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‘Vengeance is Mine.’ Heroes from the Movie-Powerhouse of Emotions.

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Abstract: In this text, I am guided by an interest in cinema as a well-understood emotion machine which creates a common sense. From this perspective, I approach the subject matter of heroism, using the emotions linked to vengeance as a connection between heroism and the cinematic production of common sense. In so doing, I put forward several theses for discussion: that film—like art in general—is a medium which founds community; that such a founding of community essentially occurs via the dimensions of emotion, in our case the dimension of a specific aesthetic emotion; that the hero is a figure emerging from the founding of community; and, finally, that feelings of vengeance—like figures of heroism—are made present in cinema in an exemplary manner.

One of the problems characteristic for my generation “Born in the 50s” (The Police) focuses on the concept of “culture industry”. As is generally known, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno coined this concept at the beginning of the 1940s in their US-American exile, faced with a culture not geared to the paradigm of the autonomous work of art, but to industrial standards of mass production. Popular music, radio, television and, above all, film ‘made in Hollywood’ stand for this culture, which therefore appears as unculture. People like us did not have to learn this by making an effort to appropriate texts from Critical Theory, but it was evident—particularly being a young critical contemporary—through one’s own experience. Those born into the *Schlager*, the German “hit song” or music purely for entertainment, and the *Heimatfilm*, did not have to go to the Frankfurt School in order to realize

that something was not right with these films and songs. And they realized it because there was another kind of popular music and film. Above all, there were western movies, showing a landscape and a type of character—predominantly male, of course—who announced a completely different, wilder form of life than the ranger in the silver forest.¹ It turned out to be somehow prohibited to approve of the cultural products as a critic, and later a ‘critical critic’, which you did, in fact, approve of, as a contemporary. You thus had to struggle with a schizophrenic split of sorts. When you wanted to ennoble yourself intellectually—which, as philosophy students we wanted, of course, to do—you saw yourself as a figure of what Hegel called “unhappy consciousness”, a consciousness which both, incorporates a contradiction, and is aware of the fact.²

Against this background, my interest in, no, my love of film is crossed by ambivalences, and a large part of my theoretical work—but not only mine—tends to justify these ambivalences. Critical Theory in the sense of the Frankfurt School, and thus Hegel as well, still offers a very helpful framework for this, particularly since Critical Theory always accentuates its historical character as well, which includes the point that a theory which is critical of society has to react to subjective and collective experiences. Bearing this in mind, my book on the *Heroic History of Modernity* is the extended answer to the hypothetical question of how it would be to go to the cinema with Hegel.³ In the heroic figures of the movies—above all westerns, crime and science fiction movies—we encounter variants of the heroic figure of modernity: the self or subjectivity.

In this text I am guided, though, by another interest, namely an interest in cinema as a well-understood *machine of emotions* which creates a common sense, a sense for what is culturally common to us. From this perspective, I once again approach the subject of *heroism*, using the emotions connected with *vengeance* as a connection between the two. In so doing, I put forward in a more general way several theses for discussion: firstly, that film—like art in general—is a medium which founds community; secondly, that such a founding of community essentially occurs via dimensions of emotion, in our case a specific aesthetic emotion; thirdly, that the hero—as a figure of our mythological and aesthetic-dramatic narrative—is a figure emerging from the founding of community; and, finally, that feelings of vengeance—like figures of heroism—are made present in cinema in a representative way.

I

“It starts with a love story and ends with divorce. It starts in the year 1933 and ends in ruins. The great operas open promisingly with elevated sentiment, and by the fifth act we are counting the dead.”⁴ The soft voice-over of Alexander Kluge narrates this quotation in his movie *The Power of Emotions* (*Macht der Gefühle*). “All emotions”, the voice tells us, “believe in a happy

ending”.⁵ And yet, the little and big, private and historical catastrophes take their course—at the opera, on screen, in real life. Kluge also emphasizes the similarities between cinema and opera. Like Werner Schroeter—the director of films, operas, and theatre who died a few years ago—he speaks of opera as a “powerhouse of emotions” (*Kraftwerk der Gefühle*. See the conversation with Werner Schroeter in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 19, 2010.) Opera works like a generating station, creating endless amounts of emotional energy, so to speak. One can claim the same for cinema. As has often been remarked, in the 20th century, cinema has assumed the legacy of opera. *The Power of Emotions*, in any case, is a movie where opera plays a starring role.

What does “all emotions believe in a happy ending” actually mean? What, specifically, does it mean in the case of an aggressive emotion linked to vengeance? The German word “Ausgang” means “ending”, “result” or “solution”. So this phrase implies that the vengeance has come to be, and that its fulfilment accomplishes a feeling of satisfaction—a satisfaction of one’s own agitated existence. A realized vengeance thus has the effect of a realized desire: the production of something which is desirable in the sense of eudaimonia or the self-reliant idea of the good life. Emotions, then, and perhaps all emotions, believe in a happy occurrence in which one is involved because it is eudaimonic; because it illustrates what is deemed to be a life worth living. Unlike merely physical sensations, like pain or erotic lust, emotions have a cognitive content, to use an expression from the analytical tradition of philosophy. They point to something, to things or persons, which then acquire an emotional value. These things or persons then appear, for example, worth loving or hating, attractive or repulsive, interesting or boring. Emotions state, indicate—like a warning lamp—and betray, divulge, give away, how one is feeling. When we want something not as a means to an end, but for its own sake, its value is shown solely in emotions or affects.⁶

II

In the words of Kluge and Schröter, film can be called a powerhouse of emotions as a successor or technological update of opera. And to the extent that all emotions, even aggressive ones, believe in a happy ending, film is a powerhouse which produces energetic performances of the good life. Since these performances are, in addition, shared more or less collectively—for the very reason that otherwise they would not be presented in a film, a cultural product which always has to be collectively successful as well, making a profit within the market economy—film is a medium potentially able to *found community*. Naturally this assertion requires further explanation with regard to both the history of ideas and aesthetics.

The idea that the field of the aesthetic possesses an essential function for political and moral community initially came from the Scottish and German Enlightenment, represented by David Hume, Edmund Burke and Adam

Smith, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Immanuel Kant. Expressed in their terms, this is the field of taste, judgement, *sensus communis* and bourgeois-moral upbringing. Balthasar Gracian may have given the initial impetus to a history of ‘good taste’ in a ‘good society’ in the first half of the 17th century, but it was to be another one hundred years before philosophy was ready to take this concept seriously, particularly in its politico-moral significance. The discourse of the late 18th century took place, namely, against the darkly coloured background of a conviction that growing affluence and increasing individualism threaten the integrity of a community—its righteousness and intactness.⁷ And it is already a basic conviction shared by the founding figures of modern political philosophy, Thomas Hobbes and Spinoza, that a social bond cannot evolve from reason, or at least not from reason alone, whether that be moral reason oriented to the common good or economic reason oriented to self-interest. A social bond requires emotions, passions and affects to, at least, an equal degree.⁸

The 18th century, which is also commonly known as the century of Enlightenment, was not singularly interested in reason “per se”. It was also the age of “sensibility” and a new theory of emotions partly inspired by the success of the natural sciences and their sensual-empirical procedures. It was the novel—Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761)—and in particular theatre, that permitted their respective audiences of readers and spectators to feel sympathy with the characters portrayed, and in so doing to enjoy their own ability to feel. In those days, it was not embarrassing to weep in public, but rather a sign of moral sensibility. And this aesthetic-cultural characteristic has surely been preserved. What connects the theatre of the 18th century with the opera of the 19th century and the Hollywood movies of the 20th century is primarily the peculiarity, that these art forms share, of not making a categorical distinction between so-called higher values and the expression of feelings, between morality and emotionality.⁹ A much-quoted phrase by Douglas Sirk has become a downright formula for film: “motion is emotion”. The *moving images* of film—of the motion picture—are both presentations of moving actions, and inwardly moving (touching, stirring). And although Sirk’s phrase is especially accurate for certain film *genres*—for example the genre of the melodrama, in which he was a master, but also that of the horror film—it is also possible to describe film in general, very positively, as an *emotion machine*.¹⁰

It is important to point out that an aesthetic emotion is a specific emotion. This, I am convinced, can best be understood, via the tradition of Kant and John Dewey, as the effect of an interplay between different dimensions of experience and rationality, namely the cognitive, moral-ethical (including political and religious) and sensual dimensions, and imagination. And as the effect of an interplay, aesthetic emotion is not dominated by a particular principle, for example that of formulating a truth-apt theory or a moral obligation,

or of increasing physical enjoyment, or of adhering strictly to means-ends relationships. Far more, it keeps these principles playfully in the air, in a state of tension. By following this principle (which is not a principle), it is the intrinsic dimension of experience itself, the very process of experiencing, which forms the core of aesthetic emotion. To this extent, aesthetic emotion is never merely a feeling, but—literally—the having (undergoing, producing) of an experience.¹¹

An aesthetic emotion is the expression of an aesthetic experience. When the phenomenon underlying such an emotion is a work of art, in an act of self-reflection that work's theme may happen to be itself a process of generating aesthetic emotions. *Accidental Hero* (1992) is a good example of this. The film is about a loser who never stops complaining, but accidentally becomes a hero when, reluctantly, he rescues people from a crashed aeroplane. More precisely, he becomes a hero by being made into a hero. In our age, the authority capable of achieving this effect is the mass media. The film's director, Stephen Frears, was attracted by the theme of amalgamating authentic yearning—for a noble story—and cynical marketing. He consolidates this theme in a scene where an ambitious top reporter, played by Geena Davis, receives a prize. During her acceptance speech she begins to peel an onion, as an allegory for uncovering the layers to find the true story. The evening before, a manager had jumped from the roof of a skyscraper before her very eyes—and the lens of a cameraman. As an investigative journalist, she had started to peel back the layers of the man's life like those of an onion: What drove him to suicide? A lover, or blackmail or maybe even paedophilia? But she also “senses” that what people really yearn for is not yet another story of filth, misery and crime, but a special story, “one which opens our eyes to the beautiful, to the noble”. The tale of the reluctant hero is just such a story, and the film depicts how it sinks deeper and deeper into a morass of egotisms by all those involved in it, including and especially by the accidental hero himself. But its effect, like the peeling of an onion, is predictable: people start to cry. The film, itself a mass medium, shows us this as well, in a last self-critical twist. In this respect, the reporter's tears can be interpreted as tears for us all, for our ineffectual search for truth (the truth of pure morality). Art—theatre, opera, film—is able to produce emotions, and that means: to generate them artificially. Since the mid-18th century, theory has acknowledged that in art nothing is genuine, and certainly not the emotions it presents, and yet everything appears as if it were genuine.¹²

III

As the theatre of sensibility, opera and cinema (especially melodramatic cinema) underline the value of sentimental enjoyment in the modern subject. However, it should not be forgotten that what we call modernity and, correspondingly, subjectivity are not homogenous notions. I believe there are

at least three distinct layers: the classical, the agonal and the hybrid.¹³ The classical layer of modernity denotes the self-substantiating subjectivity; the agonal layer permits an inner contradiction of this self-justification to emerge without solution; and the hybrid layer reacts to the other two with creative combination. Conceiving of modernity stratificatorily means comprehending it in parallels, overlaps and changing emphases of its layers, through which subjectivity advances to become the correspondingly changing hero. The self is the hero of modern philosophy that Hegel encapsulated.

It is also Hegel whom we have to thank for a philosophical theory of heroism. Tellingly, he presents it in greatest detail within the framework of his lectures on aesthetics. Just as art—in its function of creating truth and community—belongs to the past, so heroism, as a manner of acting and a model of character, also belongs to the past, of the so-called mythical age. Within modernity, that constitutional-democratic and capitalist age, the heroic can only surface in two ways: firstly, under the exceptional conditions of a revolution or war, and secondly, presuming the conditions of everyday life, within art. Not only do we draw our initial knowledge of heroes from art, from the ancient epics and tragedies, but art and heroism also display a structural agreement. Just as the hero embodies something universally valid, so the artist in his works presents something universally valid. The hero is the personification of a sociocultural whole, an individual who embodies a community; the artist is correspondingly the hero of a socio-cultural truth which manifests itself in his art. Both the hero and the artist permit an “idea”, a concept of reality, to manifest itself. And yet this is only true for premodern epochs, particularly for ancient Greece. Here the hero becomes the “founder of states, so that right and order, law and morals, proceed from them.”¹⁴

We cannot ignore that Hegel is overly convinced by history being “the progress of the consciousness of freedom” and by the corresponding dialectic logic of “sublation” (*Aufhebung*), in which destruction of the old simultaneously serves to preserve it—by transforming it and elevating it to a new level.¹⁵ The tragic, and ironic voice of romanticism—which I call the “agonal” layer of modernity objected to this when Hegel was still alive. And with the popular art form of the film, the 20th century has also brought forth a genre which sees an intriguing return of Hegel’s characterizations of premodern, mythical heroism: the truly US-American genre of the western. Generally speaking, one can immediately add that the popular art form of film—more precisely the feature film or motion picture—relies on the figure of the hero just as the novel did previously. In cinema, at any rate, heroism is still very much alive.

IV

And so, vengeance too is still very much alive. The feeling connected with revenge is a special feeling.¹⁶ The emotion attached to vengeance is an “aggression affect”, like anger, fury and hate, envy and jealousy, wrath and outrage, and is therefore connected to violence against others in a closer sense, or to impulses of action in a more loose sense.¹⁷ Revenge is a reaction to suffered (real or imagined) injustices, is therefore an act of retaliation, and one which is subjective and arbitrary (as opposed to: regulated by law). Aristotle was early to distinguish between vengeance (*timoría*) and punishment (*kólasis*), but in the mid-17th century, Hobbes was the first to place revenge definitively within the bounds of public authority and general criminal law. In the early 19th century, this enabled Hegel to state that heroism had become outmoded. The position of the individual taking the law (of action) into his own hands was now assumed by the operatives of public power—public prosecutors, judges, enforcement officers.¹⁸

Since their Greek beginnings, literature and art have portrayed vengeance as a driving motive behind heroic action. It all began with the first documented Greek poetry and one of the most famous heroes of our culture. The *Iliad* starts with the “anger” or “rancour” (*ménis*) of Achilles, thus honouring this emotion with being at the very onset of our culture; but Achilles also stands for the frenzied and bloodthirsty emotion of revenge. In order to avenge the death of his friend and close companion, Patroclus, he stabs with his own hands twelve of the most noble Trojans and then, during the funeral games for Patroclus, brutally drags the corpse of Hector by its heels behind his chariot. In toneless contempt, Christa Wolf’s Cassandra calls him “Achilles the Brute” (*Achill das Vieh*). In contrast, Odysseus’ revenge against his wife’s intrusive suitors is not frenzied, but patient and—literally—directed. The motive of revenge, if it is to be a comprehensible motive for action, requires a narration and the dimension of time, because vengeance is reactive. It reacts to an occurrence which has already taken place and which is experienced as unjust and humiliating. In the 20th century, this method of narration has advanced into film, further increasing by the illusion of reality which film alone is able to lend credibility.

Cinema boasts numerous films about vengeance, including such classics as *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968, Sergio Leone) and *The Godfather* (1972, Francis Ford Coppola), blockbusters such as *Rambo—First Blood* (1982, Ted Kotcheff), *Batman—The Dark Knight* (2008, Christopher Nolan) and *V for Vendetta* (2005, James MacTeigue), masterpieces such as *Unforgiven* (1992, Clint Eastwood) and singular works such as *Seven* (1995, David Fincher) and *Memento* (2000, Christopher Nolan). The films of Quentin Tarantino revolve almost obsessively around the theme of revenge. Less well-known, yet in two different versions, there is *Cape Fear*, filmed by John Lee Thompson (1962, with Robert Mitchum), and a second time by Martin Scorsese (1991, with Robert De Niro). Max, the main character in the

film, has been in prison for fourteen years for a crime he did not commit—fourteen long years, or five thousand one hundred and ten days, and all due to his lawyer, who withheld evidence. Now he is seeking revenge, driving the lawyer and his family into a corner so successfully that they can only escape by resorting to violence. Robert de Niro plays this role as an obnoxious mass of brawn and muscles, whose face emerges from muddy waters like a prehistoric rocky landscape. Armed with the insignia of revenge on his body, Max demonstrates a source of mental support in cases like his. Western culture provides men like him (and increasingly also women, *Kill Bill* being one example) with appropriate literature, first and foremost the Bible, Shakespeare and Nietzsche. Vengeance is rampaging around his head so strongly, bursting all other thoughts asunder, that it forces its way out and expresses itself legibly on his skin. On his back, Max literally has a cross to bear, one he has had tattooed there. And below it, in bold symmetry, the threatening words: “Truth” and “Justice”. On his arm is written “Vengeance is mine saith the Lord”. It is the arm of a supreme law which takes for itself what profane law has refused.¹⁹ If, as Nietzsche says, God is dead, then there is no Last Judgement, and the individual, so Max concludes, has to perform under his own steam.²⁰ That is the honour awarded to the master criminal: he poses a threat to positive law by taking the law into his own hands, and to this extent can be seen at the same level as the hero. Both are to be admired as much as they are to be feared.

V

“All emotions believe in a happy ending.” Above, I suggested that emotions are eudaimonic; that they signify what can be deemed a successful life. If “ending” (*Ausgang*), however, means “exit”, a “door through which to go”, a “hole to a subterranean passage”, or even a “walk”, “promenade” or “emergence” (just as it can be understood in Kant’s famous definition of Enlightenment as “man’s emergence—*Ausgang*—from his self-imposed immaturity”), then the happiness of the emotions would consist in, when not a solution, then at least a way out, an escape path. Vengeance, for example, instead of being satisfied, might then be transported into a different emotion. When we leave the cinema or turn off our DVD players after watching *Cape Fear*, we not only enjoy picturing the emotion of vengeance (against people who have committed—real or imagined—injustices against us), but also, and even more so, enjoy the aesthetic emotion of having seen a good film, with the cultural added value that *this* emotion can principally be generalised, and maybe even universalised, in a morally acceptable way.

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NOTES

1. “The Ranger in the Silver Forest” (*Der Förster im Silberwald*, orig. title *Echo der Berge*) is an Austrian-German film from the year 1954. With about 28 million visitors, it is one of the most successful films in Germany ever; see wikipedia.org/wiki/Echo_der_Berge.
2. Hegel 1977, 119.
3. See Josef Früchtel 2009 (German orig. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2004).
4. “Es fängt mit Verliebtheit an und endet mit Scheidung. Es beginnt im Jahr 1933 und endet in Trümmern. Die großen Opern beginnen vielversprechend mit gesteigertem Gefühl, und im fünften Akt zählen wir die Toten.”
5. “Alle Gefühle glauben an einen glücklichen Ausgang.”
6. Cf. Tugendhat 1979, 200.; Wolf 1984, 156; and, recently Nussbaum 2013, 11.
7. Cf. Dwyer 1987; on Gracian, taste and other ‘leading humanist concepts’ cf. Gadamer 1975, 7.
8. On the Stoics cf. Nussbaum 1994; Nussbaum 2001, above all Ch. 1 and 7; on Hobbes cf. Skinner 1996; on Spinoza cf. more recently Saar 2013.
9. Cf. Kappellhoff 2004, 11.
10. In the style of Tan 1996. Tan is guided by psychological research into emotions.
11. Cf. Früchtel 1996, 102.
12. Cf. Diderot’s famous essay “The Paradox of the Actor” and the discussion about aesthetic illusion and aesthetic appearance in Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 248-266; Rebentisch 2012, 67 & 273.
13. This is what I try to show in detail in my book on *The Impertinent Self*, loc.cit.
14. Hegel 1975, 185.—The concept of “founding” (*Stiftung*) was particularly shaped by Martin Heidegger. For him it had a three-fold meaning: a bestowing (which cannot be forced or deduced from what was there before—a cultural or logical tradition), an establishing (a grounding act) and a beginning (with which something—radically—new begins). Certainly, *Stiftung* can be interpreted in at least a conservative and a revolutionary manner (cf. Kern 2003, 171).
15. Hegel 1970, 32, my transl.
16. From a philosophical point of view, one can quite rightly doubt whether there will ever be a general theory of emotions; whether trying to comprehend emotions is not like nailing jelly to a wall. Since Aristotle, philosophy has nevertheless had much to say about this “object”. As is widely known, philosophers in their rationalistic bias have formulated several misgivings about the emotions, yet respond to them with growing interest, especially since the 1960s. Here we should highlight Kenny 1963; Solomon 1976; Oksenberg-Rorty 1980; in German then Fink-Eitel and Lohmann 1993. Perhaps, philosophy can really do no more than elicit “family resemblances” (Wittgenstein) between emotions, and legitimate them within their cultural contexts. But that would already be a start.
17. Cf. Demmerling and Landweer 2007, 287.
18. Cf. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, loc.cit, 184; on Aristotle and Hobbes cf. Probst 1993, 1 and 3.
19. Albeit in opposition to the theological-Christian sense. When the Old Testament speaks of God’s vengeance, it is the restoration of the whole or the salvation of a community which is meant. It is not acceptable to interpret this in the manner we are accustomed to: that of a hating or vindictive disposition. In Deut. 32, 35 the reservation is formulated: “Vengeance is mine”. Paul takes this on (in *Romans* 12). Accordingly the Christian does not, in the words of E. Käsemann, perform the Last Judgement (cf. Probst, “Rache”, loc.cit., 2).
20. Max’s conclusion is not Nietzsche’s. In his *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche introduces the theory that vengeance is not only an “instinct”, but also a “resentment” which has crystallised, like the Jewish-Christian religion, out of the position of those who are socially weaker. But ethically his intention is the abolition of vengeance.

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