Aristotle's 'terrible' and the cinema of excess

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Abstract

This paper draws on Aristotle's concept of the "terrible" in tragedy to develop a framework for selecting films that are "serious-for-philosophy", i.e. films that do philosophy in some sense, as opposed to films which largely defy philosophical interpretation and embody only Aristotle's "monstrous". The framework is extended using ideas from Hegel and Derrida along with others. It is suggested that the Greek "polis" is a key concept in distinguishing dramas that are properly "terrible" from those that embody only a personal moral order.

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A serious cinema

In the 1970s I walked out of a screening of *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971) because I did not want to watch the rape scene. I was torn between a love of cinema and a dislike of its excesses, a contradiction that was only resolved forty years later in writing *The American Cinema of Excess: Extremes of the National Mind on Film* (King, 2009). The key to my resolution was this passage from Aristotle's *Poetics*: "Those who employ spectacular means to create a sense not of the terrible but only of the monstrous, are strangers to the purpose of Tragedy" (Aristotle, 1922, p. 49). In my book I worked out a set of criteria to distinguish between those films that deploy violence, or any other kind of transgressional excess, in a serious manner – a seriousness concomitant with philosophy – and those where it is gratuitous, with Aristotle's ideas on tragedy as a starting point.

I define a cinema of excess as one in which transgressional material plays a significant part, including cannibalism, murder, rape, robbery, vandalism and the violent destruction of people, places, structures and ways of life. We seem to have a pro-

found need to engage with such material. In *The American Cinema of Excess* I wrote:

> A television nature documentary once featured an infant gorilla brought up by naturalists in a trailer. Its favourite toy, it seems, was a red plastic crocodile, with which it loved to scare itself (crocodiles are the gorilla's only natural predator). Some friends had been invited over to the trailer and were sitting on the sofa as their hosts prepared tea. The adult gorilla crept up behind them silently, and then, in what seems a deeply human act, it stretched its arm over them and dangled the red plastic crocodile in their faces. It wanted to scare them, in a friendly sort of way, and chose to use its own "bogey man," blissfully unaware that to be crept up on by a gorilla is in itself pretty scary. Clearly the gorilla dealt with its deepest fears by confronting the symbol of those fears: human beings simply have a more sophisticated range of methods for doing this. (King, 2009, p. 236)

A cinema of excess dangles the red plastic crocodile in front of us, by which I mean that it offers a simulacrum or mimesis of possible events that terrify us. This raises a series of moral questions which are difficult to address because there is the suspicion that exploring morals in film will become a form of moralising, as we find with the religious right. One possible defence against that, entailing the proposition that there is an observable moral structure to the human universe, can be attacked as either religious propaganda – if "God" is brought into it – or as some kind of essentialism if not. In *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Woody Allen, 1989) a Jewish family at the Seder (Passover) meal heatedly debate whether there is a moral structure to the universe. Much depends on it as the protagonist has commissioned murder and listens intently to what is in fact a scene playing out in his imagination.

Philosophy and criticism

To be uneasy with the transgressional places one at first glance with cultural conservatives and the religious right, but their analysis opens no space for the transgressional. For example Michael Medved's *Hollywood vs. America* (1993) rejects anything that is not uplifting family fare and which does not celebrate American "culture", not acknowledging that American society comprises many antithetical cultures and traditions. It is therefore a false claim on America and at the same time reactionary. On the other hand criticisms of the left can also be problematic. Susan Sontag (2001) says: "The most celebrated and influential doctrines, those of Marx and Freud, actually amount to elaborate systems of hermeneutics, aggressive and impious theories of interpretation" (p. 7). She is not however against interpretation per se, but only those she sees as "reactionary, impertinent, cowardly and stifling." It is the "stifling" element within these traditions perhaps that makes them inadequate to the transgressional, dismissing it as merely part of the spectacle. "Amuse-

ment under late capitalism is the prolongation of work," say Adorno and Horkheimer for example (1997, p. 137). All is spectacle – bread and circuses minus the bread – provided by capital to extend the world of alienated work into the world of alienated leisure, a set of ideas further elaborated on by Baudrillard (1981) under the rubric of the "hyperreal". Unless the work of art furthers the revolution or subverts capitalism, or even subverts itself, it is dismissed in such ways, stifling further philosophical investigation. This is not to say that films cannot be constructively analysed as "political" but that a programmatic approach demanding at every turn a Marxist deconstruction of bourgeois life is little short of the aggressive and impious.

For example the analysis by Trevitte (2012) of Luis Buñuel and "perversity" starts by voicing the concern that Buñuel may be offering more of a "free-floating cynicism than an incisive political critique." This may be true, but why impose on a filmmaker any obligation to mount incisive political critiques? While the essay sets out to rescue Buñuel via Slavoj Žižek and Hegel this obligation is not anywhere relaxed. Trevitte declares that bourgeois decorum always descends to perversity and excess and that they are "necessary components of bourgeois ideology", making the bourgeois both "utterly absurd and yet enigmatically persistent" (p. 218). Such an analysis is unhelpful to our problem however because it declares the perverse or transgressional merely to be the inevitable outcome of bourgeois mores. Such an approach can be classed as a hermeneutics of suspicion after Paul Ricoeur (1970, p. 32).

Trevitte describes the Buñuel films he is examining as presenting a "refracted, oneiric vision" (2012, p. 213). Perhaps artists deliberately adopt the oneiric to make their works impenetrable to any kind of "impious" analysis, and indeed a filmmaker like Tarkovsky may have also used such devices to protect himself from the censor, for example in *Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979) and *Solaris* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972). Regardless of these possible motivations, I believe that as philosophers we should accept that many works of art are not usefully open to interpretation. For example I argue elsewhere that *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) is high art hermeneutically sealed in this way (King, 2014, 118). We cannot ask such films to do philosophy for us – whether political, ethical, existential, metaphysical or linguistic – but, instead we are freed to philosophise about them as phenomenon. We can then profitably ask why the human animal dangles not just the terrifying in front of itself but also the oneiric, the surreal, the escapist, the romantic; or creates film purely as art, sui generis. However these are questions for another paper; here we are looking at the problem of transgressive content, mainly violence.

A violent film can appear serious because of its arthouse credentials, as in the case of *Straw Dogs*, but the critical method developed here asks of it, does it "do" philosophy along its narrative arc or is its transgressive content purposeless, gratuitous, titillatory? Is it a serious film which asks of me that I sit through it because of

its philosophical payload, or have I lost nothing in walking out of it half way? Establishing some criteria for the "serious" film is also a way of negotiating the issue of the disenfranchisement of film (Wittusen, 2016, p. 199). For a film to "do" philosophy we should not of course ask for it to "be" philosophy. Elsewhere I explore the idea that film and religion are both disciplines sui generis (King, 2014, p. 10), and similar arguments apply to the boundaries between philosophy and film. Witusen (2016) draws on Simone de Beauvoir to make similar points (p. 200). For a film to "do" philosophy it might of course have as its subject matter philosophy, but better if film is made sui generis, as Tarkovsky argues regarding its relationship to theatre, photography and other forms (1989, p. 37).

A question of morality

Elena Woolley (2015) begins her essay on morality in film with this statement: "The perpetual quest for moral goodness, however one might define such an elusive and subjective quality, deems that those who transgress a society's agreed terms of acceptable conduct should be punished, chastised and reviled" (p. 190). She then asks, does the transgressional in cinema permit us to form a bond with the villain? Can this be helpful? Or do we just have a cinema of excess where the audience becomes numbed to ever-more transgressional acts portrayed in ever-more graphic detail? Woolley's essay focuses on brutal acts somehow justified by revenge, stories not so much about a protagonist who lacks morality but about "a man who is subject to his own moral order—one in which revenge, while brutal, is noble." However she concludes by saying: "The audience is encouraged to recognise the 'self' in the figure of the outlaw, the cannibal and the murderer, while the supposed keepers of morality and law lie in opposition." She suggests that this is because the spectator censors out the moral, seduced by whole gamut of filmic techniques. We can say then that the actions of the anti-hero are regarded as representing a personal moral order, despite the lack of a collectivist ethic, because he or she possesses virtues such as single-mindedness and courage. In classical thought this leads to tragedy as Somers-Hall (2013) explains:

> The universal that is restored in Greek tragedy is the universal ethical substance of the polis. The play ends with the reassertion of the values of the community in the face of the single-mindedness of the protagonists. (p. 78)

One can construct a spectrum starting with the villain as pure evil where transgressional acts are not just incomprehensible but which we are never invited to comprehend – perhaps Hannibal Lecter. Next, in a more modern Western development, we have the villain with a backstory of being abused which explains those acts but who still remains committed to evil – perhaps the Joker of the late Batman films. Finally we have the nuanced position of protagonists who commit transgressional acts but who are broadly redeemed either by their generally moral character by or

some transformation of atonement – perhaps any number of Kurosawa's characters, including both the doctor and gangster in *Drunken Angel* (Akira Kurosawa, 1948). Indeed it is to Kurosawa that we will turn for examples of a middle ground where the moral implications of transgressional acts are probed but without moralising and where a collectivist as opposed to personal morality plays out.

The problem I faced with *Straw Dogs* and much of the "cinema of excess" is, as Woolley points out, an apparent encouragement to recognise and accept transgressional acts, without demanding either a mitigating backstory or that the protagonist atone for it. This is not in itself a problem of witnessing graphic transgressional acts on screen, as discussed in the 'Disgust Issue' of *Film-Philosophy* (2011), but of the role they serve in the narrative arc. Gregory Desilet draws on Derrida to draw a distinction "between genuine conflict and violent spectacle" (Desilet, 2014, 203). Crucially, Derrida suggests that in a genuine conflict a process of decision must arise where one or more parties must not know what to do. The decision becomes an ethical one because there is insufficient knowledge. Were the parties to know exactly what to do they would follow a programme, and in cinema this would then be merely a violent spectacle.

There are then many strands by which we can explore the ethical in cinema, but we start with Aristotle.

Developing Aristotle's 'terrible'

Aristotle's **Poetics**

In the *Poetics* Aristotle develops a detailed theory of poetry, theatre and music. His analysis of tragedy in Part VI begins:

> Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (Aristotle, 1922, p. 23)

I take two key words from this passage, "serious" and "purgation" as pointing to the value of Aristotle's thought. Note that he has already included the aesthetic as central to the art of drama, but its purpose is purgative, or, to use another key Greek term, cathartic. Note also that he has anticipated the film-school dictum "show, don't tell" by roughly two and a half millennia. So, how do we construct a drama involving the transgressional that is serious and cathartic? By careful consideration of the difference between the "terrible" and the "monstrous".

Aristotle is not interested in the character that is pure evil, neither does a back-story justify evil acts. He insists that the protagonist's character must lie between the extremes of good and evil, a man "who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty" (Aristotle, 1922, p. 45). The key to the "terrible" lies in our response, as he elaborates upon:

> A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. (Aristotle, 1922, p. 45)

Aristotle's further demand that the protagonist be "highly renowned and prosperous – a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families," (Aristotle, 1922, p. 45) is not suitable for our democratic age. "Nobility" where inherited or apparently signified by wealth or renown is not the point to us; a "nobility" of character is more likely found in unexpected places and without such signifiers. Other elements of Aristotle's thought on tragedy must also be rejected, for example when he says in respect to character that "the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless." But, conscious that no thinker rises above his or her time in all respects or even in many, we can still find much of relevance to a cinema of excess, for example his idea that a drama cannot ascend to the rank of "serious" if a deus ex machina is deployed to rescue the dramatist from a poor plot (Aristotle, 1922, p. 55).

Aristotle's rejects "just deserts" narratives – of personal revenge or even justice meted out by the collective – as merely satisfying what he calls our moral sense. We may want to see an evil person apprehended and punished, but this moral sense often slides into something less noble as we begin to take pleasure in witnessing the perpetrator suffer in turn.

Developing the 'terrible'

In my work I adapt Aristotle's distinction between the genuinely terrible and the merely monstrous, though I also use the term "grotesque" for the latter (King, 2009, p. 12). I found the work of Stephen Prince (2003) on film violence and his concept of "emotional bracketing" helpful here. He defines emotional bracketing as a method that works by "opening a space inside the narrative where the viewer can recover …" and expands on this by saying that in employing this device "a filmmaker is acknowledging that the violence on-screen is intended to have an emotional impact on viewers and that these viewers have the prerogative to recover from that impact …" Furthermore, "By contrast, the absence of emotional bracketing can suggest that a filmmaker is staging violence without a corresponding moral perspective" (p. 245). This idea can apply to all transgressional acts and is at heart quite simple: if there is a pause in the action for the audience to not just recover but have time for the transgressional image to hang in the imagination, then its moral implications are bound to surface, however much cinema generally invites one to suspend morality. Hence for a scene to count as terrible rather than grotesque its protagonist must be neither totally noble nor totally evil, and the transgressional act has to be followed by "opening a space inside the narrative" in one of various ways, for example the horrified reaction of witnesses. Or, if the protagonist is now on a journey of redemption we need to see him or her in shock, a state with which we can empathise.

From the transgressional to the spectacular; agency

Aristotle was concerned with tragedy as perhaps the only serious dramatic form, possibly to strengthen his argument against Plato. However I want to extend the idea of the serious film – one we can enfranchise to philosophy – beyond the tragic and beyond those that contain transgressional material of the extreme kind to anything we can call "spectacle". This is partly because as philosophers we find it almost impossible to retain critical distance from film as compared to a written text. Amongst the voluminous writings on *The Matrix* (Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, 1999) Pat Mellencamp tells us: "I felt defenseless in front of *The Matrix* – and I am a film professor long familiar with disavowal (the use of 'it's only a movie' to quell anxiety)" (Mellencamp, 2002, p. 91). That was my problem with *Straw Dogs*: I felt defenceless against it, particularly as it had all the credentials of "serious" cinema. This can also be expressed as an issue of seduction, as when Vaughan (2010) says of Baudrillard's book of that name: "*Seduction* has yet to be understood as a praise for the world of appearances, play, and reversibility, as encouragement for the resistance of the orders of law, certainty, and production" (p. 41).

We need the seduction to play, as Charles Taylor (2007) explores for us under the rubric of "festivals of misrule" or ludic intervals (p. 46). These were days in the medieval Catholic calendar which allowed reversal under controlled conditions – a so-

cial safety valve abandoned under the primness of Protestantism. So, we are powerless under the seduction of the transgressive spectacle – whether understood as the hyperreal, or festivals of misrule, or just entertainment – but I argue we can still distinguish within the spectacle the serious-for-philosophy film from one that is not. Distance comes with time, so forty years after *Straw Dogs* I can think clearly about it; eighteen years after *The Matrix* we may find the corded telephone merely quaint.

In my work I introduce another criterion: real-world agency. In the "agon", the struggle or game of life, the capacities of the protagonist and antagonist must be plausible or the serious and the tragic are lost. Aristotle objected to the deus ex machina, but why? Because it represents implausible agency. This is not just a question of personal agency through physical and mental strength, or such agency amplified through magic, arms or technology. It is also a political question: to what degree is the will of one person enacted by others? Or the will of one group instantiated through force over another group? If we forget the balance of powers that emerge in real life – either formally as in government or informally as in the family and other structures – we have properly entered the realm of escapism. Escapism has at its heart elevated and implausible levels of agency, and escapist films cannot therefore be either serious or tinged with the tragic, even if we are temporarily defenceless in front of them as spectacle.

Catharsis

A film where its transgressional material conveys only the monstrous may speak to the human condition, i.e. illustrate all that is bad in us. On the other hand a film that is "terrible" goes further by holding us to account for our transgressions, and it does so by removing barriers to identification with the protagonist. No audience identifies with the purely evil but we all recognise ourselves as open to temptation, particularly if we are terribly wronged and dwell on thoughts of revenge. For example the strength of the film *The Son* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, 2002) is that we simply do not know if the protagonist will take violent revenge on the young man who murdered his baby boy. The young man has already been judged, sentenced and released but we must question right to the end whether the protagonist's "own moral order" will supervene that of the polis, and what that would mean.

Let us pursue this question through the issue of catharsis. The term means to "cleanse" or "remove impurities" (Lucas, 1980, p. 276) and our understanding of Aristotle's thought on this has been open to some revision in the last century. As we saw, tragedy for him is conveyed through various key features, one being "through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." But what precisely does it mean to say that the audience experience then becomes cathartic? Aristotle's introduction of the terrible as superior to the monstrous may well have been

a rejection of Plato's dismissal of theatre as inferior mimeses guaranteed only to produce an orgy of emotion and passion. Catharsis justifies the spectacle because the emotions are corrected in their extremes. But why, it is objected, would Aristotle think "that pity and fear purify pity and fear" (Lucas, 1980, p. 278)? Lucas gives this answer: "The katharsis affects not the emotional quality of the experience but the subsequent emotional stability of the spectator." Here then is the clue: however emotional we may feel over the spectacle of revenge delivered it leaves no emotional stability on leaving the cinema. It is more like participating in a festival of misrule. The concern then arises when what had been the sparse emetic becomes the regular diet.

Applying the distinction

To apply the criteria discussed above we can take three pairs of films as illustration and argue that in each pair one is properly serious for our purposes while the other is less so. These pairs are: *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and *Straw Dogs*; *Captain Phillips* (Paul Greengrass, 2013) and *The Revenant* (Alejandro G. Iñárritu, 2015); and *Throne of Blood* (Akira Kurosawa, 1957) and *Macbeth* (Roman Polanski, 1971). They have been chosen for having plausible agency.

Silence of the Lambs *and* Straw Dogs

Straw Dogs draws on the fears that city-dwellers have of those "in the sticks", such as in films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972) and *Southern Comfort* (Walter Hill, 1981). The hidden assumption behind many such films is that inbreeding makes rural dwellers violent and stupid; indeed in *Blair Witch 2: Book of Shadows* (Joe Berlinger, 2000) one of the protagonists declares that "the gene pool is shallow here" after first encountering locals. In *Straw Dogs* the urban American David Sumner ends up fighting for his life against villagers in rural Cornwall (a plot device that most Britons would find implausible). The locals engage in rape and violence within which Sumner is caught up and has to overcome, all without any police intervention after the local magistrate is shot by one of those attacking his property. That Sumner finally prevails is tribute to the late awakening of his courage, resourcefulness and own personal violence, and can be read as a "rite-of-passage" killing similar to that in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976). *Straw Dogs* finishes in a similar way with the smiling protagonist, satisfyingly initiated into extreme violence, driving a car. Sumner has self-defence as justification for his killings but the grin on his face violates Prince's requirement for emotional bracketing: there is no space here for Sumner to exhibit shock, the normal reaction of the non-psychopath in his circumstances. In Aristotle's terms Sumner was brought low by adversity and not by his own weakness and frailty even though these qualities are manifest in his personality. On the other hand the villagers who attack his home are painted as monstrous. And on Derrida's criterion

we have only a programmatic descent to violence because Sumner has all the knowledge he needs regarding his course of action: he is under deadly attack.

In *Silence of the Lambs* Hannibal Lecter is the monstrous against which is pitted the vulnerable female agent Clarice Starling, who also has to discover courage and resourcefulness to prevail. Hannibal Lecter is a classic "grotesque" and made to look so in order that we do not identify with him – even the British accent helps here. Starling, the rookie agent, characterized as a "rube" (unsophisticated country person) in Lecter's first assessment of her, is forced into a terrible situation as she realises that Lecter has information on the potential victim of another serial killer, and that only by offering to him much of her inner world can she gain this. Lecter does not wish to rape her but analyse her, and the deeper he penetrates her psyche the greater his gratification (King, 2009, p. 68). This is what is terrible in Starling's situation: the question as to how much she should share of her intimate thoughts with a monster who on past form would not just hesitate to murder but also to eat her. Indeed, because of the cannibalism element the film can be accused of sensationalism in a way that *Straw Dogs* cannot. However, both films constitute a cinema of excess; in both the outcome is uncertain as the protagonists are, in different ways, vulnerable; and in both they prevail. But the crucial difference is this: Sumner prevails by becoming as monstrous as his opponents, thus overcoming his vulnerability. In contrast Starling prevails by making herself ever more vulnerable. Identification with Sumner does not purge our pity and fear because most of us cannot imagine ourselves slaughtering or being slaughtered by Cornish villagers. Identification with Starling does purge our pity and fear because, at one remove we fear for the life of the woman she is desperate to save, and more directly we fear that Lecter's seeming ability to escape incarceration means that he might yet kill her (despite promises not to). We certainly do not wish to be eaten by Lecter but we sincerely wish we had Starling's purpose and resourcefulness. And by Derrida's criterion her decisions are all tinged with the ethical because she has insufficient knowledge of either how Lecter will react or the exact situation of the next victim.

Captain Phillips *and* The Revenant

Captain Phillips is the close dramatisation of the 2009 Maersk Alabama hijacking in which captain Richard Phillips was taken hostage by Somali pirates. *The Revenant* is based on the life of Hugh Glass, an American trapper left for dead by his companions in the early 19th century. In both cases we can say that art has improved on life, and that they are on the surface equally serious, if not sombre, films. But even a quick assessment shows that the hijacking story meets Aristotle's requirement for tragedy where the survival story does not. Both protagonists are brought low by adversity, but we are conscious throughout that Phillips has all our ordinary frailties despite his courageous and quick-witted action, and at the end of the film his breakdown is truly cathartic (much of which is down to the performance of Tom Hanks). Glass in contrast survives repeated mauling by a grizzly bear, being half-

buried alive in below-zero conditions, long immersion in freezing rivers and countless bullets. We may admire that but few of us imagine we could possibly live through similar trials. At the end he pursues those that brought him low, in particular John Fitzgerald who left Glass for dead and killed his son. It is then a revenge movie, not much mitigated by the fact that Glass refrains from the act of final killing, confident Fitzgerald will die as he lets him fall to hostile Indians. We see no frailty or weakness in Glass, quite the opposite, while we see Fitzgerald as purely evil, a "grotesque" figure. Phillips on the other hand is traumatised at the end precisely because he is covered in the blood of one of his young Somali captors who he talks with and has compassion for. Indeed we gain much understanding through the film about why some Somalis resort to piracy, posing in this case genuine questions about globalisation for example. The pirates are flawed people but not incomprehensibly evil and are the tragic figures in this story. Here, where Phillips is too honourable to meet Aristotle's criteria on his own – though we could argue that he unthinkingly embodies globalisation and its inequities – it is the ensemble that rises above the monstrous.

Returning to *Straw Dogs* for a moment, I would suggest that in comparing the beatific smile on Sumner's face after killing his assailants with the shock registered in Phillips's face at proximate violent death – not at his hands – we have a stark image of the monstrous versus the terrible in film. Both are conveyed by actors of great talent.

Throne of Blood *and* Macbeth

Polanski's version of *Macbeth* is considered true to Shakespeare and serves perhaps as the best test of Aristotle's thought because both the film and its original are mostly regarded as high examples of the dramatic form of tragedy. But early on as the story unfolds we find again quite missing just the quality that Aristotle insisted on: the averagely decent character of the protagonist. All we know of Macbeth at the outset is that he is a brave and loyal general, held in high regard by Duncan. On the dark whisperings of three witches that changes in an instant. Around twenty minutes into the film Macbeth has formed the desire for the throne and to dispose of Duncan. Only a short conversation with his wife is enough for the murder to be agreed, and when Macbeth has second thoughts she easily turns him to his original course, appealing to his manhood.

In Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* we find a close transposition of the Macbeth story into feudal Japan, but, as Somers-Hall (2013, p. 68) observes, the move "allows for a fundamental transformation of its meaning." Somers-Hall argues that it is the influence of Noh on Kurosawa, and particularly its aesthetic, that allows for this transformation, but I will suggest something slightly different. Washizu (the Macbeth-equivalent) does indeed murder Lord Tsuzuki (the Duncan equivalent) but in this version we find many revisions to the story that add up to a quite different pro-

tagonist. After encountering an evil spirit – equivalent to the witches – and hearing the equivalent prophecy of titles gained, Miki (the Banquo-equivalent) says to Washizu "every samurai longs to be master of the castle," repeated later by Washizu's wife, Asaji. In other words, it is an ordinary ambition. We are now as far into the movie as when Macbeth has decided to murder Duncan, but that decision is yet a long way off for Washizu. It is his wife that eventually persuades him, against far more resistance than Macbeth offers, and for a very different reason. She argues that the prophecy, now known to Lord Tsuzuki, means that Tsuzuki has every reason to kill Washizu. Up to this point his loyalty overrules his natural ambition, but in casting murder as self-defence Washizu is finally convinced. From here to his eventual death and Asaji's madness we follow a familiar path, though strewn with considerably less bodies than in Shakespeare. Washizu's death also has a very different unfolding. The prophecy by this time is public knowledge and when the forest moves on the castle Washizu's men know – along with their leader – that the game is up, and so it is they who kill him, having long suspected his responsibility for Lord Tsuzuki's murder. Washizu dies in a hail of arrows from his own militia.

Why these changes of plot within an otherwise faithful transposition? Because, I would argue, Kurosawa is not content to paint a portrait of a purely monstrous individual. By allowing us twice as long to understand Washizu's situation and personality, and by adding the element of self-defence to that of ambition, Kurosawa has indeed gone a long way to reconstructing Aristotle's "terrible" out of Shakespeare's "monstrous". We can also draw on Derrida to say that Washizu's decision was made under insufficient knowledge. It is clear that had he been able to answer his wife over Lord Tsuzuki's intentions he would not have taken the decision to murder him. Macbeth on the other hand continues to fight even when he learns that Macduff was not "born of woman"; neither are there any hidden facts that could have changed his original decision to murder Duncan.

The polis vs. the psychological

Staying with *Throne of Blood* and *Macbeth* for the moment, we can profitably turn to Hegel's elaboration on Aristotle's theory of tragedy, usefully introduced to us in the paper by Somers-Hall. Hegel places emphasis on the resolution of the tragedy and then goes on to declare that "modern" tragedy has a different quality to that of the classical form (Hegel, 1975, p. 1231). He begins by noting that the tragic hero must be single-minded in adhering to a subset of all the virtues, or "solid interests" as he puts it. In our example Macbeth is courageous, determined, ambitious and inventive and so, Hegel says, such protagonists "have inseparably identified themselves with some single particular aspect of those solid interests we have enumerated above, and are prepared to answer for that identification." (Hegel, 1975, p. 1195) He adds:

> The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has justification; while each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other. The consequence is that in its moral life, and because of it, each is nevertheless involved in guilt." (Hegel 1975, p. 1196)

Within our six films it is perhaps Phillips as officer of global capitalism in opposition to the Somali pirates that best illustrate this idea of Hegel's. What is finally required, according to Hegel, is the proper tragic resolution of the conflict (1975, p. 1197). He invokes the Absolute in this, an "eternal and inviolable something" or "eternal justice" which as Somers-Hall (2013, p. 69) points out is embodied for Hegel in the Greek polis. In contrast the modern tragedy has a protagonist not bound by eternal justice, and Hegel is quick to identify Shakespeare amongst the first and greatest of the modern playwrights so defined. Crucially Hegel sees such protagonists as "free artists of their own selves," (1975, p. 1228) an idea that I would suggest is deeply Romantic. He says:

> In this case the sole spectacle offered to us is that the modern individual with the non-universal nature of his character, his circumstances, and the complications in which he is involved, is necessarily surrendered to the fragility of all that is mundane and must endure the fate of finitude. (Hegel, 1975, p. 1231)

Putting it another way the tragic protagonist and the resolution of the conflict can be framed either within the greater moral order of the polis, in which case we have Aristotle's "terrible", or it can be framed within what Somers-Hall calls "freedom" of the individual, in which case we have Aristotle's "monstrous".

I prefer the dramatic juxtaposition of the "polis" to the "psychological" as the alternatives here, and in Kurosawa's retelling of the Macbeth story the distinction becomes clear. I would claim that the Japanese film-maker has transposed a merely psychological protagonist into one of the polis. He does this, as we have seen, by allowing twice as long to take the decision to murder his master against his moral sense; for the possibility that this is pre-emptive defence; and finally for the resolution of his death to be at the hands of the polis rather than another individual bent on revenge. In contrast Polanski's Macbeth is properly psychological in all the extraordinary ways that Shakespeare prefigures not only the Romantic but the Freudian in drama, where Greek hysteria takes the place of Greek catharsis, hysteria in this sense being a delayed and prolonged emotional state with no resolution. Lady Macbeth goes Lady gaga, one might say.

Throne of Blood, as we have examined, may steer more to the terrible than the monstrous, but is it therefore more cathartic in Aristotle's sense than Polanski's *Macbeth*? Here I draw away a little from Somers-Hall's analysis again, because I

would argue that, while Noh is certainly a part of the reframing of meaning, it is also a barrier to identification with Washizu, particularly for a Western audience. Noh as an aesthetic is present in Kurosawa's film in the austere sets and ritualistic enactment of dramatic moments, making it harder to identify with Washizu. In contrast, despite the more monstrous nature of Polanski's Macbeth, the naturalistic rendition of the film, in particular the details of the imagined feudal life, all help us identify with the polis of the time, a polis under threat from its monstrous new ruler. It is in another pairing of US-Japanese films that we better see where Kurosawa's concerns takes us, *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960) and *Seven Samurai* (Akira Kurosawa, 1954). Here Kurosawa's film comes first and is later transposed into the Western genre, and where the whole question of the polis is again made stark. *Seven Samurai* avoids the Noh aesthetic and embodies more deeply the collectivist instinct in a period where the Japanese feudal polis is breaking down. I argue elsewhere that Kurosaw's is a pacifist film, but in its transposition to the Wild West the Sturges film loses all of the compassion and ambiguity of character that Kurosawa paints (King, 2014, p. 171-173).

In these comparisons we can remark that Hegel's "modern" drama when instantiated in America loses the sense of an "eternal and inviolable something", a moral order, or "eternal justice", because the polis itself is either unformed – as in the case of the Western genre – or is dismissed as endemically corrupt in the modern city. In this context the vigilante hero, such as Batman, metes out justice as personal revenge. I would suggest that most of Clint Eastwood's work, both as actor and director, can be understood as "modern" in Hegel's sense because its protagonists so often become executioners in the absence of the polis. In contrast Kurosawa's samurai at the end of *Seven Samurai* mourn not only their lost ronin friends but also that their way of life – based on violence – is deficient compared to that of the peaceful farmers whose polis they have saved and which will persist long after the remaining samurai have perished. That Japanese culture throws up protagonists and scenarios closer to Aristotle's "terrible" than to the "monstrous" is also shown, I would suggest, in the entire oeuvre of the animator Hayao Miyazaki.

Perhaps Somers-Hall, via Aristotle and Hegel, has bequeathed us a key term in "polis". It is in the polis that the moral structure of the universe, or the Absolute, or whatever phrase we prefer, is embodied. This civic virtue can as easily be argued from the humanist tradition as from a religious one so we may avoid the problems of essentialism which terms such as "the Absolute" imply. Turning to the other film pairings discussed here we can say that the polis in *Straw Dogs* is simply absent as the moderating power over individual antagonisms, while in *Silence of the Lambs* it appears to lack competence until a female officer of the law brings to it her subtlety of thought, and is so redeemed. In *Captain Phillips* the polis has only shaky remit over international waters infested with pirates but when it finally arrives it is most efficient; more, the eponymous captain embodies all civic virtues as he places himself at extreme risk to protect his crew, his ship, and his cargo. In contrast *The*

Revenant epitomises that strand in fiction which declares the polis to be irredeemably absent, corrupt, or incompetent. Its Wild West setting is informative however. Perhaps American scepticism to the polis and the resulting vigilante instinct arise from a lingering frontier mentality and this is what so deeply informs much of the American cinema of excess. Similarly if we return to the Seder scene in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* it is clear that the characters arguing against any moral order in the universe do so because they believe that the German polis massively failed the Jews. Perhaps this is what informs the oeuvre of Allen generally, or at least in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Match Point* (Woody Allen, 2005). Desilet compares the latter film to *Taxi Driver*: "Just as Scorsese does in *Taxi Driver*, Allen offers absolutely nothing in *Match Point* to place the actions in a critical context" (2014, p. 206). It seems that morality in such films is merely an option for their protagonists who are "free artists of their own selves", as Hegel says.

I am not suggesting that we now have a complete system for discerning the serious-for-philosophy film but perhaps something to build on. Perhaps we also have a way of understanding Wittgenstein when he described Shakespeare's plays as "'completely unrealistic' and full of 'asymmetry', presenting themselves as phenomena to be nodded at and admired, rather than processed and understood," (cited in Sullivan, 2007, p. 3). Wittgenstein, Voltaire, Tolstoy and Shaw, all sceptical of Shakespeare, may have seen such dramas as hermeneutically closed and so incapable of "doing" philosophy because they were not of the "terrible".

Philosophy and criticism of excess

George Steiner says: "... I believe that literary criticism has about it neither rigour nor proof. Where it is honest, it is passionate, private experience seeking to persuade" (1961, p. 351). Of all the films discussed here, I found the ending of Captain Phillips the most cathartic but recognise this to be mere private experience. I do wish to persuade however that in Aristotle's "terrible" there is measure by which we can seek out films that are serious-for-philosophy. Perhaps we are deeply shaken by the end of Polanski's *Macbeth* or Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* but my argument here is that such films, veering more to the monstrous than the terrible, and meeting more Hegel's description of "modern" rather than "classical" tragedy, make fewer demands on us. They convey a message not so much of justice as the primacy of the individual over society. We may recall the words of Margaret Thatcher: "... there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families." Do we not laud the ancient Greeks because of their advanced polis, one which contradicts Thatcher's sentiment? And do we not have to be Greek to some extent to do philosophy, as Derrida says? If philosophy fights back by drawing us to the ethics of other-as-self, we cannot avoid the conclusion that such films as *Macbeth* or *Straw Dogs* remain merely psychological, and as Hegel says, "must endure the fate of finitude."

We may of course participate in merely monstrous transgressional films as seduction or post-Protestant festivals of misrule. These may permit a kind of social emetic, possibly of value as long as the emetic does not become the diet. And when I recall the writings of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor on the festivals of misrule it is not a written page I see in my mind but a scene from a film full of transgressional excess – the festival procession in *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973). That is the undeniable power of cinema.

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