

## *Cinema, Fantasy and the Impossible: Traversing the Fantasy in the ending of Frank Darabont's The Mist*

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### **Résumé/Abstract**

This paper departs from the radical ending of Frank Darabont's film *The Mist*. This ending is so shocking that it may leave the spectator beyond the ordinary condition of tranquil illusions or reassuring images. Thus it incorporates the movement of "traversing the fantasy" as elaborated in (Lacanian) psychoanalysis. The paper also relates this movement to the notion of the impossible as articulated — in the Nietzschean tradition — by the philosopher Georges Bataille. In its analysis of *The Mist*, the paper elucidates that the cinematic screen is a medium for relating to the empty space that is both beyond ordinary reality and at the heart of human subjectivity. As such, cinema is a ritualistic space for confronting the impossible — a painful confrontation that man as "an excessive animal" apparently always seeks. Cinema then, in its radical form of the ending of *The Mist*, is an almost religious practice for recognizing God's absence.

### **À propos de l'auteur/About the Author**

André Nusselder is a Dutch philosopher. He applied the work of Jacques Lacan to new media, resulting in the books *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (MIT Press, 2009) and *The Surface Effect: The Screen of Fantasy in Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 2013). Currently he works as coordinator in Information Studies (Science faculty) at the University of Amsterdam, focusing on changing epistemologies and practices of communication in a network society.

***Introduction: into the mist***

David Drayton, an artist in Maine, is hand painting his latest work, a poster for an upcoming movie. His studio also contains several other works, one of them is a poster of *The Thing*, showing a human figure in polar clothing with rays of light radiating from the place where the face should have been. Then the house loses power because of a massive thunderstorm striking Bridgton. We, the spectators of the film, see the storm striking violently outside; in the next shot we see it through the window of the house with David, his son and wife standing in front of it and looking outside; then the windowpane becomes something of another tableau in the studio with the three people staring at it. After the family has descended into the cellar, the window depicting the storm is suddenly smashed and glass flies in a million pieces into the studio.

This is how the movie *The Mist* (2007, dir. Frank Darabont), based on a short story by Stephen King, begins. The following examines the traversing of fantasies, or the smashing of windows upon reality, and takes scenes from this movie as cinematographic incarnations of these psychical processes. The end of the movie is of special interest here, an ending which is probably one of the most shocking ones in film history. Or as Stephen King says: “Frank wrote a new ending that I loved. It is the most shocking ending ever” (qtd. in Tyler 2007). The end of *The Mist* articulates an experience that exemplifies the depths of human despair in a world abandoned by God. The horrible, as depicted in the movie by the monsters in the mist but finding its apogee in the ending, is regarded in this paper in relation to the empty place that God has left behind. The paper will focus on cinema (and in a broader perspective, art) as a (technological) means for relating to the catastrophic event that the movie depicts as coming from outside but which is, as the paper seeks to show, actually at the heart of human subjectivity (the object is “extimate” (see Miller 1994)). With that, the paper situates itself in the most recent version of psychoanalytic film theory, which focuses not on the filmmaker’s or the character’s unconscious, but on the audience’s unconscious and the manners in which films replicate formal models of the mind. Cinema, then, is considered in its dimension of producing a (fantasmatic) relation to a (traumatic) Real (cf. Žižek 1991).

Although this paper interprets the notion of fantasy — and its traversing — primarily from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, it also uses the work of philosophers like Nietzsche and Bataille in order to interpret subjectivity in a world wherein reason, as well as religion, touches its limits, or is confronted with the impossible. The justification for doing this comes from the fact that Lacan grafts his notion of the Real

upon Bataille's notion of the impossible (Surya 1987, p. 256); a notion which, for Lacan, is pivotal in understanding the Real as that against which fantasy constructs a defensive formation (see Lacan 1998; Perron-Borelli 2001, p. 115; Žižek 1993, pp. 85-90).

This is how the movie proceeds: after the storm David Drayton drives with his son Billy and his neighbor, lawyer Brent Norton, from his lakeside house to the supermarket to get supplies. On the way, they see a heavy mist, as well as military convoys, police, fire trucks, and ambulances heading into it. In the supermarket, a frantic local arrives crying that there is something alive in the mist. The manager closes the front entrance but the mist encloses the store. Soon the group discovers that they are under siege by blood-thirsty creatures from another dimension that have reached our planet through a window opened by a failed military research project. Left without any alternatives, a small group led by David decides to take a chance, leave the supermarket, and get to his car, hoping to escape the mist.

### ***Cinema as a gateway to another level of subjective existence***

A first question is: what is actually happening when we are watching a movie? A short sketch of this process should suffice here. In cinema there is a projection of an imaginary scenario on a screen, and we, as spectators, are identifying with the point of view from which this projection takes place: the projector (in the process of showing) or the camera (in the process of recording). This is "primary cinematographic identification" (Metz 1982). Through this mechanism the spectator is, in the space and time of cinema, transferred to another level of (subjective) existence, which might be called that of the "subject of the unconscious" (Lacan). This primary identification is the (transcendental) condition for a more complex play of identification with the overall narrative. The narrative provides the spectator with multiple and shifting points of identification (Mayne 1993). Identification therefore can be multiple and fractured, and allows constituent parts of the spectator's own psyche to be paraded before her or him (Ellis 1982).

Cinema in this sense is the rear side of science. Scientific representations are made in terms of clarity and understanding. Science creates (mostly symbolical, abstract) representations that are — or should be — verifiable and logical, and that follow the universal laws of rationality. While cinema works with more lively, imaginary representations, the question is whether there also is a form of "universality" in cinema. If not, why would its imaginary scenarios be of any interest to a diverse range of spectators? That would make the

spectator nothing more than some sort of voyeur, interested in peeping at the secret fantasmatic lives of an artist (an approach taken in the earliest stages of psychoanalytic film theory, with its focus on the filmmakers' unconscious). Then there is only some truth-value involved for the spectator when the artist is the "genius" who is able to reach heights (or depths) that are unattainable for the ordinary man, who can only get a glimpse of those aspects of human existence by staring at the figments of a genius. Contrary to this (romantic) vision of art, another kind of universality and even truth might be involved in cinema.

This is the universality of fears and desires that are staged in cinema. Cinema then, in this approach, replicates or mimics the formal model of the conscious/unconscious mind posited by psychoanalysis. The fears and desires put on screen in cinema are the fears and desires that all human beings share and that define the heights and depths of human existence.<sup>1</sup> The fears and desires that a film producer puts on the screen are shared by the spectators and they show them something of the (hidden, underexposed) truth of their desires (and not only of the desire of the producer). In that sense, the approach taken in this paper is also the one that focuses on the audience's unconscious, wherein experiences and behaviors of certain characters can be interpreted as manifestations of *our* unconscious, insofar as we come to identify ourselves with them when we visit the cinema.

The law that makes the representations on the screen valid for different situations and persons is then not — as in science — that of rationality, but that of desire. Understanding cinema is, in this perspective, understanding the law of desire. This leads to the peculiar situation of aiming to understand (in a clear and distinct manner, i.e. scientifically) a law or logical order that goes against the rationality of science. It requires a (scientific) understanding of the vast field of the imagination.<sup>2</sup>

The peculiarity of this approach is that there is not only a law to the construction of scientific representations, which is a law based on transparency, detachment, regularity — all the qualities that define Cartesian perspectivism (Jay 1988, p. 4). There is also a law of unconscious processes, which is basically a law that tunes desire's raw insistence to go to the end (exemplified in psychoanalysis by the death

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<sup>1</sup> For is not, as Kierkegaard holds, the extent to which one is able to feel fear also a measure for the extension of humanity in a person; or, as Nietzsche thinks, the extent to which one is able to "dance" and to feel joy?

<sup>2</sup> This paradoxical situation is expressed in Lacan's attempts to define the "logic of fantasy". My attempts to understand the imagination can be found in the books *Interface Fantasy* (Nusselder 2009) and *The Surface Effect* (Nusselder 2013).

drive) and its easy, playful creation of images (exemplified by daydreaming). In Nietzschean terms this is a law regulating the Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies in man. From this perspective, of man as excessive and fundamentally out of tune or balance (not having a “natural” relation to the world as an animal is supposed to have), follows that imaginary fabrications are not only means for gaining some sort of pleasure, but that they are — exactly as pleasurable scenarios — a means for screening a threatening, excessive and anxiety-provoking presence off (more on this in section 3). A film then, understood as replicating or mimicking the formal model of the mind, does exactly that: it is a defense-formation screening a threatening presence off (vacuity, death), while at the same time showing a manageable piece of it (David’s struggle in the mist) — a piece that we might even find pleasurable as it wraps up the trauma in attractive narratives and scenarios.

Freud explicitly articulated this issue of defensive formations in the psychological field in his theory that the fantasies (of seduction) of his (hysteric) patients were not always expressing a real event, but were in many times psychic formations in order to cover up another kind of traumatic reality, namely that of sexuality and the fears and desires associated to it. Lacan widens this theory by bringing forward that fantasies are not just means for defense against a traumatic intrusion of sexuality, but that they function in man’s psychic life as almost unavoidable illusions for dealing with the singularity and mortality of human existence, that is with lack, or, as he developed in his later works, with the excessive tension of losing the boundaries of the self and disappearing in the abyss of enjoyment, *jouissance*.

Cinema is not only an environment for showing — in a detached way, wherein the spectator remains at a distance — how certain characters (protagonists) deal with this *jouissance*. Because of the fundamental layers of identification involved in it, it can also function itself as a screen for dealing with trauma (or the impossible). Before turning to this second perspective, the fundamental issue of fantasy as a defense-formation will be discussed — for the impossible always requires some sort of illusionary form to surround and alleviate it. Reality, in order to be livable, always needs some sort of fantasmatic support: that is also what the Kantian tradition in philosophy, with its crucial role for the imagination, teaches us (cf. Žižek 1993 p. 90). In the film *The Mist*, this fantasmatic support emerges in its religious and rational forms.

***The heart of reason and religion: a scenario for the impossible***

In *The Mist*, several scenarios are depicted for dealing with the horrific presence in the mist outside. The most explicit one is represented by a deeply religious woman, Ms. Carmody, who believes that God has sent down plagues upon the world because of man's sins. Slowly she convinces many people of God's wrath and that He has sent down monsters and demons in the mist to claim all those who are not worthy of salvation. She cries out that she's a righteous follower of God and that anyone who wants to be saved should listen to her words and to the scripture. She proposes that they all prepare to meet their maker for "the God of the Israelites now demands retribution and blood".

David's neighbor, the lawyer Brent, believes that all the turmoil about monsters in the mist is just a bad joke. He considers himself a "normal thinking person", discussing this issue rationally, and he definitely does not esteem the situation to be supernatural or biblical. In spite of his fixed beliefs, David tries to show Brent proof of the monster. In trying to restart the store's generator, David enters the garage and perceives something pressing against the door. Back in the main store he tells some men what he heard and that they need to fix the generator. As they don't believe him they suggest opening the door and seeing what's outside — although David urges them not to do so. A young store boy, Norm, volunteers and, upon opening the door, he is grabbed by a large tentacle that snags his leg and pulls him under the door. Although David pulls him back into the loading dock several more tentacles follow Norm back into the loading dock and begin ripping flesh from his body. Bloodied and terrified, Norm is dragged outside into the mist. David quickly grabs an axe and manages to chop off the end of one of the tentacles. When presenting the piece of tentacle to Brent, he still is not convinced. To the contrary: as Brent refuses to believe in any form of "supernatural nonsense" he considers the whole situation as a setup. He thinks that the men are trying to prank him because he was the lawyer who represented the people who sued this grocery store.

The interesting thing in this piece of the story is that because he does not believe in "another world", Brent thinks that the whole thing is nothing but a trap made by other people in order to harm and lure him. Brent represents the modern man who approaches the world with rational explanations ("there is nothing in the mist", the mist is nothing more than part of a storm), and who at the same time — or exactly *because of the absence of belief* in another world — thinks that all alien elements that question this rational order are manmade fabrications *in order to fool and nail him*. The movie shows the fantasmatic aspect of this rational

worldview in its depiction of the confrontation with the Real, which smashes the fantasmatic screen to pieces. For this is what happens:

In order to find help, Brent organizes a group of people to go out into the parking lot in front of the store and drive off. One man wants to get a gun out of a car and bring it back into the store. The people in the store suggest that the man put a long rope around his waist so that they know that he made it at least as far as the rope goes. A little while after the group leaves the store, the rope starts being pulled at very quickly. When the rope stops pulling David and others pull it back into the store. It comes back into the store red, covered in fresh dripping blood, with the lower, severed half of the man's body attached to the end of the rope.

What psychoanalysis teaches us, and what this movie illustrates, is that worldviews (the religious one, but also the rational one) contain a fantasmatic aspect, not just as a trivial decoration, but right at their heart. Even the rational worldview is not merely a representation of the world; it is also a construction in order to screen an element of the world off. This element is what, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, is called the Real. To put this in philosophical terms regarding the subject of modern science (which tried to do away with all fantasies in order to get to exact representations): at the heart of the Cartesian subject of representation is fantasy — a notion that Kant already developed in his theory about the categories of space and time as unavoidable mental dimensions for synthesizing sensations (Nusselder 2013). This perspective on fantasy may need some explanation.

***When existence touches upon the impossible, fantasy is more than fun***

Fantasy is usually understood as an imaginary scenario for gaining pleasure. This is the more common notion of fantasy that departs from human existence as characterized by a lack of satisfaction: the world does not correspond to our desires, and fantasy is the means for compensating this. This is Freud's first understanding of fantasy, where fantasy fits within the categories of neurotic frustration (*Versagung*) and compensation. However, fantasy not only falls within the categories of neurotic compensation: there is a more fundamental aspect to it.

Fantasy is first of all the inevitable means for relating to the Real: the impossible element of human reality, which is beyond understanding and representation. Kant elaborated this, in his theory of the imagination, as what provides the dimensions of time and space to the "things in itself" which otherwise would remain inaccessible to the human mind. The human world is always a world *for us*, not as it is *in itself*. What is outside the world as it is for us remains haunting our world as a threatening

“thing”. And this is of course what we see in science-fiction horror movies such as *The Mist*: there is a “thing” outside (in the mist).

In the movie this “thing” is actually the manifestation of another dimension or another reality. For the mist would be the result of a military project aimed at making a window to the other side, and seeking to look through this window in order to see what is there. By accident, as one of the soldiers trapped in the supermarket explains, this world came spilling through to ours. That the rational lawyer considers all speculations about a “thing” in the mist as rubbish is also understandable, as rational, scientific deliberation considers the entire world to be reducible to rational representation. However, the rational constructions are smashed to pieces in the movie and shown to contain an illusionary aspect: the “thing” in the mist is real and a devastating presence. The fact that the religious woman is interpreting the threat from her religious framework as an offense against the will of God is also understandable, for that actually is the way in which this mechanism is interpreted from such a background. In a religious construction, the “thing” may be considered as the evil side of God (the wrath of God), and this interpretation is difficult to refute as long as the whole religious framework that upholds this interpretation is intact (which explains why it is so hard to discuss or argue with a religious follower, or why doctrinal religious explanations of diseases, for instance, keep resurfacing).

When this religious framework is absent, however (and that is where we must position the author of this paper and his interpretation of the fantasmatic screen as also a defensive-formation), the devastating presence outside is the dark rear side of the human efforts and attempts to bring all of the world into representation (into the “light of reason”). The work of Slavoj Žižek expresses this as the contemporary highlight of an idealistic philosophy, going from Descartes to Kant and Hegel, which is — after Nietzsche and Freud — hitting its limits. Psychoanalysis therefore is not an idealism (Lacan 1998, p. 53). Psychoanalysis makes what is repressed from idealistic representation into its object (what Lacan names the “object *a*”). And repression here should not just be understood in neurotic terms (as a lack in development that can be overcome — by growing stronger in ego functions, etc.), but as something that characterizes human existence: *Urverdrängung*, an originary repression that goes, along with man, being a subject of representation at all.

In this inevitability of the fantasmatic function, that of mediation between subject and object, fantasmatic scenarios are not just to be understood as the organization of pleasure. There is of course an

organization of pleasure involved, but this serves exactly as a means to screen off a deeper affectivity, a traumatic excitement that Lacan names *jouissance*. A good understanding of the pleasure principle in psychoanalysis requires that one let go of understanding it merely as the (neurotic, compensatory) organization of pleasure. These fantasmatic scenarios of organizing pleasure through all sorts of images are exactly a means to control an unbearable excitement!

***When the sacred place is empty: the cry of the impossible***

There is a threatening presence that both fascinates and frightens us. In that sense it is related to the notion of the sacred as described by Rudolf Otto (1923) and Mircea Eliade (1987). The experience of the sacred has, in addition to the *tremendum*, the tendency to invoke fear and trembling, a quality of *fascinans*, the tendency to attract, fascinate and compel. The theme of “the thing” is therefore related to the issue of religion in a world without God, and horror movies might well deal with the contemporary sacred.

Some sort of screen or fantasmatic environment is necessary for dealing with the sacred. One can think here of insights from studies of religion that show how religions have always given a special place to the sacred, and by doing so have fenced it off from ordinary life (Eliade 1987). For a direct confrontation with the threatening presence beyond causes trembling and destruction. In *The Mist*, the religious woman builds a religious story around the anxiety provoking presence, a story that gives this presence its place and keeps the believers distanced from it. The lawyer Brent pretends to feel no fear, as it is all nonsense, but is eventually devoured by the monster that he seeks to deny. David does feel fear, but still tries to deal with the monster and is therefore the hero of the film.

At the end of the movie David decides to go outside, into the mist and try to escape from it. There is something of a heroic act in this, although it does not fully comply with the steps of a heroic journey as told for ages in many different forms by myths all over the world (Campbell 2008). Generally the hero is the one who has the courage to go outside into the unknown, seeks the confrontation with the monster, tries to kill it, and subsequently returns from his hazardous journey with a new knowledge or understanding that is able to regenerate life in the closed world of everydayness from which he departed and that he now revitalizes. Although David’s act is heroic in its initiative of going outside and not hiding hen-headed in the closed world within the supermarket, something else happens.

A group of people is willing to follow David rather than the hysteric Ms Carmody who tries to incite the majority against David, and who even wants to sacrifice a son for the sins committed against God. This Ms. Carmody is, in the end of the confrontation between the groups, shot by the shopkeeper so that her group of believers comes back to their senses and lets David and his people go. David, his son, and the group go outside and try to make it to his car. Some of them are killed by enormous spiders and other creatures before making it to the car. But David, his son Billy, a woman, the original man who warned of the creatures in the mist, and an older woman, eventually make it into the car, and David grabs the gun that the shopkeeper dropped before he was killed. They drive off in the mist, passing David's house where he sees his wife's dead body in a spider's web. On their way out they see destruction everywhere, and enormous monsters dominating the environment. Then the car runs out of gas and David pulls over, not having been able to drive out of the mist. With his son Billy asleep, David pulls out the gun and nods with silent agreement with the other members of the group. There are only four bullets left, and David says he will figure something out to kill himself after he has shot the others. Then four gunshots are heard and four flashes of light are emitted from the car. David, stupefied by the act he just had to commit, steps out of the car and screams for the monsters to come get him: "come on ... come on". He has shot and killed his eight-year-old son, and the three other survivors, and now wants to die himself. Then a large rumbling noise emerges in the distance. Screaming and begging to die, it is not a monster that reveals itself in the mist, but a U.S. military tank and then a full military battalion. Tanks, soldiers with flame throwers and rifles, and truckloads of survivors are now traveling on the road. Some of the survivors are from the grocery store. Realizing that he just murdered his son and three innocent people only moments before they would have been rescued, David collapses, falls on his knees and screams towards heaven.

The monster is killed (by the military), the normal world chases away the world of horror again, but the "hero" has just committed the most ferocious act that one can think of: deliberately killing his own child. Where this act might possibly only find some sort of justification from a metaphysical framework wherein it would serve as a means for a higher good — such as Abraham willing to kill his son as a response to the demand from God to prove his love for Him — this justification is completely absent for David. Even the pragmatic or utilitarian justification, wherein the act would be justified by preventing an even more terrible act to occur (being killed by the monsters), is torn to pieces

and ripped apart before the spectator's eyes. What the spectator then witnesses is man completely left to himself, pitiless, merciless; man irretrievably lost, in a universe beyond redemption. The cry that sounds then is far more radical than the cry of abandonment of Job in the Bible — who is also deprived of all that is valuable to him in this world, but is ultimately recovered by God (and thus regains value in another world). The cry that sounds at the end of *The Mist* is that of man stripped of everything that can hold his existence together — without any further reconciliation: the movie ends, and all that remains is darkness.

***“The night also is a sun”***

In the metaphysical tradition, the dramatic moment of man being confronted with truth and thus traversing the fantasies that have thus far dominated his life is often illustrated by a person being dazzled by the light (of the sun). One of the most well-known examples hereof is the conversion of Paul where, on his way to Damascus he is blinded by a light, thrown off his horse, and then hears the voice of Jesus speaking to him. The life of Saul the persecutor of Christians then takes a turn and he becomes St. Paul the teacher of the gospel, who spreads Christianity over the world. This theme of light shows that the notion of light is crucial for the (Platonic) metaphysics that grounded the Western world (Blumenberg 1993, p. 33).

However, what becomes of this notion of light in its relation to truth when the whole metaphysics supporting these ideas falls to pieces? That is: how do we depict those radical experiences after the “death of God”? (Nietzsche 1974). The dazzling element in the radical experience remains, but this is not a blinding by the light but a blinding caused by the absence of all light, by darkness, or by what Georges Bataille — the thinker who most radically articulated these experiences in a world without God — names “the night” (Bataille 1988). This also explains the mysterious quote by Nietzsche that Bataille puts as an epigraph at the beginning of his central work, *Inner experience* (Bataille 1988): “the night also is a sun”. The night causes the same radical experience of “fear and trembling” as the light of the sun. But in the night this blinding experience is not accompanied by a “heavenly voice” that conveys the truth, and that dictates what to do (as in the case of Saul who is told to go into the city of Jerusalem where he will then be told what to do). The “voice” that sounds in the night is not an echo from heaven, but the cry of a man confronted with an empty heaven, a man who is left alone; it is a cry of utter despair. This cry tears its bearer (the subject) to pieces, and this subject will not recover its broken self again on a higher, spiritual

plane — as in Christianity a new man should appear (as the aim of the religious experience ultimately is to construct a “new subject” (Badiou 1997)). In the metaphysics of light, the mirror — or the narcissistic self-image that limits man’s view of reality — is smashed to pieces so that the spiritual Self behind it may appear. However, in the night the mirror is broken and the pieces reflect nothing but darkness.

This is the radical experience that is staged at the end of *The Mist*: a confrontation with absence without mediating fantasies, images, or stories that give sense to it. A sacrifice (of the son) without some good (an Idea, Other, Heaven) or lesser evil (not being devoured by monsters) to sacrifice it for; a “sacrifice of the sacrifice” (cf. Žižek 2001, p. 166); “radical Evil”. So in the final scene of the film there is a traversing of (fundamental) fantasies that hold a person’s reality together and that give it meaning *without* (the hope of) a new one appearing out of it. Therefore David’s sense of self cannot but disintegrate and he as a person vanishes in a desperate cry. The movie ends with the traversing of fantasies, with the broken mirror. Not only are David’s fantasies traversed, so is his hope or belief that the impossibility of his act would somehow or somewhere be justified (by preventing his son be killed by the monsters: a promise that he made to his son) and would thus allow for his life to have, at some point in time, a new beginning after this act. Such a justification, however, is not there (again: a “sacrifice of the sacrifice”). For if only he would have postponed his act for a couple of minutes his world would have been completely different, and would have had the possibility to recover (retrace) its normalcy. Now the return to normalcy is impossible: all fantasies were smashed to pieces, and they remain smashed, an impossible, unbearable situation that cuts off all roads leading back to life. For the occurrence of another fantasy is what leads back to life (or even to a better or more truthful life, as the process of Paul’s conversion should illustrate). Life stripped of fantasmatic support is a dead life.

***Cinema and the impossible: man as a relation to himself***

This is what the spectator gets confronted with at the end of the film. But why would someone want to show this? And why would someone want to be confronted with this? The answer to the first question might be the radical desire of a singular subject, the artist, to go to the end of the possible and show the truth of life at pointblank. This could be an

explanation — but there might be others.<sup>3</sup> The answer to the second question might have several aspects to it. First of all, it may be noted that the spectator might not know that the movie would end like that, and he or she would thus find this end as an unexpected shock. Secondly, in the case that the spectator did know what was coming, or did not know what was coming but still deliberately chose to watch such a horror movie, he or she might want to be confronted with something *without having to undergo it themselves*. This is the classic case of catharsis, which also has its role in the psychoanalytic study of films that focus on the audience's unconscious. Catharsis as a purification of emotions through art, or a purification of desires by identifying with what is happening on stage, but still keeping — as spectator — a safe distance with something *which is nevertheless at the spectator's core too*, and thus something with which the spectator wants to have some sort of relation. The stage, or in this case the screen, is then a *means for a subject relating to itself* (and the impossible truth that its everyday existence is circling around). Analyzing film as such an (unconscious) self-relation allows for its understanding in deep psychological and philosophical manners.

Nietzsche holds that man is the “not-yet determined animal” (Nietzsche 2001), an animal whose relations to its environment are “disturbed” or upset, out of balance, so that the relation to the objective world also contains a subjective element of relating to the self. This means, to be concrete, that when someone is struck by an accident and has to lose a leg, the meaning of this accident still depends on the subjective relation that someone takes up to it: some people might get depressed and lose their will to live; others might be able to deal with it and actually find their experience of existence intensified. Also, the other line of thought that is used in this paper, which goes from Lacan to Žižek, stresses this breach between the natural world and the cultural world of subjective existence. It finds a clear articulation in Žižek's philosophy, with the notion that at the heart of human subjectivity is emptiness: the center of the human subject is an empty core. Žižek considers the decisive insight of modern Western thought to be that the subject is not a steady substance but an empty core, a “substanceless void of the pure *cogito*” (1992, p. 168). This shows that at the heart of human existence is the issue of freedom, and philosophy describes this subjective dimension in relation to the objective situation of man's existence.

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<sup>3</sup> I have not dug into the motivations of Frank Darabont on why he wrote this ending to the film; however interesting that might be, I am not doing a psychological explanation here, but am focusing on the product itself and its relation to the audience

In the metaphysical-religious tradition, man can ultimately realize his freedom and is able to become what he is in truth: the birth of a new subject — like a religious person whose narcissistic self-image is smashed but recovers her spiritual self as a reflection of God. However, in a world beyond the promises of these metaphysical-religious traditions (the “death of God”), the human subject bumps into emptiness, and hits an empty core where the promises of the metaphysical-religious traditions used to be: God, Logos, and History. Then the subject hits something which is beyond the human capacity to control and understand, and which therefore is a matter of imagination (as in Lacan’s theory that fantasy is the “stuff” of the Cartesian subject). As a result of this imagination, a monster may creep out at the end of what is possible, the thing in the mist, a manifestation of the impossible. Although this impossible “thing” is something that man cannot deal with, it is at the heart of human subjective existence: the Real or limit that all human possibilities and freedom are circling around, and which has to be imagined in order to keep some sort of distance to it.

In order “not to give up one’s desire” (Lacan), abandon “going to the end of what is possible” (Bataille), neglect the call of the *Übermensch* (Nietzsche), or betray the “truth-event” (Badiou) — so in order to exist in some truthful way (and not stash this evil thing away behind all sorts of narcissistic, convenient, narcotic or any other self-misleading illusion) — man has to relate to something that he actually cannot relate to; that is the tragic situation of the subject (of desire) as it is articulated here. How does he do that?

Here the perspective on cinema as described earlier recurs. Man can relate to what is beyond the human, to what is beyond the possible, by imagining it, by going to the cinema. Then cinema is a gateway to a subjective dimension that is actually beyond the illusions of everyday life, and is thus precisely the opposite of what common understanding thinks it is. Cinema does not merely stage a realm of illusions that flies away from the real world, but it takes the spectator to a dimension that is actually more real than everyday reality! It creates imaginary scenarios or illusions that are actually more real (or truthful) than the scenarios that we dwell in most of the time. Cinema is truth twenty-four times per minute — to paraphrase Jean-Luc Goddard: not because it is photographic (as Goddard states), but because it is psychic and establishes (temporarily) an extraordinary self-relation.

***Conclusion: art as ritual***

Behind the everyday world of shadows there is no “higher” world of light or an enlightened world: that is the result of the decisive “event” that Nietzsche names the “death of God”, an “event” in the aftermath of which human existence nowadays still evolves. Behind the everyday world of images that is organized as pleasurably and comfortably as possible (but of which almost everyone almost intuitively knows that this is “not all” and that “there should be something more” — the most heard-of statement concerning religiosity today), there is a world of monsters. Cinema can take the spectator to this other world for a specific period of time, so that she doesn’t have to deal with this “beyond” herself. In that sense, cinema (or in a broader perspective, art) actually is the replacement of religion — as the function of religion always was to regulate our relation to the beyond.

Cinema then has sort of a ritualistic function, in that it functions like a machinery for relating to the other side. For a machinic functioning characterizes symbolic and ritualistic practices used for relating to the gods; a machinism relieving the individual of the call to invent such a relation herself, and thus allowing her to participate in a relation and thereby communicate (with the gods). As an apparatus for putting the spectator temporarily in another subject position, cinema has this same organized and machinic function. This apparatus takes over the subjective function of self-relating: subjective mediation becomes technological mediatization. The spectator gets a taste of an object that she, as a subject of (excessive) desire, longs for but from which she wants at the same time, to keep a safe enough distance. Art has become a necessary illusion (Nietzsche). So at some level of human existence, which normally remains at a distance in order for the world to keep on functioning, there sounds a cry similar to David’s: David cries for me.

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