phallus, the actual powerful image of Tyler and the phallic symbolic position he occupies. For Silverman, such an equation is an ideological procedure whereby men's symbolic castration becomes suspended: "Our dominant fiction calls upon the male subject to see himself, and the female subject recognize and desire him, only through the mediation of *images of an unimpaired* masculinity. It urges both the male and female subject, that is, to deny all knowledge of male castration by believing in the commensurability of penis and phallus, actual and symbolic father"⁶³.

The crucial thing to observe in *Fight Club* is that such and ideological closure does *not* happen in the end. That is, the film presents Tyler's excessive phallocentrism as an ideological threat, rather than a viable alternative to capitalism. In the dénouement, when Edward Norton's character realizes that he is in fact Tyler Durden and that his evil imaginary twin organized a terrorist attack, he desperately tries to prevent the catastrophe. He seems to think that it is him (with his unruly nightly habits) who is to blame, not the existing capitalist symbolic order. He wants to take responsibility which can be seen as an attempt to cover up the lack in the big Other, to stop the ignorant gaze of the Other from knowing about the disavowed enjoyment of the symbolic – an endeavor which is the exact obverse of his self-beating scene. He tries to give himself up; a futile attempt since the policemen are all part of *Project Mayhem*. Tyler has planned everything all too well, so in the end our man finds himself with Tyler's gun in his mouth on the top of an office building, waiting to see the "apocalypse" to happen.

⁶³Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 42. – my italics

Then in the last minute he finally realizes that the gun is really in his hand, and although he cannot kill Tyler, he can do something more radical. “I want you to really listen to me. My eyes are open.”⁶⁴ – he says and shoots himself in the head. He doesn’t die, though, just gets a nasty wound on his face, a gaping hole bleeding heavily. Tyler, on the other hand, disappears. The temptation here is to read this moment as the main characters identification with his symptom, his “subjectifying the traumatic cause of his or her own advent as subject, coming to be in that place where the Other’s desire—a foreign, alien desire—had been.”⁶⁵ I would argue, however, that if this identification with the symptom happens in the film, it is in that masochistic performance where the hero beats himself up in front of his boss. That leads to the traversing of the fundamental fantasy by enacting it, thus disrupting the symbolic order that relied on its disavowal. What happens in the final scene is something different. To understand this, we have to look at what happens after Edward Norton’s character shoots himself and Tyler is gone. His soldiers rush into the room in panic, bringing Marla with them (Tyler ordered to capture her as a security risk). The hero calms everybody that his wound is not so serious and sends the men away. Marla is worried, touches his face gently. He says: “I’m really OK. Trust me. Everything’s gonna be fine.” – at this moment the skyscrapers surrounding them are starting to blow up, the couple is holding hands and watching the spectacle through the window. And finally Edward Norton/Tyler says: “You met me at a very strange time of my life.”⁶⁶

Given this context, I would call the act of the hero’s shooting himself a form of abjection of the same sex other through phallic identification. This involves him taking *responsibility* for his acts as Tyler Durden, which is far from being the same as identifying with him as the

⁶⁴ Edward Norton in *Fight Club*

⁶⁵ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 62.

⁶⁶ Edward Norton in *Fight Club*

symptom. The first involves his abjection, his expulsion as an excremental object and thus saving the existing symbolic order by securing its boundaries while the second is ultimately the identification with him as the scatological object⁶⁷, an act that disrupts the symbolic framework. In this final scene, the exclusion is performed through the gun, standing for the castrating power of the phallus. The phallic spectacle also involves bringing down the corrupt, excessive social order of mindless consumerism symbolized by the credit card companies, a necessary violence our main character now heroically assumes responsibility for. What is missing from the scene is the ideological denial of the hero's castration through hyperphallic imagery. Quite the opposite, we see Edward Norton in a miserable state: he is in his underwear, his head is bleeding and most importantly he has no control over what is happening around him (everything was set up by Tyler). The paradox is that this phallic spectacle, as opposed to what Silverman calls "classic male subjectivity" in Hollywood cinema⁶⁸, mobilizes images of *impaired masculinity*. Castration is not denied, rather, openly assumed. And yet, the (re)signifying power of the phallus still works, but because of the visible dislocation of imaginary from the symbolic, it appears as a miracle, an act of god (in the scene when the skyscrapers start to blow up). The gaze of the woman is also crucial in this finale: it is for Marla's eyes that this miracle is organized for. She is not the subject supposed to believe anymore, though. The spectacle does not involve the male hero's acting as a believer in order to trap the woman's gaze. As we have seen, belief only has a role in connection to a big Other that doesn't exist. In this final scene, the big Other is made to exist; the couple watching the spectacle *know* it exists. And in a similar paradox, Edward Norton's character obtains the *real* phallus precisely by not trying to have any imaginary supplement.

⁶⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *An Ethical Plea for Lies and Masochism*, 182.

⁶⁸ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 42.

What are the consequences of this purified vision of the symbolic? First of all, the apocalypse doesn't come, the original plan of Tyler towards self-annihilation (of both himself and Marla) is blocked when the good hero defuses the charges under the building the couple will watch the finale together from. The revolutionary impetus is tamed and diverted, in a conservative move it is put in the service of saving the values of the old world (e.g. the bourgeois heterosexual couple who is morally outraged by the greed of big credit card companies). Most importantly the two contradictory types of queer excess (political and sexual) opened up by Tyler suddenly stand for the same thing, for the excess of capitalism (a parallel alluded to many times throughout the film, for instance when the Edward Norton persona talks about Tyler's setting up fight club franchises all over the country). Through the process of phallic signification, the previous negativity of global capitalism gets sublated (*Aufgehoben*), moralized, split in two: the former amoral antagonism where queer politics was opposed to capitalism gets displaced as the conflict between bad (queer) capitalism vs. good (heteronormative) capitalism. In the same way, the antagonism between the two separate versions of queerness (political and sexual) is also sublated in a Hegelian negation of the negation⁶⁹, that is, political queerness and its negation, its homosexual excess turns into a performance of impaired masculinity, in support of the heterosexual and bourgeois status quo. The disappearance of the queer subjects ultimately amounts to their alienation, them being eclipsed by the signifier once again, into a place of social invisibility where they don't pose a threat to the phallic performance of the heterosexual male hero anymore.

Such conclusion also gives an interesting twist to Jasbir K. Puar's concept, queerness as a regulatory idea. In a Foucauldian manner, Puar claims that contemporary queer subjects "are

⁶⁹ Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 99.

normativized through their deviance (as it becomes surveilled, managed, studied), rather than despite of it”⁷⁰. The “lesson” of *Fight Club* is not simply that in the end, transgressions of symbolic norms are bound to get normalized, that marginal subject positions inevitably move to the center, thus betraying their original deviant impetus. It is precisely when deviance becomes the transcendental regulative idea of our social life, impossible to realize by definition, that queerness is neutralized, put in its “proper” place. In the same way as in the end of the film, paradoxically, the assumption of castration at the level of the imaginary functions to actually undo symbolic castration, the queerness assumed by Edward Norton’s character becomes the regulative idea of heterosexuality itself.

⁷⁰ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xii.

Chapter 2 - Cynical Masculinity and the Real Phallus

2.1 A Historical Perspective

In this chapter, I will identify a shift in Hollywood cinematic discourses of masculinity that happened in the mid 90s. My focus will be on the problematic of phallic signification that I have identified in the previous chapter. I will look for two recurring patterns in a chain of films, one visual and one narrative. The visual pattern is concerned with the penis – phallus equation, which, according to Kaja Silverman, is constitutive of classic masculinity in Hollywood cinema⁷¹. The other element is the narrative of “the young man’s quest for the phallus”, the story told in moral terms about the good (right) male hero’s journey to overthrow his evil hyperphallic opponent. I described the psychoanalytic understanding of this tale in my analysis of *Fight Club*⁷². The point I’m developing further in this chapter is that both of these components go through a shift around the mid 90s and their change is interconnected. The two periods I’ll look at range roughly from the late 70s to the mid 90s and from the mid 90s until now. My aim is not to give a statistically representative analysis of the films of these eras, but to look at the changes in movies that are connected through a membership in a certain genre. I’ll first look at differences between the old and the new *Star Wars* trilogy, then at the changes in a couple of

⁷¹ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 42.

⁷² see Chapter 1 of this thesis

film noirs. I'll use the results of these comparisons as the contextual frame for the analysis of Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* and *Slumdog Millionaire*.

The original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, 1980 and 1983)⁷³ tells the story of a small group of rebels fighting against the totalitarian ambitions of an evil galactic Empire. Besides the political conflict there is also a metaphysical one between the good and the dark side of the Force, this mysterious substance of life that a few chosen people, the Jedi knights can manipulate to gain supernatural powers. According to the film's logic, this power can be used for good as well as for evil purposes, producing a strict moralizing opposition ultimately one is to choose in the political conflict. Thus the young rebel pilot and aspiring Jedi knight of the films, Luke Skywalker stands for the good, while his father, the imperial commander Darth Vader for the dark side. What interests me first of all is how this clean cut opposition is upheld throughout the trilogy. In the second film, *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke has a dream about fighting Darth Vader for the first time. After a short duel with lightsabers, he manages to cut Vader's head off. But when he opens up the helmet of the dark lord, he sees his own face under it. At the end of the film the duel really takes place, ending with Luke's defeat. His right arm is cut off, he is holding on to the edge of a precipice with his remaining hand. Vader, standing above, tells him the terrifying truth: he is Luke's father. The young hero cries out in horror, and after Vader's famous "Join me!"⁷⁴ he throws himself into the darkness as an act of repudiation of this outrageous identity. This clear refusal of the dark side is then repeated in *Return of the Jedi*: Luke refuses both Darth Vader's offer to join him against the Emperor and the Emperor's offer to him to step

⁷³From here on the dates in brackets will show the year of the cinematic release of the films. As a reference, I'll use the year of the DVD release. *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*, DVD, directed by George Lucas (Region 1: Fox Video, 2008); *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back*, DVD, directed by Irvin Kershner (Region 1: Fox Video, 2008); *Star Wars: Episode VI - Return of the Jedi* directed by Richard Marquand (Region 1: Fox Video, 2008)

⁷⁴ Darth Vader in *The Empire Strikes Back* as well as in *The Return of the Jedi*

in father's place. By contrast, the new *Star Wars* trilogy (1999, 2002, 2005)⁷⁵ tells the story of how Anakin Skywalker, Luke's father became Darth Vader, that is, how a promising young boy, much like Luke, with all the goodness in his heart, in the end *did* join the dark side. Peculiarly, the story of both trilogies involves a prophecy about Luke and Anakin's destiny of "restoring the balance of the Force"⁷⁶. This way, we have two different versions of the same story told in two different epochs.

The other curious aspect of *Star Wars* that changed in the new trilogy is the role of the feminine gaze in the construction of a phallic masculine image. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, right after the above mentioned defeat of Luke, it is Princess Leia who helps the hero to restore his broken masculinity. As his wounds are covered and he gets a new artificial hand, in the last shot of the film, the couple stands, embracing each other, by a window of a spaceship, looking at the remainders of the rebel fleet. The gaze of the woman here works to comfort the defeated after a lost battle, and articulate her belief that he should regain power later on. In the next episode, Luke, after another course of Jedi training comes to rescue his friends, among them Princess Leia, from the captivity of the notorious criminal and slave holder Jabba the Hutt. The introduction of his newly gained powers and brand new light saber is organized for the woman's gaze as well. The half naked Leia, chained as a slave to Jabba, is watching from Jabba's balcony the execution ceremony set up for Luke and his friends. The young Jedi, in a highly theatrical act of showing off, prepares his move right before his supposed death, capturing the girl's full attention. And finally, when at the end of the film the Empire's secret weapon, the Death Star is destroyed through the collective effort of a few men, we also see Leia watching ecstatically from

⁷⁵ Star Wars: Episode I - *The Phantom Menace*, DVD, directed by George Lucas (Region 1: 20th Century Fox, 2008); Star Wars: Episode II - *Attack of the Clones*, DVD, directed by George Lucas (Region 1: 20th Century Fox, 2008); Star Wars: Episode III - *Revenge of the Sith*, DVD, directed by George Lucas (Region 1: 20th Century Fox, 2008);

⁷⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 101.

a distant and safe place. That, the penis – phallus equation through the feminine gaze Silverman mentions is at work here⁷⁷.

By contrast, we find an entirely different setting at the end of the new trilogy. In the *Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin Skywalker, already turned to the dark side, has a heated quarrel with his pregnant wife Padme who is questioning his integrity. In a fit of rage and anger, Anakin starts to strangle her and she loses her consciousness. This is the moment when his old master, the “good” Jedi Obi-Wan arrives and the two have their final duel. All this in front of the woman, but a woman who is knocked unconscious so her gaze cannot see. I would argue that the paradigmatic example for such a scene in 90s Hollywood cinema can be found at the end of the movie *Se7en* (1995, by *Fight Club* director David Fincher)⁷⁸. The film is about two cops, Mills, a young, unruly man of loud action and Somerset, a calm, intelligent cop about to retire chasing a serial killer who chooses victims committing one of the seven deadly sins. In the finale, the two of them are in the desert with the killer, who gave himself up and offered to show them where the body of his last victim is. The scene soon turns into a nightmare for Mills, as a parcel is delivered to the spot with the chopped-off head of his wife. The killer murdered her out of envy for the nice family life she had with her husband and the baby she was expecting. The plan is now for Mills to commit the last sin, i.e. wrath by killing him out of anger and revenge. And he does. The act of which can be seen, much like in *Fight Club*, both as the expulsion of the demonized same sex other and the identification with him⁷⁹. It is through the act of repudiation of the evil that the evil is preserved but this time the feminine gaze the spectacle is organized for cannot help to redeem the hero: she is already dead.

⁷⁷ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 42.

⁷⁸ *Se7en*, DVD, directed by David Fincher (Region 1: New Line Home Video, 2004)

⁷⁹ the trick of the killer is precisely to set up a trap for Mills where repudiation coincides with identification

I'll now look at two film noirs from the two eras under analysis to support further my argument about the discursive shift. *Something Wild* (1986)⁸⁰ tells the story of how the successful but uneventful life of Charlie, a Long Island yuppie is turned upside down when he is lured by a mysterious seductress, Lulu, into a crazy weekend adventure where he has to pose as her husband in front of her friends and family. The two have their fun until Lulu's real husband, Ray, an ex-convict macho brute arrives to the scene, claiming the woman to himself. Charlie doesn't give it up so easily, though, and the two end up having a showdown at Charlie's house in the suburbs, in front of Lulu, which only one of them survives. Here, the repudiation of the bad guy still works and successfully creates the phallic spectacle in the woman's eyes whereby the penis – phallus equation can be enacted. The logical sequence of this process is also important. First, Charlie is put into the symbolic role of the husband, but his fakeness is exposed not simply by the lack of divorce papers between Lulu and Ray but more importantly by the lack of his imaginary qualities as a real man, compared to Ray. Thus he becomes a proper husband when he is able to supplement his symbolic mandate with the necessary imaginary performance (i.e. by subduing Ray).

We find the discrepancy between man's symbolic role and his imaginary persona in *The Usual Suspects* (1995)⁸¹ as well. A group of criminals is hired to do a series of risky robberies by a mysterious character called Keyser Soze. The members as well as the police are eager to find out who Soze really is, especially after people asking too many questions about him start to disappear. In the end, everyone suspects the most well-established and intelligent member of the group, Keaton, who has a respectable position as a lawyer as well as a wife, and tries to leave his life of crime behind. All this would be the perfect cover for a criminal mastermind. The logic of

⁸⁰ *Something Wild*, DVD, directed by Jonathan Demme (Region 1: MGM Video & DVD, 2007)

⁸¹ *The Usual Suspects*, DVD, directed by Bryan Singer (Region 1: MGM Video & DVD, 2002)

his identification here seems to follow the narrative of Hitchcock's *North By Northwest*⁸², where Roger O. Thornhill, an ordinary advertising executive is mistaken for a spy called Kaplan because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, only to actually end up playing a crucial role in an international spy drama, that is, realize (at the level of the imaginary) the place offered to him in the symbolic⁸³. But unlike *Something Wild*, *The Usual Suspects* doesn't follow this scheme; as it turns out, Keaton is not Keyser Soze at all, he and everyone else, including the police was manipulated by the group's most insignificant member, a limping, stuttering petty criminal nicknamed Verbal, whose only talent seemed to be to talk his way out of trouble by humiliating himself. He is also the narrator of the story, the victim and supposed good guy as opposed to the sturdy and ruthless Keaton. Actually, he has killed Keaton, disposed of his body and came up with a story that framed him as Soze. And the only reason why he was able to do this is his performed image of impaired masculinity that positioned him above suspicion. In a world of constant surveillance where one's phallic image is always under scrutiny and attack, masculine power withdraws to a place where nobody would expect to find it.

This condition is exemplified by the scenes at the beginning of the film where the whole group of criminals is arrested for allegedly participating in an armored car robbery. All of them are interrogated, „leaned on” by the men of the law, and we see how tough they are for not breaking so easily. We see all of them „worked on”, except for Verbal who narrates these events while being questioned by the police himself at a later point of the story. His questioning officer, along with the viewer, accepts as normal this omission of Verbal's own interrogation scene. His body image automatically disqualifies him from belonging to the group of hard-boiled criminals, his masculinity is already damaged, so to speak, he doesn't need to be broken. As we find out

⁸² *North by Northwest*, DVD, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (Region 1: Warner Home Video, 2009)

⁸³ needless to mention that this wouldn't be possible without the support of a female spy

later it was Soze – Verbal himself who tipped the police, accusing himself along with the notorious criminals of the robbery to divert suspicion. In the end, with Verbal’s unlikely identity with Keyser Soze, much like in *Fight Club*, the viewer can witness the spectacle of dislocation between phallus and penis and the subsequent collapsing of the categories good and evil into each other.

A similar moral ambiguity is present in the concluding scenes of Danny Boyle’s *Trainspotting* (1996)⁸⁴ and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008)⁸⁵ as well. Both films tell the story of a social outcast’s emancipation, that of a working class Scottish heroin addict in *Trainspotting* and a young orphan from the Mumbai ghetto in *Slumdog Millionaire*. One can easily have the impression that while the former tells the story of the hero’s emancipation and success through becoming morally corrupt, in the later film, set in an ‘authentic’ Third World environment as opposed to the corrupted West, the main character can “really do it”, that is, become rich, famous and get the girl without corrupting himself. To deconstruct this opposition, I’ll do an intertextual analysis of *Slumdog Millionaire*, looking for scenes that directly refer to ones in *Trainspotting*, thus making their meaning more ambiguous and in doing so I can connect them to the chain of films from the 90s I have mentioned earlier.

⁸⁴ *Trainspotting*, DVD, directed by Danny Boyle (Region 1: Miramax Home Entertainment, 2004)

⁸⁵ *Slumdog Millionaire*, DVD, directed by Danny Boyle (Region 1: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2009)

2.2 Reading *Slumdog Millionaire* with *Trainspotting*

At the beginning of both films, the main characters are positioned as social outcasts. The hero of *Trainspotting*, Renton is a heroin junkie in the poverty stricken neighborhood of Edinburgh. He does have a nice working class family and a group of friends including non-addicts as well. Although he makes an attempt from time to time to give up the drugs, he never succeeds: the pleasure of intravenous heroin injection is too great to exchange it for anything else⁸⁶. His gain of enjoyment, however, is only part of the picture as he is constantly interacting with members of the “normal” society, urging him to change his ways. One of them is his friend Begbie, an ultra violent, alcoholic, homophobic macho man who significantly calls drugs “shite”, drawing the normative line between his proper ways of enjoyment and the pleasures of the junkies apparently despicable. Renton, the narrator, comments sarcastically: “Begbie didn't do drugs, he did people, that's what he got off on”. He is thus quite aware of how the social marking of certain transgressions as “ok” while others as unacceptable, has nothing to do with some inherent nature of those habits⁸⁷.

One way to understand the social significance of creating this boundary is using Kristeva's theory of abjection that explains how the stable limits of one's self are created through the expulsion of a scatological object, the subject's internal excess bearing an inherent ambiguity, simultaneously standing for sameness and otherness, being both intimately connected to the body and totally alienated from it⁸⁸. When the abject is projected to someone else, the

⁸⁶ „Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?” – Renton in *Trainspotting*

⁸⁷ about his mother's valium addiction: „my mother, who is, in her own domestic and socially acceptable way, also a drug addict” - Renton in *Trainspotting*

⁸⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection*, 2.

illusory unity of the self comes to be strengthened. The junkie thus figures as the subject of limitless enjoyment, and for this reason, the only true “subject of consumption”, as Žižek puts it, “the only one who consumes himself utterly, to his very death, in his unbound *jouissance*”⁸⁹. What is threatening about the junkie is that he doesn’t just transgress the symbolic norm of, let’s say, the proper bourgeois family by enacting one of the commonly shared, but publicly disavowed fantasies of disidentification like Begbie beating up random people or Renton’s mother, the housewife, taking valium. For drug addicts don’t respect the equilibrium held up by inherent transgressions, they don’t transgress discretely enough, they don’t respect the blind gaze of the Other whose ignorance has to be upheld for society to function, as I have shown in the previous chapter. They don’t participate in shared practices of legitimate disidentification and for that they can’t belong to the normative community.

But does this mean that they don’t believe in the symbolic norms either? Already the famous first lines of Renton’s opening voiceover complicate this assumption: “Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose sitting on a couch watching spirit-crushing game shows.”⁹⁰ These are the words of someone who observes the spectacle of bourgeois life at a distance and doesn’t see the appeal of it (the narration goes on: “I chose not to choose life. I chose something else.”). I would argue that what he doesn’t see in these examples is precisely the systematic/structured presence of enjoyment, the space they allow for disidentification. For Renton, from the point of view of the junkie who fully enjoys

⁸⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), 44.

⁹⁰ Renton’s voiceover in the opening shots of *Trainspotting*

these choices his mother or Begbie made are empty, they represent the symbolic as a mere façade, hypocrisy, a site of alienation and death.

I'd like to connect Renton's perspective to that of the Lacanian subject supposed to believe. Žižek explains the function of this figure through the child for whom his parents pretend there is a Santa Claus⁹¹. The child here plays the role of the one who really believes. For Žižek, the conclusion is that for the ritual to work, to produce an effective fiction, no one actually has to believe in Santa Claus, it is enough if everyone plays his role. What I would add to this is that it may very well be the case that the child doesn't believe in it either, however, he believes that his parents believe in the sense that the spectacle of the ritual traps his gaze, making him blind to the fact that the big Other (Santa) doesn't exist. On the one hand, we can also pin down this subject position based on the psychoanalytic theory of child development. Lacan calls this stage alienation, which, as Bruce Fink explains, and as I have mentioned previously, comes about through the child's encounter with the Other's desire, with the desired, socially valued image of him that comes from his parents⁹². In this image, there is a lack of fullness present through the prohibition of masturbatory enjoyment in the genitals which leads to the child's first lost battle with the Other: if he wants to be the object of his parent's desire, he has to give up part of himself, he has to see himself as fundamentally lacking something⁹³. This encounter brings the threat of castration, a negation that forces the subject to *exist* in an alienated form in the Other, completely lost behind the signifier. His *being* is annulled; he is nothing but a lack in the Other.

⁹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 29-30.

⁹² Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 52.

⁹³ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 136.

Yet, it's crucial to emphasize that "*The subject's first guise is this very lack*"⁹⁴. A lack who is supposed to believe.

Lacan's theory of subject formation partially overlaps here with that of Althusser, according to whom ideological interpellation produces the subject by making him recognize himself in its call. He emphasizes that there is no subject before interpellation and there is no ideology without its concrete subjects⁹⁵. In Lacan, we could say that interpellation produces alienated subjects but there is no subject before alienation. However, the above mentioned distinction between the subject's (annulled) being and (alienated) existence shows that for Lacan, this is not the end of the story. In Althusserian theory the equivalent of the subject's being as mere lack, negativity would be the position produced by the misrecognition of the call. As Butler argues against Althusser, there is always a possibility for the subject to say that he is not that name they called him by or not entirely that name. She hails that "the Althusserian use of Lacan centers on the function of the imaginary as the permanent possibility of misrecognition, that is, the incommensurability between symbolic demand (the name that is interpellated) and the instability and unpredictability of its appropriation."⁹⁶ But from here, she parts with Lacan and emphasizes that the disidentification made possible by the misrecognition is "crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation"⁹⁷. For the Lacanian, by contrast, "The imaginary thwarts the efficacy of the symbolic law but cannot turn back upon the law, demanding or effecting its reformulation. [...] Hence, psychic resistance presumes the continuation of the law in its anterior, symbolic form and, in that sense, contributes to its status quo. In such a view,

⁹⁴ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 52.

⁹⁵ „The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.” Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 49.

⁹⁶ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 96.

⁹⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 4.

resistance appears doomed to perpetual defeat.”⁹⁸ If we accept, with Kaja Silverman, that for Althusser, all ideology works through a demand for belief⁹⁹, after the scenario I have sketched up earlier about the feminine gaze and *Marketplace Masculinity*, we can see that, from the Lacanian perspective, disbelief in the imaginary can indeed leave the belief in the symbolic intact.

It is easy to discover in Renton’s not choosing life (being) the “choice” of an alienated form of existence. What I’d like to stress is that in this situation, besides playing the social role of the one who fully enjoys (who is nothing but enjoyment), he is also the figure of supposed belief, the one for whom the Other is not lacking, that is, not permeated with enjoyment. And in the same way as a properly split subject abjects the junkie because of his excessive enjoyment, he also externalizes his own belief in the symbolic norm to the same figure. The subject’s supposed enjoyment and supposed belief are thus interconnected. The remainder of interpellation, the subject’s being as pure negation, as enjoyment is the condition of possibility for his acting as the gaze who, indirectly, but believes in the big Other: not in the fullness of the image he is presented with, as Renton’s critique of his friends and family clearly shows, but the possible fullness of *some* image: he believes that they believe.

The hero of *Slumdog Millionaire*, Jamal, is also a social outcast, a slum dweller in a Mumbai shanty town. There is a scene early in the movie that could be the perfect illustration of his alienated abject status. Jamal is sitting in an outdoor toilet when a famous action film star arrives to visit his fans in the slum. Jamal has a picture of him he’d like the actor to sign, but he knows very well that he won’t have a chance to get near him. He has to improvise using his

⁹⁸ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 98.

⁹⁹ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 17.

situation to his advantage, so he jumps into the toilet and covered in feces head to toe (except for the photograph he holds in his hand), he starts to run into the crowd. They can't but let him through and he gets his autograph. This scene is another version of imaginary identification where the subject's existence becomes completely alienated in the image the subject believes the Other wants him to be while his being, his scatological jouissance is entirely negated, abjected in the process (the actor doesn't even seem to notice him, covered over shit or not, he just signs the picture)¹⁰⁰.

Jamal's story from here on, much like Renton's quest to relinquish drugs, is an attempt to leave behind this scatological social identity and be 'normal' like anyone else. Before he is able to do that, however, like Renton, he is also confronted with the fact that others benefit from his subject position as a naïve believer and want to see him fixed as a social abject. When he and his brother Salim are orphaned, a local criminal, the runner of a beggars operation takes them to a compound of abandoned children where they are taught how to panhandle. Fed with dreams of fame and success, little do they know that behind the apparently benevolent mask of their caretaker lies a sinister plan: Jamal's ability to sing would make him a more profitable beggar if he was blind. Luckily, Salim intervenes in the last minute and the boys manage to escape together and have the possibility to "see" for the first time, that is, move beyond their role of the gaze who believes.

In Lacanian terms, this is the point in Jamal's story where his separation from the Other begins as the naïve belief in the Other's completeness is shattered¹⁰¹. He starts to see the Other as

¹⁰⁰ The scene is a reference to Renton's immersion into a public toilet for a couple of opium suppositories in *Trainspotting* as well as the role of the actor is similar to that of Sean Connery, the main figure of imaginary identification for the junkies.

¹⁰¹ Crucially, the female friend and love object of the boys, Latika cannot follow them on this path. Their separation from the Other is also their „flight from the feminine”.

lacking as well, and he does what the child does when he discovers that his mOther's desire is directed always to somewhere else, at something that cannot be accounted for, what she cannot have. He makes an attempt to fill the Other's lack with his own, to make their desire coincide¹⁰², that is, he offers his scatological being that doesn't have a place in the symbolic as an object of the Other's desire. Appropriately, Jamal and Salim become con men, using their oriental identity as bait to get money out of Western tourists. For instance, Jamal steals the tires from the car of an American couple but he is caught by a policeman who starts to beat him up. When the Americans arrive at the scene, he overplays his role as a victim, even saying something like "you wanted to see the real India, here you have it", and the tourists, in a way satisfied with the spectacle, hand him a 100 Dollar bill. In the same vein, he pretends to be a tour guide at the Taj Mahal, offering its real story that is not in the guidebook to foreign visitors, ultimately coming up with as much horrifying and orientalizing fabrications as possible. The fact that he is not the supposed subject of belief anymore shows clearly in the scene where he meets one of his old friend from the beggar's compound, the boy is blinded now and basically plays the role Jamal would have if he had stayed. By giving him the 100 Dollar bill, Jamal repeats the gesture of externalization and abjection he himself went through, in a way paying the scatological object to stay in its place and also making the blind boy the witness and thus believer of his shaping symbolic identity.

In *Trainspotting* there is a similar scene of exchange after Renton gives up his junk habits and starts a respectable life as a realtor (which the Taj Mahal episode of *Slumdog Millionaire* refers to). He visits his old friend Tommy, whose life started to get worse just about when Renton's started to get better. He becomes a drug addict at the same time when Renton stops

¹⁰² Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 54.

shooting heroin. After that, Tommy's life quickly deteriorated, his girlfriend left him and he found out he has HIV. Now he lives alone in a dark apartment which he never leaves. Quite obviously he is what Renton could have been without his lucky break. He asks for money to "pay the rent" and Renton gives it to him with a telling smile on his face; he is fully aware that he is supplying his friend with a daily dose of heroin.

Separation from the big Other, however, doesn't automatically mean the subject's liberation from the socially subordinated position he occupied before. After all his youthful adventures, Jamal ends up in a place where he merely pretended to be: he becomes a servant, a call center assistant whose role is to bring tea to the senior associates. For them, he remains the naïve figure of the subject supposed to believe who knows all the silly details about celebrity gossip, about a world he is cut from forever. This boring office life is the necessary other side to his adventures in the brotherhood, the same way as the daily jobs of the Fight Club members support their nightly disidentification practices. The case of Renton is even more telling. Although he manages to make some money in his temporarily independent life as a realtor¹⁰³, one day his friends, living as petty criminals by now, show up at his door and move in with him. Soon he has to realize that they have a plan to use him and his money to buy and sell a substantial amount of drugs, an opportunity they cannot miss and also cannot take without his help. Before he knows it, he has exchanged back his new life for a bag of heroin which he also has to try before the deal - a slippery slope for a former addict.

Renton doesn't let himself be dragged back into drugs this time, however. He is ready to go through the final moment of separation from the Other, from his group of reprobate friends, especially Begbie who treats him like a servant, as an idiot whose function is to strengthen his

¹⁰³ also leaving his teenage girlfriend behind

phallic identity (this is the obvious reading of the recurring motive of Begbie demanding Renton to buy/give him cigarettes). Thus when the opportunity offers itself, he takes all the money from the drug deal and leaves his friends and with them his former life behind forever. In the Lacanian context, this is the moment of castration and phallic identification, the moment when the subject is able to mediate the Other's desire through language: it is translated for him into social norms, ultimately symbolic values attributed to the phallus¹⁰⁴. The phallus as I have argued earlier, "comes to represent place of jouissance", in a way that turns the former negativity, the prohibited of the imaginary relation, the lack of the subject into a positivity, gives it a positive symbolization¹⁰⁵. This means that the signified of the bag of money changes: instead of standing for the scatological enjoyment of the subject excluded from the normative symbolic order, the money, now as a phallic signifier, refers to this very act of betrayal, this necessary founding crime of Renton's symbolic identity. What is missing here is the phallic image supporting this act of signification. Renton's betrayal is just as unexpected for his buddies as Verbal's turning out to be Keyser Soze in *The Usual Suspects* for just about everyone. After all, he is supposed to be the idiot used by his friends because he cannot say no to them. They moved in to his apartment, sold his TV, used all his money for the drug buy and even made him test the heroin because, after all, he was supposed to be the junkie. His bald, meager, androgynous body image doesn't help him becoming an authority figure either. And yet, he is the one who gets the money instead of Begbie, the most likely candidate. The scene where Renton carefully and without flinching unfolds the arms of the sleeping Begbie and steals the bag of money he was holding onto can be interpreted as the moment when the phallus gets detached from the penis.

¹⁰⁴ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 135.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

This is the point where Renton is able to tell his life story to us, where his past crimes and transgressions can have positive representations. He repeats his monologue about the values of bourgeois society but with a different valence this time: “Now I’m cleaning up and I’m moving on, going straight and choosing life. I’m looking forward to it already. I’m going to be just like you. The job, the family, the fucking big television. The washing machine, the car, the compact disc, an electrical tin opener, good health, low cholesterol, dental insurance, mortgage, starter home, leisure wear, luggage, three-piece suit, DIY, game shows, junk food, children, walks in the park, 9:00 to 5:00, good at golf, washing the car, choice of sweaters, family Christmas, indexed pension, tax exemption, clearing gutters, getting by, looking ahead, the day you die.” It is obvious that while being formally enthusiastic, he keeps an ironic distance towards the newly assumed values of his life. Such a disidentification, as I have shown before, always supports symbolic identification. Yet, Renton’s case is quite different from the one I described in relation to Kimmel’s *Marketplace Masculinity*. His performance of masculinity doesn’t demand of the audience belief in the dominant fiction (bourgeois values) he performs. He doesn’t pretend to be an imaginary stand-in for the symbolic values he cites. This means that the ideological equation of penis – phallus Silverman talks about doesn’t work here either. His symbolic identification can be described as cynical, involving an “enlightened false consciousness” as Peter Sloterdijk puts it. Cynics “know what they are doing, but they do it because, in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling them that it has to be so.”¹⁰⁶

What happens to the interpellated supposed believer of this performance if the performer’s disbelief is already included into the ideology performed? It seems that he becomes

¹⁰⁶ Peter Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), 5.

superfluous in his old function as a believer and instead he ends up becoming a witness to a miracle, the miracle of phallic efficiency that works despite the male hero's effort to keep his distance from it. Like the astonished Marla in the end of *Fight Club*, the viewer of *Trainspotting*, interpellated by the hero's voiceover narration finds himself unable to believe what goes on in front of his eyes, how the bourgeois propaganda sarcastically cited by Renton in the beginning of the film suddenly becomes effective, even if the tone of his second citation is exactly the same as that of the first one.

As for Jamal's final moment of separation, he also gets a chance when he is accepted as a contestant for the popular game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*. The game then works as an open psychotherapy for him as the answers to the questions magically coincide with traumatic memories of his past, thus going through them literally provides the phallic signification of their former negativity, the exchange of the unbounded scatological jouissance for the money he gets for the right answers. The final challenge involves his unfulfilled relationship with Latika, the girl who has been in his life since childhood but from whom he, due to unfortunate circumstances, got separated from. The last question of the game asks for the name of the third musketeer, a character Latika played with Jamal and his brother Salim when they were kids, without any of them knowing the actual name though. Thus she cannot help Jamal when he calls her using the "phoning a friend" lifeline. It is him who has to name her, the final symptom to cure, the last obstacle standing between him and his identity. And despite not knowing the answer, he does it, in line with the psychoanalytic rules of phallic signification being ultimately arbitrary: "A." - he says. "Because? – Just, because." And, of course, Latika is more than happy to serve as an object to be named in Jamal's identification process, so much so that she allows

the following exchange between the two of them to happen: Jamal: “This is our destiny!” – Latika: “Kiss me!”

Reading this final scene against the final scenes in *Se7en*, *Fight Club* and *Revenge of the Sith*, we can spot the two shifting elements of the discourse of masculinity. The trial of Jamal’s manhood in the game show involves his imaginary identification as an emasculate figure; he doesn’t have any culturally acceptable persona (like a doctor or a lawyer, as the host tells him) that could qualify him to win the game. He remains a *chai wallah*, a boy who server tea all along, he never obtains a phallic image¹⁰⁷. Strictly correlative to this, as we have seen in the movies cited above, the role of the woman’s gaze becomes superfluous. Latika is unable to assist him in his act of resignification. His subversion of the symbolic hierarchy when the lowest place he was holding suddenly becomes the highest is just a miracle for her as for everyone else: she is watching the TV broadcast ecstatically with millions of viewers. At the end Jamal is transubstantiated into a god-like figure, leading the Bollywood-style group dance routine that closes the film. Emphasizing his transcendental masculinity even more, we get an answer to the movie’s opening question about how it is possible for someone like Jamal to win the game: A: he cheated, B: he’s lucky, C: he’s a genius, *D: it is written*.

2.3 The Real Phallus and Cynicism

To clarify further how this conclusion about Jamal’s transformation changes the role of the feminine gaze in the construction of masculinity, let’s go back to the ending of the last *Star Wars* movie. Before Anakin turns against his wife, they have the following exchange: Anakin

¹⁰⁷ The identification through a phallic ego-ideal is represented by Jamal’s brother Salim, working as a gunfighter for the local gangster boss in the slum. He is in love with the same girl as Jamal and his objective is the same as his: get the girl and get out of the ghetto. In the end, he fails (dies) and Jamal wins.

after telling her about his newly gained powers: “Together we can rule the galaxy!” – Padme, after expressing her moral dismay: “You’re going down a path I can’t follow!” This is when Anakin starts to strangle her and she falls down unconscious. My reading based on the conclusions of the other films would be that she is unable to function as the gaze of the believer for his phallic image. The masculinity he is about to create doesn’t need her to see him(/pretend to see him) as complete, as unimpaired. His following duel with Obi-Wan can be seen as a variation of the final showdown in *Fight Club*. On the surface, we have the moralized binary of the good, balanced, reasonable Obi Van / Tyler 1 (Edward Norton) vs. the evil, power hungry, uncontrollable Anakin / Tyler 2 (Brad Pitt). In both cases, the dark excess is cut out in the in a violent bodily act, Tyler 1 shoots part of himself while Obi-Wan an cuts his disciple’s hands off and leaves him to burn in a lava pit while crying “You were my brother, Anakin I loved you!”. Then he rushes to save Padme who is just about to give birth; she is having twins, but she is about to die in childbirth for medically unexplainable reasons. “She lost her will to live.” - says the doctor. In her last words, she asks about her husband and states without a doubt that “There is still good in him.”¹⁰⁸ The most peculiar aspect of this childbirth scene is the way it is cross-cut with the images of Darth Vader’s “resurrection”; he is saved by his Sith Master just when he is about to die and is rebuild by machines in a painful process. We see his mutilated, helpless body regaining its form through the black armor and mask Darth Vader is known for from the old trilogy. We see the male hero elevated into the symbolic place of immortality and unlimited power, without the help of the woman’s gaze, and despite the contrast between his pathetic bodily image and the dark mask of power¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁸ *Star Wars: Episode III*.

¹⁰⁹ Padme’s last words thus can be interpreted as her trembling acknowledgement of his husband’s apotheosis as well as of her own superfluousness, the death of her former agency as a subject of disbelief.

This new logic of phallic masculinity, instead of trying to fill in the (universal) place of symbolic authority with a (particular) phallic image as Silverman argued, uses the distorted, broken, impaired image of the male body directly as the phallic signifier. The function of the symbolic phallus, as we have seen, was to give positive representation to what cannot be represented in language, to cover over “the place of jouissance”¹¹⁰, to elevate the lack, the negativity of the imaginary identity into a positive semblance. This *real* phallus, on the contrary, only seems to work if the place of jouissance in the imaginary is *not* covered over, if the wounds of the male body are opened up. If the symbolic signification leads to an illusion of totality, the real signification ends up creating a paradox, a living contradiction of a male body that should die but is instead immortalized as a source of unlimited male phallic power. The new body of Darth Vader shows this paradox clearly with his mask shaped like a skull and his artificially enhanced voice and breathing belonging to a dying man who cannot die¹¹¹.

But how does Darth Vader end up as a cynic? As I have argued above, having the real phallus doesn't seem to make one cynical. It rather seems to be a phenomenon Nietzsche described with the help of the figure of the ascetic priest, the Christian figure who gives positive value to one's suffering and lacking life force with the help of morality: “All this is paradoxical to the highest degree. Here we stand in front of a dichotomy which essentially wants a dichotomy, which enjoys itself in this suffering and always gets even more self-aware and more triumphant in proportion to the decrease in its own.”¹¹² The priest devalues life and values it in its devalued form. As a consequence, however, “The ascetic priest is the incarnation of the desire for

¹¹⁰ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 126.

¹¹¹ According to Žižek, „it is a spectral voice, not the organic voice of the body: not a sound which is part of everyday external reality, but the direct expression of the Real of „psychic reality” – Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 103.

¹¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. transl. by Ian Johnston (Arlington, VA: Richter Resources Publications, 2009), III/11.

another state of being, an existence somewhere else”¹¹³. He invents the afterlife, a transcendental state of being as a compensation for the *suffering* in this life. The lower one gets here the higher his place there will be. The cynic, on the other hand, as we have seen, doesn’t quite believe in the afterlife. For him, rather, it is this life, the normal course of things that becomes transcendental, what appears as a miracle, the miracle of being alive at all¹¹⁴, despite one’s miserable (guilty, shameful) imaginary body and the nonexistence of another life that would make up for it. Under these circumstances, one has to be a realist and give in to the “power of things”¹¹⁵.

And this is precisely what the heroes of all the movies cited do in the end. Anakin accepts that his excessive attachment to his wife was not nearly as important as operating the machinery of the New Empire. Edward Norton – Tyler renounces the queer revolutionary project of his evil alterego in favour of being alive and coupled with his heterosexual girlfriend, a conclusion presented as a miracle in itself. In *Se7en*, detective Mills pulls the trigger, fulfilling the cynical plan of the serial killer to show how humans are incapable of acting outside of predetermined courses. But it is the other cop, Somerset who summarizes the cynical wisdom of the film: “Earnest Hemmingway once wrote: ‘The world is a fine place and worth fighting for’ – I agree with the second part”. At least we’re alive. In *The Usual Suspects*, a film about the collective effort to bring down the criminal mastermind, Keyser Soze who controls the life of all the characters, in the end, Soze - Verbal is the only survivor; with his cynical transformation ultimately nothing changes, things go on as usual. In *Trainspotting*, Renton finally comes to terms with the system of beliefs he doesn’t believe in and learns to be successful in life through cynicism. And finally, Jamal in *Slumdog Millionaire* sells himself to the capitalist ideology of the game show: his acceptance of the winner’s prize (the money and the girl) is at the same time the repudiation of his brother’s way of life, the organization of armed “resistance” in the ghetto. Thus, to conclude with Sloterdijk’s words: “Cynicism, as *enlightened false consciousness*, has become a hard-boiled,

¹¹³ Ibid., III/13.

¹¹⁴ this is what Sloterdijk finds in the Weimar-motto „Hey, We’re Alive!” – Peter Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, 386.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

shadowy cleverness that has split courage off from itself, holds anything positive to be fraud, and is intent only on somehow getting through life. [...] cynicism guarantees the expanded reproduction of the past on the newest level of what is currently the worst¹¹⁶.”

¹¹⁶ Peter Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, 546.

Chapter 3 - Can Cynicism Be Subversive?

3.1 The Ambiguity of the Colonial Discourse in *Slumdog Millionaire*

My question in this chapter will be: after all this criticism of the cynic's discourse, is it possible for cynicism to be subversive? What can it produce? Is it possible that to be cynical is actually a good thing? Here I will give an alternative reading to one of the cynical films I have talked about in the previous chapter, looking for the progressive elements in the hero's performance of masculinity. I'll use Homi K. Bhabha's idea about the ambiguity of the colonial discourse, focusing on two of his key concepts: the stereotype and mimicry. I'll apply these concepts to Danny Boyle's film *Slumdog Millionaire* which, as we have seen, deals with the discourse of a social outcast in today's postcolonial India. Although we are not talking about a colonial situation per se, I'll argue that the director nonetheless uses the colonial framework as a reference for two reasons. First, for Indians in the film, the English colonial power is very much present in the form of the language and culture of Britain (and Western Europe and the US), that can be seen in the type of questions asked in the game show *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* the main character is contesting in. Furthermore, there is a new form of colonial power connected to the cultural discourses and that is global capitalism, we have skyscrapers built in the place of slums, call centers providing service to affluent Western countries and game shows offering huge cash prizes for those who prove to be knowledgeable in new-colonial trivia. Indeed, the story of *Slumdog Millionaire* can be summarized as that of a teenage boy, Jamal, from the Mumbai ghetto becoming rich and famous by telling his life story on public television

in a way that conforms to the demands of the colonizers - his past experiences provide answers to the questions in *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*. This suggests that the voice he raises, the story he tells is not really his own, it is what the big Other¹¹⁷, the social symbolic order wants him to say. As if he publicly acknowledged his subordination, his dependence on those racially and culturally superior, whom these dominant discourses originate from. And yet, the film ends with Jamal's victory over the smug game show host, who after identifying him as the stereotype of the *chai wallah* (someone who makes and serves tea for people), out of a sheer sense of social propriety, does everything to prevent the boy from winning. I'll argue that Bhabha's notion that the colonial stereotype is always ambivalent, never completely fixed helps to understand how Jamal can win in the movie, in the same way as the concept of mimicry explains his subversive strategy towards the dominant symbolic order.

What, then, is the colonial discourse for Bhabha? "It is an apparatus that turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences. Its predominant strategic function is the creation of a space for 'subject peoples' through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited."¹¹⁸ The aim of colonial power is to construct and fix the colonized in a racially and culturally lower end of the hierarchy dominated by the Western white man. For this, however, it has to fulfill two contradictory objectives. First of all, there is a need to create the colonized other forever separated from the colonizers whose sense of superiority to be maintained, they can't mix with the subordinate who have to remain distant, mysterious others. At the same time, the governmentality of colonial power relies on the constant surveillance of the colonial subjects, on their total visibility and knowability. Thus "it employs a system of representation, a regime of

¹¹⁷ I'll use the Lacanian terminology in line with Bhabha's own appropriation of it.

¹¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 70.

truth that is similar to realism”¹¹⁹. In order to control its subjects, colonial power has to recognize them as different, has to create stable categories, stereotypes through which they can be identified. However, this recognition of difference is simultaneously its disavowal, as the attempt to fix the Oriental other into essential, controllable images can never be complete, there is always a remainder of otherness escaping classification that would then direct the desire of power to repeat its identifying act. As Edward Said already formulated it, the ambivalence, the internal division of the Oriental discourse means that besides being a “static system of ‘synchronic essentialism’”, the site of knowledge production aimed to create stability, there is always another (‘diachronic’) side to it where the unidentified elements return as dreams and fantasies, making classifications unstable¹²⁰.

Bhabha uses the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the imaginary to explain how the colonizer’s attempt to fix the identity of the colonized always fails; it remains a constant source of anxiety. As I have shown in the previous chapters, according to Lacan, in the child’s development, process of imaginary identification comes about in what he calls the mirror phase, where through a dialectical exchange with the Other (usually the mother-figure), a discrete image of the self is created, based on what the child imagines his parents, society values of him. As Bruce Fink explains, this procedure is the outcome of the child’s encounter with the desire of the Other (with the enigmatic question “What does the Other want from me?”), an outcome that leads to his alienation into an image, an ideal ego that is placed outside of himself. Crucial here is that in order to attain this imaginary fullness, part of himself, the masturbatory enjoyment

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 71.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

associated with the genital region, has to be negated, has to figure as an unrepresentable negativity, a lack denied, or to use Bhabha's term, disavowed by the Other¹²¹.

When we look at this relation from the colonizer's point of view, his desire to fix the colonial subject into a stereotype can be read as forcing his imaginary identification, alienation. However, as Bhabha stresses, such identification always fails, there is always a lack, the return of the unrepresented that makes it unstable¹²². He also connects the colonizer's situation to that of the fetishist, the stereotype functioning as a fetish object for the colonizer. "The fetish or stereotype gives an access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it."¹²³ In psychoanalysis, fetishism is the disavowal of sexual difference, meaning that it is a form of mediation in a place where no mediation is possible, that it covers up the fundamental inconsistency of our symbolic order as such, the fact that there is no metalanguage, "There is no Other of the Other."¹²⁴ The price to be paid for this escape from the real, for the creation of the fetish object is the constant oscillation in the imaginary between "pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defence, knowledge/disavowal, presence/absence", leading to two contradictory but simultaneous relations of the colonizer to the colonized, that of narcissism and aggression¹²⁵. Linguistically, these two aspects correspond to the metaphoric and the metonymic function of the fetish/stereotype, that is, the way it substitutes and fixes the image of the colonial subject but at the same time it opens up a metonymic sliding of its meaning by signifying its lack, its inherent absence¹²⁶. If we identify, as Bhabha does, the strategy of the colonial discourse with the mobilization of the scopic drive, the gaze that seeks the

¹²¹ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 136.

¹²² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 76.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, § 311.

¹²⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 77.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

knowledge about the other, the ambiguity of this discourse can be seen in the way the colonized returns the gaze and produces anxiety in the colonizer¹²⁷.

In *Slumdog Millionaire*, the procedure of imaginary identification of the colonial subject happens in the game show setting, the hero's contest for the ultimate prize which is none other than his liberation from his shackles, his subverting the role of the *chai wallah* that was imposed on him. The main character, Jamal, starts his life as a social outcast, slum dweller in Mumbai. After a series of adventures he ends up getting a chance to have another life, one that would get him a recognized place in society: he is accepted as a contestant in the TV show *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*. Playing the game, he soon realizes that he knows all the answers because they correspond to different traumatic experiences of his past, the only thing he has to do is identify them, put them into a narrative. The latter is necessary because we see the scenes from his game cross cut with the scenes of his interrogation by the police who suspect him of cheating. The only way he can clear himself is by telling the story behind each answer to the policemen. I will focus on the game show setting as that is the one involving Jamal's imaginary identification. The host of the show is the voice of the colonial discourse, the bearer of the scopic drive who in a way lures Jamal into identifying with the stereotypes included in the answers to his questions. His questioning stands for the desire of the Other and Jamal's answers can be seen as alienated images of himself, his life, offered as a fetish object to feed the Other's hunger for knowledge.

To illustrate this more precisely, here is the flashback scene once again for one of the first questions addressed to the hero about the name of a famous action film star. In his recollection, Jamal, as the young boy is sitting in an outdoor toilet when the film star arrives to visit his fans in the slum. Jamal has a picture of him he'd like the actor to sign, but he knows very well that he won't have a chance to get near him. He has to improvise using his situation to his advantage, so he jumps

¹²⁷ In this gaze of the colonizer we can find both aspects of the Lacanian gaze of the big Other, the seeking of newer and newer knowledge and ignorance. Also, the returning of the colonizer's gaze is a variation on the theme of disidentification of the colonized; Bhabha's concept of ambivalence is crucial here in showing how it is always the very process of imaginary identification that is at the same time a form of disidentification.

into the toilet and covered in feces head to toe (except for the photograph he holds in his hand), he starts to run into the crowd. They can't but let him through and he gets his autograph. A version of imaginary identification where the subject's being becomes completely alienated in the image he believes the Other wants him to be while his existence, his scatological jouissance is entirely negated, abjected in the process. It is literally this signed image that he uses to answer the question on the show, that satisfies the desire of the host, who, like after every one of his correct answers, suggests Jamal to quit, be glad that he has gotten so far, meaning to remain in the fixed image he is identified with. But there is always an excess of his life, something that is not translated yet, something absent from the scene of visibility which pushes him to move on to the next question. And, of course, this move coincides with the desire of the host as well who cannot but taunt him, mock him about not being good enough, which is also an expression of curiosity about what the boy is really capable of, what else he has got in him. Quite a lot, it seems as the story goes on, so much so that he is able to answer the final question as well which ultimately leads to the elimination of the difference between the host, the bearer of Western knowledge, the Lacanian figure of the subject supposed to know¹²⁸ and the colonial stereotype as the object of knowledge.

To elucidate this development more, I'll briefly look at Bhabha's concept of the mimicry. "Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference"¹²⁹. Mimicry involves another aspect of the imaginary

¹²⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. transl. by Alan Sheridan. (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977), 232.

¹²⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86.

relation between colonial power and its subject, not so much the attempt to fix the colonized into stereotypes of difference but to make him almost, but not quite like the colonizers as part of their civilizing mission. What's at stake here is the identity of the colonizers, their presence, their originality, that is reinforced by the supposedly mere imitation, mimicry of the colonized who will thus be always separated by a minimal difference from their dominators¹³⁰. They can never be quite that. Mimicry can only count as partial presence; its desire for authenticity can never be satisfied. But this is precisely the reason it can be subversive of colonial authority: "Its threat [...] comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity effects' in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself'"¹³¹. It produces anxiety in the colonizer because it constructs an identity without any claim to originality and presence. It opens up the possibility of seeing colonial power as ultimately arbitrary and constructed. Or to turn back to the movie, Jamal's winning the game shows that he is no less a white Western subject than white people from the West themselves¹³², that there is no essential difference between colonizer and colonized.

3.2 Mimicry, Drag and Cynicism

We reach a similar conclusion if we put Jamal's enactment of colonial mimicry into Judith Butler's theoretical framework of subversive gender performances in her *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*. The role of the colonial discourse is played here by heteronormativity that sets up

¹³⁰ Ibid., 88.

¹³¹ Ibid., 90.

¹³² This point that at the end of the film Jamal is created as a white subject I owe to Elizabeth Shramko who made it in a private conversation.

heterosexuality as the original sexual identity opposed to homosexuality as a mere copy, imitation¹³³. Much like its colonial counterpart, the discourse of heteronormativity has a fundamental ambiguity to it: there is no essential quality that would make it really original, its originality is the retroactive effect of its repeated performance, of imitating the nonexistent „ideal of a heterosexual identity”¹³⁴. We can also read Bhabha’s concept of the stereotype along the lines of homosexual coming out. The dialectics of the colonial subject in part fixed into a stereotype and in part escaping fixing, always producing a remainder that cannot be identified resembles the problematic of the homosexual coming out of the closet that, according to Butler, always also „produces a new and different „closet””¹³⁵. And, of course, the enactment of colonial mimicry can be coupled with Butler’s drag performance, the subversive potential of which lies in the fact that „drag enacts the very structure of impersonation by which *any gender* is assumed”¹³⁶, just like the mimicry of the colonized exposes the „almost the same, but not quite” quality of *any* identity, including the colonizers.

So is Jamal a subversive drag performer or a cynic who ultimately supports the existing symbolic gender norms? My claim is that although both Bhabha’s and Butler’s theory opens up ways to resist the colonial discourse/heteronormativity, they don’t deal with the cynical challenge to their subversive potential. What they don’t see is a certain ambiguity within what they identify as subversive performance. Sure, drag and mimicry can reveal the fakeness of a supposed original, the cracks in the supposedly complete image. But what if, as I have shown in my Lacanian reading of Kimmel’s *Marketplace Manhood*, performers of the dominant discourses already mobilize this subversion for their own purposes, they themselves disidentify and this disidentification is the guarantee of holding on to their privileges? Does it mean, then, that drag and mimicry exposes something everybody already knows? I have shown how in the

¹³³ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories/Gay Theories*. edited by Diana Fuss, (London: Routledge, 1991), 22.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹³⁶ Butler paraphrasing Esther Newton, Ibid., 21.

Lacanian economy of gazes, the whole process of symbolic and imaginary identification/disidentification relies on a fictive gaze of ignorance who, indeed, does *not* know and doesn't supposed to know what drag and mimicry can expose: the fact that he is impotent, as the king in Poe's story, that as big Other, he doesn't exist, he is dead. Zizek explains this paradox of the modern symbolic order with Lacan's statement: "God is dead but he doesn't know it."¹³⁷

This economy leads to the externalization of belief as I have explained earlier: as long as someone supposedly believes in the reality of the symbolic order, if individually everyone knows the truth, it's efficiency is undisturbed, those embedded in dominant discourses can hold onto their privileges. What drag and mimicry does is the exposure of the lack of belief on the part of each of the participants. Or to put it differently, unlike disidentification and misrecognition, drag and mimicry doesn't rely on the belief of those in power in their own discourse. They exploit the fact that since symbolic efficiency is always produced artificially, without actual belief, it can exist parallel to a discourse that immediately undermines it. But taking out the reference to symbolic belief from this system, the only thing we eliminate is the gaze of ignorance, a key component of the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father as the signifier of lack. With this move, the big Other ceases to be a symbolic order: it becomes *real*¹³⁸, and with it belief does as well, meaning that the space for disbelief disappears. Thus Judith Butler's utopian vision of gender performances that reveal the performatively fabricated nature of all gender identities¹³⁹ come dangerously close to a world of cynical gender performances of compulsory heterosexuality, immune to the spectator's disbelief. The cynical performance doesn't demand anything of its audience except for their presence, for them to be witnesses to a miracle, to a visual paradox. In

¹³⁷ Slavoj Zizek, *How To Read Lacan*, 91.

¹³⁸ as a variation of Lacan's thesis that "what was foreclosed from the Symbolic returns in the Real" Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 72.

¹³⁹ Judith Butler, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*, 29.

the case of Jamal, this means, among other things, his construction as a white man despite his skin color being brown. This way, the cynical performance of whiteness can become the common denominator between subjects in a multicultural world while the system of values connected to whiteness (colonialism, bourgeoisie, heteronormativity etc.) can remain effective.

Drag and mimicry, however, can have also the obverse effect to the one Butler and Bhabha seems to emphasize. Besides revealing the constructedness of the supposedly original identities, they are capable of creating the opposite effect, that of the originality of the construction, of the copy itself. According to Žižek, this is what happened during the Haiti revolution, when the Napoleonic armies sent to suppress the slave revolt were shocked to hear the Haitians singing the *Marseillaise* in their battle against Frenchmen. Their enthusiasm for the French Revolution, as Žižek claims, was not an ironic subversion of the supposed universality of the 1789 event, revealing how it was actually restricted to white middle class French men. The power of their performance relied on the fact that they took the universal promise seriously, more seriously than the French themselves; that their message was: “In this battle, we are more French than you, the Frenchmen, are - we stand for the innermost consequences of your revolutionary ideology, the very consequences you were not able to assume.”¹⁴⁰ And in the same way, through mimicry, the colonial subject can become more white than the white colonizer himself, and the drag performer more of a man/woman than a “real” man/woman himself/herself¹⁴¹. As Žižek explains with Hegelian terminology, such a moment is the “reconciliation between Universal and Particular”. The crucial point is that “insofar as every particular species of a genus does not 'fit' its universal genus - when we finally arrive at a particular species that fully fits its notion, the

¹⁴⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* (New York and London: Verso, 2009), 113.

¹⁴¹ This is what the category of Realness refers to in the movie *Paris is Burning*, to the drag performance with the uncanny closeness to the „real” one. – *Paris Is Burning*, DVD, directed by Jennie Livingston (Region 1: Miramax Home Entertainment, 2005)

very universal notion is transformed into another notion". "Here we encounter the properly dialectical paradox of 'concrete universality' qua historicity: in the relationship between a genus and its subspecies, one of these subspecies will always be the element that negates the very universal feature of the genus."¹⁴² In the case of the colonizer's whiteness as a universal notion, this whiteness is paradoxically realized when it is negated in the particular of, let's say, black Haitian slaves standing in for it. It is clear that at this moment, we are not talking about whiteness anymore¹⁴³.

The paradoxical conclusion of these investigations is that in the struggle between normative and resisting discourses, identity is on the side of the resistance, whereas cynicism as the ultimate assumption of non-identity always supports the status quo.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to identify a shift in Hollywood discourses of masculinity. I have argued that the paradigm of *Marketplace Manhood* that according to Michael Kimmel emerged with the capitalist economy of the 19th century in the US came to an end as far as its cinematic representations are concerned in the mid 90s. I have shown how this old paradigm of masculinity was connected to what Lacan calls the big Other, the social symbolic order held together by the phallic signifier, the Name-of-the-Father, historically appearing with the event of God's death, the moment when phallic authority becomes castrated, not real, purely symbolic.

¹⁴² Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 99.

¹⁴³ the analogue is Hegel's claim cited by Žižek that „the only existing state that effectively fits its notion is a religious community - which, precisely, is no longer a state." Ibid.

As I have argued, such a development did not in itself challenge male privileges: what happened is that from then on, symbolic performances of masculinity relied on an imaginary ideological supplement, a spectacle addressed to its supposed believers instead of real ones. With the help of Althusser and Butler's theories of interpellation and Žižek's commentary on the Lacanian gazes, I have shown how ideology's reliance on the subject supposed to believe opens up a space for misrecognition, disidentification and disbelief for the subject of the call. Instead of emphasizing, however, with Butler, how this space can be productive and lead to the subject's rearticulation of the ideological discourse he is demanded to believe in, following Žižek, I focused on the ideological elements in disidentification itself. Through the analysis of homosocial communities in Kimmel's text and *Fight Club*, I have pointed out, with Žižek, that performers of dominant discourses of masculinity already rely on a disidentification with their officially enacted identity when they are among themselves.

My central argument in this thesis was that with a discursive shift in masculinity, such a disidentification becomes publicly avowed; it doesn't have to hide from the ignorant gaze of the symbolic order anymore. Borrowing Peter Sloterdijk's concept, I have called this new performance of masculinity cynical because it doesn't rely on the fiction of the believer anymore. As a logical consequence this also means that it doesn't have to set up a phallic image, an ideological stand-in masking the castration of male symbolic authority, the fact that the emperor is naked, as Kaja Silverman has claimed about the traditional modern masculinity. Now the broken, impaired, incomplete male image is openly assumed; it is not sublated (*Aufgehoben*) but rather kept as a paradoxical *source* of phallic power. The performance of the male hero put in such a position resembles a miracle rather than an ideology. Its witness cannot but *really* believe in it precisely because it is so unbelievable, because it doesn't *demand* belief from its

subjects; but for that reason, it also doesn't leave a space for disbelief. It is this spectacle of the real phallus that I have identified in the concluding scenes of *Fight Club*, *Trainspotting*, *Slumdog Millionaire* etc.

Finally, I have shown how this cynical masculinity challenges Bhabha and Butler's notion that a performance that reveals the fabricatedness of all identities has a subversive effect on normative discourses. Cynicism is similar to mimicry and drag in the sense that it is a performance that is very effective against the traditional ideology that still had to present an imaginary totality. But the aim of cynicism, as Sloterdijk argues, is not to subvert but to support the status quo, it is a way of giving in to normal course of things, supporting existing symbolic norms not through the dialectics of belief/disbelief but rather through their resigned elevation into the transcendental framework of our lives. In the cynical age, bourgeois values, heterosexuality or patriarchy are destroyed, deconstructed, that is, lost as social norms and found again as gifts of a new divinity.

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