

Aronofsky's subversion of mainstream cinema through the neo noir *Pi* (1998)

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This article investigates how Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998) subverts the visual language of mainstream cinema and the mass media at both an overt level, through the use of alienating techniques that encourage the audience to reconsider the representations as constructed artefacts, and at a more subtle level, through making the narrative structures of mainstream cinema conspicuous insofar as the narrative of *Pi* disappoints the audience's expectations. That is, Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998), as a neo noir, carries the full critical weight of *film noir* behind it and problematizes the socio-cultural myths, romantic façades, and "stable world view" of mainstream cinema. Aronofsky's film text denies that any final moment of unequivocal Apollonian truth is possible, and thereby declares the arbitrariness of the two "key" American cultural myths propagated by mainstream film texts, namely that "the truth will always prevail (wrongs will be made right) and that the powerful in this society can be brought down by the little people who are represented [as]...truth seek[ers]" (Denzin 1995:23). Furthermore, Aronofsky's representation of the psychoanalytic dimensions of intimacy demythologizes the usual discourse of romance found in the narratives of many mainstream films because it reveals the extent to which romance is underpinned by the desire to re-experience the lost moment of plenitude with the mother. Finally, Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998) reflects, at both a cinematographic and conceptual level, elements of German expressionism. That is, through the use of heavily accentuated shadows in the film, which results in more being hidden than revealed, and through the implications of the narrative, which ends on a very ambiguous note, the audience is presented with a perspective of the world as a terrifying "abyss" of possibility, which leads to the further subversion of the "stable world view", perpetuated and propagated by the visual language of mainstream cinema.

Introduction

In my analysis of Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2001)¹ I focussed on the structural and "technical" ways in which Aronofsky challenges the predominantly Apollonian visual language of mainstream cinema in order, thereby, to give "voice" to the subversive "Dionysian" impulse that makes for critical cinema.² I discussed how he makes overt use of cinematographic techniques that encourage the audience to engage critically with the represented material, and how, at a more subtle level, he subverts mainstream visual language through parodying the narrative structure of montage of tempo,³ in a manner after Eisenstein.

In what follows I shall consider Aronofsky's earlier film, *Pi* (1998), to show how a Dionysian "voice" also sounds its echoes in this film at the level of theme, content and visual metaphor. (I should mention that structure and content are difficult to separate, and by using a particular film to focus on one or the other, I do not mean to suggest that either structure or content occurs in isolation of the other.)

In fact, *Pi* (1998) constitutes a forerunner to *Requiem for a Dream* (2001) as subversive critical cinema. It contains many of the same overt "critical" cinematographic techniques and a similar subversion, at a subtle level, of the narrative structure of mainstream cinema, insofar as the conclusion of *Pi* does not allow for "clear" Apollonian resolution.

However, in addition to this, Aronofsky further subverts the Apollonian tendency in mainstream cinema through *Pi* by thematizing, in a critical light, capitalism, (Judeo-)Christianity and patriarchy.⁴ He also highlights certain psychosexual dynamics that subvert mainstream cinema's aesthetic of romance. Moreover, cinematographic aspects of German expressionism, that is, the sharp contrast between light and accentuated shadows, within the text of *Pi*, reflect the perspective on the world that views it as an "abyss", in contrast to the "usual" perspective of mainstream cinema that conjures up illusions of the world (and *Being*) as something stable and controlled. In short, *Pi* may be characterized as *film noir*, or better, what is known as neo *noir*, the debate concerning whether or not *film noir* exists as a strict genre, notwithstanding.⁵

These elements in *Pi* (1998) are significant not simply because of the way in which they subvert the visual language of mainstream cinema and the mass media, but, more importantly, because of the way in which, through this subversion, the construction of subjectivity along the lines of the Cartesian ego is problematized.⁶ The way in which *Pi* (1998), like *Requiem for a Dream* (2001), gives voice to a Dionysian perspective,⁷ and "un-forgets" the abyss of possibility that lurks beneath the narrative structures of mainstream cinema's visual language, facilitates the construction of subjectivity as something far more open and porous that parallels the subjectivity valorized by both Nietzsche and Heidegger.⁸

Vernet and *Film Noir*

Vernet's primary argument against the idea of *film noir* being a specific *genre* stems from the fact that it arose as a concept amongst French film critics

when they were exposed to American "detective" films (produced from 1941 to about 1955) after the second world war, to which they had been denied access for the duration of the war.⁹ The French critics noticed in these films certain prevalent patterns and themes, which enabled them to define these films as a specific *genre*.

According to the French, the *genre* offered, through the characters' dispositions, circumstances, and the backdrop against which the narrative played out, an implicit criticism of the socio-economic structures of capitalist America. Moreover, the subtle yet weighty psychoanalytic subtext that ran through all the films was considered as integral to the *genre* as the "European" mark of German expressionism that made its presence felt through the use of deep shadows and chiaroscuro lighting.¹⁰

Europeans did not interpret the detective films in the same way as the American public. Instead, they established a hermeneutic key through, and in terms of which, they could understand the plethora of new "detective" films flooding the European market in the post-war years, and this resulted in the creation of the *genre* that has become known as *film noir*.

Some French critics saw a socio-economic criticism of capitalism reflected in the situation of the *noir* detective, who was caught between a corrupt bureaucracy and a criminal underworld. Capitalism, although it made exorbitant profits possible for the lucky few, obliged all to live by their wits in a desperate hand to mouth existence. Thus, according to the critics, the narrative reflected the dire circumstances that existed in the absence of socialism or social welfare. For example, in Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946), the hero, Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart), is the alienated detective who, having shunned the

“corruption” of the authorities, is drawn into a criminal underworld because of the need for money. He is characterized as far more intelligent than both the criminals and police, and it is the insight afforded by this intelligence that allows him to perceive the corruption inherent to the police and legal system, while his (highly individualistic) moral predisposition forces him to reject the comfort and job security offered by such systems.¹¹ As such, he is forced to act independently and is thereby drawn into the criminal underworld by the *femme fatale*. The intractability of this dilemma accounts for the cynicism on the part of the hero that, quite often, is revealed to be a thin veneer covering his moral predisposition that manifests itself in his final execution of justice in relation to the criminals.

Other European critics maintain that, at the level of psychoanalysis, the tensions between the characters and the power structures in the narrative constitute a reflection of the human condition and psyche. For example, in Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), the characters’ concern with the pursuit of the ever-elusive statue of the falcon is a metaphor for the pursuit of the forever-unattainable “original moment of plenitude” or “*l’objet petit a*: an endless quest for a non-existent object” (Storey 1998:93).¹² Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) even goes so far as to articulate the impossibility of re-acquiring such an object, or “moment” when, at the end of the narrative, he describes the falcon as, “The stuff dreams are made of.” The relationships between the detective and the other characters also mirror the tensions within the human psyche and the relationship between the ego and its “archetypal” paternal and maternal figures. For example, the detective is always caught between a government bureaucracy and the underworld of criminals in a way that mirrors the

tension of the (Freudian) ego caught between the Superego and Id. There is also usually a “maternal” figure, who often takes the form of the detective’s secretary, and in whom he trusts implicitly, and a “paternal” figure, who can be either a friend of the detective or his arch-enemy, but who always guides him in some way.

Furthermore, the *femme fatale* is of crucial importance as the dark and mysterious woman who draws the hero into the plot, as much through money as through the promise of the erotic. The *femme fatale* is a metaphor for the dynamic that exists between Eros and Thanatos,¹³ with the tension between her and the detective being a metaphor for the power struggles and impulses that underpin intimacy. In Hawks’ *The Big Sleep* (1946) there occurs an increased use of sexual innuendo in the repartee between the hero Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) and the *femme fatale* played by Lauren Bacall in “the notorious nightclub scene with racy dialogue about horse-racing and saddles”

(<http://www.filmsite.org/big.html>).

This hints at the sexual subtext that exists not only beneath overt flirtations but also, by implication, beneath seemingly innocuous verbal exchanges, and thereby “makes conspicuous” the way in which simple conversations and actions are underpinned by unconscious or latent impulses. Similarly, in *film noir* there is often the introduction of *risqué* and sexually-ambiguous elements such as effeminate and overtly homosexual characters, for example the characters played by Peter Lorre in Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Curtiz’ *Casablanca* (1942),¹⁴ and elsewhere, whose effeminacy does more than merely contrast with (and thereby enhance) the machismo of Humphrey Bogart’s characters, in the respective films. Rather, as in the *Maltese Falcon* (1941), where the

underlying theme is one of dreams, myths and illusions, Lorre's character opens up possibilities of alternative forms of eroticism and sensuality, denoted as much by his attire and accoutrement as by his character's name of Joel Cairo. In *Casablanca*, Lorre's character enjoys a relationship with Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) that is tantamount to one of verbal sadomasochism, while the character of the French Chief of Police (Claude Rains), who at one point says, "If I were a woman I'd be in love with Rick," brings an additional element of sexual ambiguity to the narrative.

Less salient aspects of psychoanalysis, such as the ideas of repression and parapraxis,¹⁵ also find a voice in *film noir*. This is evident in the scene in Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) where Bogart's character, after arguing violently with Caspar Gutman (Sydney Greenstreet) and Wilmer Cook (Elisha Cook Jr.) exits the villains' hotel room and walks towards the elevator where he notices that his right hand has begun to shake uncontrollably. Although he only stares at it briefly, uncomprehendingly, before grimacing and entering the elevator, the inclusion of this brief scene hints at a comprehension and awareness, on the part of the director, of the phenomenon of parapraxis in relation to repressed ideas or emotions. This, in turn, by highlighting the tensions at work within the human psyche that are largely beyond the rational control of the ego, amounts to an implicit "Dionysian" subversion of the idea of the integrity of the viewer (because he/she identifies with the detective) as an autonomous, self-transparent, Cartesian ego.¹⁶

Still other theorists maintain that in the shadows and smoke of the early *film noirs* there lingers the influence of German expressionism involving the spectre of the "world-as-abyss". They argue that the abysmal shadows and

obscuring smoke/fog of the representations hide more than they reveal, and that they, together with the "red-herrings", false leads and "holes" in the narrative that do not tie together at the end, deny the text the possibility of concluding with an "amiable" Apollonian resolution. That is, because of the *aporias* and half-truths that litter the narrative,¹⁷ critical engagement with the text, like the psychoanalytic process in the face of the hypothesis of the unconscious, becomes interminable.

Neo-noir as simulacrum

Vernet may well be right to suggest that *noir*, as a genre, emerged merely from a European interpretation of films that were not intentionally made with that framework in mind. However, the situation is different when one talks of neo *noir*, that is, those films made after 1955, which contain a "pseudo"-detective narrative and *purposefully* mimic themes found in the French definition of *film noir*. These cannot be dispatched under the label of myopic European error, precisely because of their status as "quintessential" simulacra.

That is, the more correct Vernet's argument, the more erroneous appears the French definition and the more devoid of real parentage neo *noir* appears to become. However, as such, the more correct Vernet's argument, the more impossible it becomes to dispatch neo *noir* that, by virtue of the success and validity of Vernet's argument, attains its status as "quintessential" simulacrum, not only because of the medium through which it is expressed (i.e. film),¹⁸ but also in terms of its visual metaphors that, in accordance with Vernet's argument, become increasingly "marked" as copies entirely devoid of parentage.¹⁹ Baudrillard states that

Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelopes the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum. This would be the successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a basic reality it masks and perverts a basic reality it masks the *absence* of a basic reality it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard 1996:77).

Although Baudrillard is dealing with art and representation throughout the history of western culture, at a certain level his schema is applicable to *film noir* and *neo noir*. Photographs taken of American society during the Depression would constitute a reflection of a basic reality. A *film noir* that imbricates these images with a creative narrative involving a detective and a *femme fatale* masks and perverts the basic social reality it purports to represent. Further, from Vernet's perspective, *film noir* arrives only through a masking and perverting of a basic filmic reality, a "contorting" of the facts relating to pre- and post-war film production, not to mention a convenient "forgetting" of examples of film that, in terms of their narrative content and cinematography, undermine the rigid definitions which see *film noir* as being produced between 1945 and 1955. A *neo noir* film, in turn, takes as its point of departure *film noir*'s "mis"-representation of a social reality and builds its narrative upon it. From this perspective, *neo noir*, in its reference to *film noir*, "masks the *absence* of a basic reality" upon which it is predicated and, given the evolution of *neo noir*, has reached the stage where it "bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum."

However, as simulacrum, it *does* engage critically with other simulacra, namely those of mainstream cinema and the mass media, through "remembering" the abyss of Dionysian possibility that,²⁰ in turn, subverts the "legitimacy" of the social structures,

epistemological concepts and ontological perspectives propagated by Apollonian visual language.²¹

Social critique, psychoanalysis and German expressionism in *Neo Noir*

Everything that Vernet proves as untrue, or at least as ambiguous, about *film noir*, is, by implication, true about *neo noir*, because it is modelled on *film noir* as something possessing the features that Vernet maintains are not contained within it. *Neo noir* is usually played out against a backdrop that carries with it an implicit criticism of aspects of capitalist society, while the psychoanalytic subtext and motifs merge easily with the German expressionist perspective of the world and life as an "abyss".

At the level of social criticism, David Fincher's *neo noir* *Fight Club* (1999) engages straightforwardly with the issues of reification in a postmodern image-saturated culture, with the character of Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) openly advocating a quasi-Marxist doctrine and social revolution that involves the destruction of the buildings that house the credit card companies. Similarly, Schumacher's *neo noir* *8mm* (1998) condemns the dominant patriarchal discourse prevalent in contemporary society that results in the horrors of the pornography industry.²²

At the level of psychoanalysis, the "supposed" underlying psychoanalytic subtext of *film noir* is also embraced, unashamedly, by *neo noir*, with good examples being found in Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974). Polanski refers back, implicitly, to the horse racing theme in Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946), which acts as a metaphor for a discussion of sex between Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) and the *femme fatale*, played by Lauren Bacall. However, Polanski takes it further when Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) visits

Noah Cross (John Huston). During their subsequent conversation, which is interrupted by the distant neighing of horses and the clatter of hooves, Noah Cross inquires of Jake Gittes whether or not he is taking Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) “for a ride” literally *and* figuratively.

The presence or proximity of horses also functions as a motif, in the early part of the film, to denote violent and pent-up sexual tension. All of this intimates that the “untameable” unconscious manifests itself not only as a subtext in speech and action, but extends itself into dwelling spaces through concrete representations that mediate between the ego and the latent sexual impulses of the id. That is, the placement or positioning of representations, along with the representations themselves, are revealed as equally underpinned by unconscious sexual motifs. This is found a number of times, from the scene during which Jake Gittes visits Evelyn Mulwray’s home and meets her just after she has returned from riding “bareback”, to the scene in which she approaches Jake to hire him and Jake’s office is found to contain numerous references to horses and horse-riding, from the figure of a horse-rider on his table to the plaque of a horse’s head next to his door.

The psychoanalytic dynamic between sex and power also finds a voice in the unstable and often inverted power relationship between the detective and the *femme fatale* that forms the dominant point of tension throughout any neo *noir*, while Jake Gittes’ “lost moment of plenitude” is articulated in vague yet significant terms as intertwined with his inability, at some previous time, to prevent some woman (i.e. another substitute for the lost moment of plenitude) from getting hurt in Chinatown. His desire to prevent similar injury to Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) is related to this experience,

while his failure to save her contains the implicit acknowledgement of the impossibility of reacquiring that lost moment.

Also, with regard to German expressionism, neo *noirs* often refer back, (presumably) consciously, to the classic film manifestations of this artistic movement. For example, in the narrative of Robert Wiene’s expressionist work, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), murders are attempted and sometimes committed by the character of Cesare while he is in a state of somnambulism. This constitutes a metaphor for actions that are undertaken in response to overwhelming unconscious desires, but which are then repressed, “forgotten” or rejected by the conscious mind because of their horrendous nature, i.e. they are relegated to the “abyss” of the unconscious that is seen to lurk behind all conscious actions.²³ Similarly, the question of guilt and responsibility in the absence of rational autonomy, given the functioning of overwhelming unconscious urges, is broached in Fritz Lang’s expressionist film *M* (1939) when the child murderer Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre) cries out to the enraged crowd in the final scenes saying, “But can I... can I help it? ... Haven’t I got this curse inside me? The fire? The voice? The pain?... Who knows what it feels like to be me?” With regard to *M*, Gary Morris states that the most important aspect “is the sense of doom that colours the film, a fatalism Lang renders through chiaroscuro lighting effects and enormous high-angle shots that suggest a malevolent spiritual presence hovering above the city and guiding its denizens to their doom” (<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/29/m/html>).

Both of these themes, namely murders committed by an alter-ego, unbeknown to the individual in question, and the problem of

responsibility in relation to such crimes, are echoed in the narrative of Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987). This neo *noir* also refers back to German expressionism at a cinematographic level. In the final scenes, Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke) runs out into the rain away from Louis Cyphre (Robert De Niro) who has just revealed himself to Harry as Lucifer and explained to Harry his obligations to him in accordance with their earlier deal. The scene is captured with the same high-angle shot as found in *M*, that, along with the occasional use of chiaroscuro lighting during the preceding narrative, creates the sense of a malevolent spiritual presence that guides Harry (and the other characters) towards their doom. Also, the terror in Harry's voice when he engages in a futile attempt to deny the truth of his "darker", murderous side, as revealed to him by Louis Cyphre, betrays the acknowledgment of his "belief" in his guilt. This manifests later in his response to the policeman's statement of, "You're going to burn for this, Angel" with, "I know...in hell." Yet an abyss of uncertainty opens up in relation to the question of responsibility and guilt, which echoes the similar ambiguous conclusion in *M*. This occurs because responsibility is predicated on a certain degree of autonomy that appears markedly absent in all of Harry's crimes, an autonomy only declared and testified to by Louis Cyphre or Lucifer, a character who by definition is not to be trusted. Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987) is thus a neo *noir* that consciously refers back not only to *film noir*, through the characters of the alienated detective and *femme fatale*, but also to German expressionism with its underlying and insidiously subtle perspective of the world and life as an "abyss" of uncertainty and possibility.²⁴

Dionysian vs. Apollonian resolution in neo *noir*

As mentioned earlier, for a neo *noir* to be successful in its criticism of the Apollonian visual language of mainstream cinema it must let the "voice" of Dionysus speak.²⁵ That is, it must follow through with its subversion of mainstream visual language, without containing a last minute "covert" valorization of capitalist social structures, without playing down the power of the unconscious at the end of the narrative to reclaim for the ego (of the viewer) a "Cartesian" autonomy, and without covering over the view of the world as an abyss of possibility to put the ego (of the viewer), once again, on stable ground.

However, many of the above-mentioned neo *noirs*, to various degrees, operate within the axiological confines of the visual language of mainstream cinema. At the overt level of cinematography, most of them employ continuity editing and refrain from using "alienating" techniques²⁶ such that the audience is "drawn" into the narrative and, through such "mesmerization", critically disarmed.²⁷ At the subtle level of narrative structure, many of them might be considered as "failed *noirs*" in that their narratives resolve themselves "amiably", or at least end after a clear explanation of the plot has been delivered.

For example, in Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987), the narrative ends with all the intricacies of the plot being revealed and with the police triumphing through their apprehension of the murderer, namely Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke).²⁸ In Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), the narrative concludes with an Apollonian resolution in which the hero, played by Edward Norton, destroys his subversive alter-ego, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), who was responsible for instigating social revolution, and with whom he had a homo-erotic relationship, in favour of returning to the realm of reification and a "normal"

heterosexual relationship with the character of Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter).²⁹ Similarly, in Schumacher's *8mm* (1998), despite Tom Welles' (Nicolas Cage) final "breakdown" in his wife's lap and his desperate plea to her to "save *him*", the final scene involves him raking up leaves in his front yard, as he did before, with the "structures" and gender roles of suburbia having been reconstituted.³⁰

Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998), in contrast to the above, contains no such conceptual "back-peddaling". Rather, from the beginning to the end of the narrative, it allows the "voice" of Dionysus to speak in a way that not only subverts, unequivocally, the dominant themes (or content) of mainstream visual language and its narrative structure, but also, in relation to such subversion, informs a more open and porous subjectivity.³¹

Pi (1998) as a neo noir

Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998) not only subverts the visual language of mainstream cinema at an overt level, through the use of certain techniques characteristic of critical cinema,³² but also at the subtle level of narrative structure in that its narrative, like the narrative of *Requiem for a Dream*, refuses to live up to the expectations of an audience "educated" by the mass media, and ends instead without Apollonian resolution.

In Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998) there is a "protagonist", namely Max Cohen (Sean Gullete), with whom the audience can identify, in contrast to his later work *Requiem for a Dream* (2001), where there are no heroes, as with Eisenstein's early films. Also, less use is made in *Pi* of "Brechtian" distancing techniques.³³ Yet *Pi* avoids falling into the category of mainstream cinema through Aronofsky's frequent use of montage of

rhythm,³⁴ or what Aronofsky refers to as "Hip Hop montage", to interrupt the continuous narrative. Although there is no use of "reverse footage" that, however briefly, breaks and reverses the continuity of the narrative, and although there are no captions in *Pi* that subdivide the text and interrupt the narrative,³⁵ frequent use is made of "unstable" footage (i.e. through capturing footage with a "snorrie"-cam) that makes the camera conspicuous in its non-stability.³⁶ This, in turn, makes the "constructedness" of the represented material conspicuous. In addition to this, the surreal character of certain images necessitates critical appraisal on the part of the audience to distinguish between what takes place in "reality" and what takes place in Max's mind. Also, the entire film is shot in black and white with a very grainy texture and often heavily accentuated shadows that, along with the strange angles of focus and often very jarring and disorientating straight-cuts, constantly alienate the audience from the text.

At the level of content and visual metaphor, *Pi* engages with the narrative structure of mainstream cinema by reconsidering a key Platonic myth that underpins dialectical language,³⁷ that is, it engages with mainstream visual/film language that perpetuates the myth of a final moment of Apollonian resolution, a "resolution" that is echoed in Plato's allegory of the cave. In Book VII of the *Republic* Plato gives the allegory of the cave to explain how (what I term) dialecticism/ dialectical language is superior to mere rhetoric. According to it

human beings [live]...in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them...Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way...with men passing along the wall carrying all sorts

of vessels and statues...Like ourselves, [those chained] see only...the shadows ...which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave (Plato 1952: 388).

The cave is a metaphor for the “unenlightened” mind that revels in poetry and rhetoric but resists dialecticism. However one man, presumably Socrates (or perhaps Plato himself), in his quest for knowledge, frees himself from the chains and proceeds to the mouth of the cave/den. Plato maintains that

when he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all...[However, h]e will...grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world...Last of all he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water...and he will contemplate him as he is...And when he remembered his old habitation...and his fellow prisoners...he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them (Plato 1952: 38-389).

In Plato’s allegory there occurs an unequivocal privileging of the “light of reason” or dialecticism, personified by Apollo as the sun god, and an overt denigration of the cave, that is both a metaphor for the womb and of a “feminine” language of emotion and poetry.³⁸ Aronofsky’s *Pi* is orientated around a similar tension between, on the one hand, the Apollonian language of mathematics, and on the other hand, a “Dionysian”, more feminine language of intimacy and emotions, with the struggle between the two taking place within the compass of Max Cohen’s skull. However, in this conflict, the limitations of the more restricted economy³⁹ of mathematics are revealed,⁴⁰ and gradually its primacy is usurped by the language of a more general economy, namely that of emotion and intimacy. However, this usurpation does not result in a negation of the language of mathematics in favour of an unequivocal privileging of a more poetic, feminine and holistic language, but rather amounts to the

subversion of the binary opposition between the two languages, and thereby a subversion of Plato’s exclusive privileging of reason, or the voice of Apollo, through the allegory of the cave. *Pi* also contains a social critique of capitalism, a thematization of psychoanalytic elements and reflections of German expressionism, all of which subvert aspects of mainstream cinema. However, before discussing these, I will present a synopsis of the narrative of *Pi*.

A synopsis of the narrative of Aronofsky’s *Pi* (1998)

The narrative of *Pi* centres around the character of Max Cohen (Sean Gullete), a mathematical genius who is obsessed with finding the ultimate equation that will reveal the metaphysical (mathematical) pattern beneath all events that occur in time and space. His computer, “Euclid”, spits out a 216 digit number before it crashes, and Max believes that this set of digits holds the key to the equation. Max, who is caught between the corrupt investment company, Lancett-Percy, and a fanatical Jewish Kabala sect, is therefore the “detective” in pursuit of the ultimate “truth” through this equation. The *femme fatale*, who draws him into the plot with the “gift” of a computer chip to assist him with his research, is Marcy Dawson (Pamela Hart), with his neighbour Devi (Samia Shoaib) fulfilling the role of the maternal figure, while his maths professor, Sol Robeson (Mark Margolis), is the paternal, guiding figure.

In keeping with *film noir*, intermittent use is made of a voice-over that gives background information and puts the images into context. It states,

9:13... Personal note: When I was a little kid my mother told me not to stare into the sun , so once when I was six I did... The doctors didn’t know if my eyes would ever heal...I

was terrified, alone in that darkness... Slowly, daylight crept in through the bandages and I could see, but something else had changed inside me, that day I had my first headache... 12:45... Restate my assumptions: One – Mathematics is the language of nature. Two – Everything around us can be represented and understood through numbers. Three – If you graft the numbers of any system patterns emerge. Therefore – There are patterns everywhere in nature... So what about the stock market? My hypothesis – Within the stock market there is a pattern as well, right in front of me, hiding behind the numbers... 12:50... Press return

Max's mother is the personification of a more Dionysian or "feminine" language (and a metaphor for the womb or cave) who tried to keep him from "mesmerization" by the "light of reason" but did not succeed. Max's consequent blinding was only temporary and constituted the "dazzling" effect of the sun spoken of by Plato as something experienced initially by those who emerge from the cave. The information contained within the above-mentioned voice-over gets repeated several times during the film and forms the basic metaphor or "primary" metaphor around which all the other metaphors of the narrative are orientated. Max's pursuit involves an endeavour to attain the complete understanding promised by Plato, and this involves an unequivocal privileging of the language of reason. However the closer he gets to the "answer" the more he is assailed by blinding headaches and dreams in which blinding "light" pursues him. At the same time the more "feminine" language that he suppresses begins to manifest itself in the form of dreams.⁴¹ Shlain maintains that

[A] *holistic, simultaneous, synthetic, and concrete* view of the world are the essential characteristics of a feminine outlook; *linear, sequential, reductionist, and abstract* thinking defines the masculine. Although these represent opposite perceptual modes, every individual is generously endowed with all the features of both. They coexist as two closely overlapping bell-shaped curves with

no feature superior to its reciprocal (Shlain 1999:1).

However, in Max's case, there is a marked imbalance in that his mathematical genius is matched by his rejection of a more "feminine" language. Sol, his maths professor, advises him repeatedly to take a break from his work, and tells him the story of Archimedes' discovery of the law of displacement whilst taking a bath. He then asks Max the moral of the story, to which Max gives a logically-deductive answer relating to the necessity of arriving, sooner or later, at some result if one persists long enough. Sol corrects him and exhibits a very different and "lateral" way of thinking by maintaining that the answer is to engage in the simple act of "taking a bath", that is, to cease with the obsessive pursuit of an answer. It is no accident that this "lateral" way of thinking manifests in an anecdote that involves water, the symbol of the feminine and the womb. Sol's advice to Max amounts to an inversion of the Platonic myth of the cave (in which the "light of reason" is privileged), and it contains instead the unspoken imperative that Max should re-acquaint himself with the "language" of the womb, of fluidity and of poetry. Yet Max is initially as resistant to this idea as he is to the advances of his neighbour Devi (Samia Shoaib).

As Max gets closer to the "truth" his headaches get worse and the two groups between which he is caught, namely the corrupt investment company, Lancett-Percy, and the Jewish Kabala group, close in on him. After a blinding headache Max shaves his head and discovers a growth on the right side of his skull. Shlain maintains that

all forms of writing increase the left brain's dominance over the right. As civilization progressed from image-based communication, such as pictures and hieroglyphs, to non-iconic forms, such as cuneiform, written communication became more left-brain orientated. An alphabet,

being the most abstract form of writing, enhances left-brain values the most (Shlain 1999: 67).

Mathematics is the domain of the left-brain hemisphere and Max's genius is the result of the way in which the growth on the right side of his skull impinges on the activity of his right brain hemisphere and thereby facilitates the dominance of his left brain functions. As such it is the source of both his genius and pain, in that the pain it causes him results from the way in which it restrains the impetus of the Dionysian "feminine" language of a more general economy. This, in turn, allows his left (Apollonian) brain functions free reign to operate and proliferate.

After the death of Sol, Max develops confidence in this more "feminine" language and its corresponding intuitive "understanding", and he decides *not* to take the drugs he has been using for his headaches. In the absence of medication, the pain of his headache overwhelms Max who, instead of clawing at the place in his skull which causes him pain, attacks the manifestations of the Apollonian language that surround him, namely his immense computer system. At this point in the narrative he finally shifts away from his exclusive immersion within the language of mathematics and "re-enters" the more general economy of a "feminine" language. Further evidence for this hypothesis occurs in the other elements of his dream, namely the scene in which Devi holds his hand and embraces him as he sobs, while she whispers, "Stay with me, Max."

He finally cuts his ties with his erstwhile predominantly Apollonian disposition by burning the list of 216 numbers computed by "Euclid" before its crash, and by drilling into the growth on the side of his head that hindered the operations of his right-brain

hemisphere. The effects of this act are apparent in the final scene when he sits in the basketball court next to Jenna (Kristyn Mae-Anne Lao), at peace yet unable, mentally, to complete the complex mathematical calculations as he had before. He is not in any state of "perpetual mystical bliss", but rather regards the trees against the backdrop of the sky in the light of his insight (or, presumed insight, given the preceding sequence of events) into the co- or interdependence of the "languages" of the general and the restricted economies,⁴² and of the organic and inorganic (ants play the role of organic "subverters" that cause his computer to crash), insight which "we" saw developing in him as the narrative progressed.

Social critique in *Pi* (1998)

The subversion of the Platonic allegory of the cave found in *Pi* impacts negatively on the narrative structures of mainstream cinema that are "inspired" by this Platonic "myth" and orientated around the belief in a final (amiable) Apollonian resolution to all narratives. Two key American cultural myths that propagate the idea of such Apollonian resolution as inevitable, and which are perpetuated by mainstream film texts, are "that the truth will always prevail (wrongs will be made right) and that the powerful in this society can be brought down by the little people who are represented [as]...truth-seek[ers]" (Denzin 1995:23). *Pi*, through maintaining that any such final moment of unequivocal, Apollonian "truth" is impossible, simultaneously declares the arbitrariness of these two myths.

However, through problem-atizing "truth", the film also undermines the dramatic effects of the cornerstone of mainstream cinema, namely montage of tempo. One of the earliest examples of montage of tempo is found in Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) where

the camera cuts with increasing rapidity between the Lonedale Operator's daughter (as she is besieged in the telegraph office), the two villains who are trying to gain access to the office, and the hero who races to the rescue on a locomotive.

The tension of the montage of tempo is predicated on the belief in the "absolute" validity and legitimacy of certain social structures and power hierarchies, to the extent that their inversion or subversion is "unthinkable". The excitement of a montage of tempo involves the intimation of just such an "unthinkable" inversion of these power/social hierarchies through a threat posed to some besieged individual/s by a villain/s. However, at the last moment, the hero *always* arrives to vanquish the villain, neutralize the threat, and thereby facilitate Apollonian resolution to the narrative, which lends implicit confirmation to the validity and "truth" of the power/social hierarchies.⁴³ Yet, if Apollonian "truth" is revealed as illusory, or at best, a relative term (as it is in Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998)), then the "absolute" legitimacy and validity of the power hierarchies and social structures, necessary for the tension of the montage of tempo, are undermined, and with them the possibility of the montage of tempo being dramatically effective.

Three bourgeois "pillars" of truth, integral to montage of tempo, and implicitly supported through mainstream cinema, are those of patriarchy, (Judeo-)Christianity and capitalism.⁴⁴ At one point in *Pi*, the patriarch of the members of the Jewish Kabala sect expounds the ideology and rhetoric of his faith, in terms of which only he is "pure" enough to utter the name of God. This power hierarchy at work amongst the all male group, headed by a Rabbi and beholden to a masculine God, is problematized by

Max's question of, "*How are you pure?*" Max's question attacks the mythical foundations of the Kabala sect and reveals it to be predicated, firstly, on the "belief" in the *possibility* of "purity",⁴⁵ and secondly, on a "belief" in the *superior* "purity" of males.⁴⁶ However, just as patriarchy is revealed to be based on an arbitrary privileging of the masculine gender on the basis of "myth", so too patriarchal religions such as (Judeo-)Christianity are revealed as resting upon the same arbitrary "mythical" foundations.⁴⁷

In addition to patriarchy and Christianity, the third and last pillar of "truth" integral to montage of tempo concerns the legitimacy of capitalism,⁴⁸ and this also gets subverted in *Pi*. Through the character of the *femme fatale*, namely Marcy Dawson (Pamela Hart), capitalism is revealed as entirely superficial, mercenary and, arguably, underpinned by criminal intent, given its inherent exploitative structure. When Max does not deliver the promised equation, Marcy's façade of politeness slips away to reveal an incredibly hard and ruthless disposition, while her association with thugs who threaten to kill Max highlights the fine line between capitalism and its counterpart in the criminal underworld. This social criticism echoes the criticism "found" in *film noir* by the French and while, as discussed earlier, Vernet argues for the absence of any such implicit criticism in "*film noir*", and indeed for the non-existence of *film noir* as a specific genre, *Pi*, as a neo *noir*, is completely resistant to his arguments and renders just such a social critique.⁴⁹

Psychoanalytic themes in *Pi* (1998)

In Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2001), the relationship between the character of Tyrone (Marlan Wayans) and his girlfriend was revealed to be underpinned by his pursuit of a

substitute for the lost moment of plenitude with the mother. Similarly, through the image of the red dress that featured prominently in both Sara's (Ellen Burstyn) fantasies, and Harry's (Jared Leto) hallucinations, in which he imagined his girlfriend, Marion Silver (Jennifer Connelly) wearing it, the link between romance and the pursuit of the moment of plenitude was visually articulated. Yet these images and their implications problematize the romance-pervaded aesthetic of mainstream cinema because that aesthetic is predicated on a silence concerning this underling psychoanalytic link.

In his earlier film *Pi*, Aronofsky went even further in his thematization of the psychosexual dynamics that underpin relationships. The character of Devi (Samia Shoab), throughout the movie, is the quintessential personification of the substitute for the moment of plenitude. The first time we meet her is when she meets Max in the stairwell, having brought him some food. At this point Max is looking particularly dishevelled and Devi tries to fix his hair saying, "Your hair! You can't go out like that, you need a mom." When Max leaves in a hurry she calls him back to take the lunch that she bought for him, and then gazes after him as he races off. Again, later, when Max is in need of iodine to stain a slide, he knocks on her door and asks her if she has any. Her immediate response is to move closer to him and exhibit "maternal" concern asking, "Did you cut yourself?" Later still, when Max is installing and trying to run his computer with the computer chip he received from Marcy Dawson, he hears Devi next door making love to someone saying, "Do you want to suck on mommy's nipple? Mommy's going to make it all better." At this point Max collapses under the pain of another severe head-ache, betraying a link between this more feminine, intimate

and emotional "language" and his pain. This pain is caused by the conflict between his over-privileging of his masculine left-brain hemisphere functions and the demands made upon him by the repressed needs of his right-brain hemisphere. At the end of the film this conflict is "resolved" in the dream in which Max embraces Devi. However, their (imagined) intimate relationship can never be divorced from Aronofsky's representation of the *psychoanalytic* dimensions of intimacy because such representation demythologizes the discourse of romance by revealing it as based on the pursuit of the lost moment of plenitude. This, in turn, severely problematizes and subverts the aesthetic of romance as found in mainstream cinematic narratives. In addition, it also problematizes the idea of the autonomy and complete self-transparency of the Cartesian ego, the implications of which can, potentially, open the audience up to the idea of a more porous sense of self.

German expressionism in *Pi* (1998)

The echoes and reflections of German expressionism in *film noir*, the presence of which Vernet has debunked, involved the perspective of the world as an "abyss", in which laws and social structures were ambiguous and permeable, and where any comfort or security was only a thin veneer that obscured a gaping chasm of dreadful possibility. This was echoed as much in the incongruities and aporias that existed in the narratives, and which prevented Apollonian resolution, as it was mirrored in the cinematography that employed dark and haunting shadows that hid more than they revealed.

Pi, as a neo *noir*, consciously reflects the elements of the French definition of *film noir*, which includes the use of heavily accentuated shadows

and cinematography that leaves a great deal un-represented.⁵⁰ Similarly, *Pi* concludes on a note that entails no Apollonian “resolution” at all. Although Max’s relinquishing of his excessive pre-occupation with (Apollonian) mathematics allows him to become more “human”, his sense of peace, as he sits with Jenna (Kristyn Mae-Anne Lao) in the basketball court, is the result of his acceptance of the limitations of the language of mathematics to represent the world in its entirety, along with his embrace of the Dionysian, “feminine” language of emotion and intimacy.⁵¹ Yet, simultaneously, this acceptance and embrace entail the denial of the possibility of final, Apollonian “truth”, which, in effect, constitutes an acknowledgement of the world as perpetually haunted by the void of infinite possibility. Max finds peace as the result of his embrace of the impossibility of ever attaining an Apollonian “truth”, and therefore his peace is predicated on both the death of the Apollonian “dream” of the Enlightenment and on the dissolution of the “integrity” and “stability” of the Cartesian ego, associated with that “dream”.

Conclusion

In both *Pi* (1998) and *Requiem for a Dream* (2001), Aronofsky subverts the visual language of mainstream cinema and the mass media at both an overt level, through the use of “alienating” techniques that encourage the audience to reconsider the representations as constructed artefacts, and at a more subtle level, through making the narrative structures of mainstream cinema conspicuous insofar as his texts disappoint the audience’s expectations. In addition to this, *Pi*, as neo noir, carries the full “critical” weight of *film noir* behind it in its subversion of the socio-cultural myths, romantic façades,

and stable world view of mainstream cinema.

However, the result of *Pi* is the same as that of *Requiem for a Dream*, that is, they both, because of their critical perspective, take the audience to the “edge” of the visual language of mainstream cinema and the mass media, which usually informs and reinforces audiences’ subjectivity along the lines of the Cartesian ego. By revealing visual language as metaphor, and by opening the audience up to the abyss of possibility that haunts the narrative structures of visual language, Aronofsky’s texts (like the implications of Nietzsche’s valorization of tragedy, and Heidegger’s mythology of the “Fourfold”) facilitate the construction of a more porous and open subjectivity.

That is, instead of perpetuating Apollonian illusions of the subject-as-ego’s capacity for complete autonomy and self-transparency, or the ability of visual (or dialectical) language to represent the world in its entirety, Aronofsky’s texts “dwell” in close proximity to Dionysian “chaos” that involves both subversive unconscious forces and the “abyss” of possibility that lurks beneath the limitations of visual (and dialectical) language.

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Internet Resources

- http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/articles/1996_eros_thanatos.htm
- <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/29/m/html>
- <http://www.filmsite.org/big5.html>
- <http://www.haverford.edu/psych/ddavis/p109g/fslip.html>

Notes

¹ The full title of the article is "Subversion of the dominant narrative structure of mainstream American cinema in Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2001)" (Konik 2002:54).

² Nietzsche states that, "[I]n the naïve artist and the naïve work of art... Apollo appears to us again... [and] shows us with sublime gestures how the whole world of torment is necessary in order to force the individual to produce the redeeming vision and then to sit in calm contemplation of it as his small boat is tossed by the surrounding sea" (Nietzsche 2002:31). Apollo is the god of light, illusion, form and order, and Apollonian visual language is reflected in cinematic narratives that resolve themselves 'amiably' (through the eventual reconstitution of social/power hierarchies), and in the use of cinematic techniques such as continuity editing and smooth transitions between scenes that conjure up the illusion of an intriguing 'reality' in order to 'captivate' an audience. This visual language is designed to lull the audience's critical faculties to sleep so that they become emotionally involved with the cinematic representation as though it were part of everyday reality. That is, this visual language encourages the audience to forget that what they are watching is only the product of editing. Benjamin laments this in his

essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* when he states that the “equipment-free aspect of [cinematic] reality ... has become the height of artifice” (Benjamin 1968:233). In other words, mainstream cinema edits out anything that might detract from the ‘captivating’ illusion of the film because, ultimately, mainstream film acts as an (Apollonian) opiate for the masses by providing them with an alternative ‘reality’ to numb the pain of an alienated existence. It is this alternative ‘reality’ that is subverted by ‘Dionysian’ critical cinema. ‘Dionysian’ here does not mean Dionysian in the Nietzschean sense of the term that involves dithyrambic music and possession of the self by the spirit of Dionysus. Rather, because critical cinema occurs at an Apollonian, iconographic level, I use the term ‘Dionysian’ here to refer to that which resists the Apollonian form and order of the narrative structures of mainstream visual language and reveals, instead, the ‘abyss’ of possibility that haunts those structures.

³ The critical cinematographic techniques used by Aronofsky in *Requiem for a Dream* (2001) are very similar to the ‘alienating’ techniques used by Eisenstein in his early films (Cf. note 26). The use of montage of tempo in mainstream cinema, along with the way in which Aronofsky’s critical cinema subverts this narrative device, will be discussed later in this article in section vi. ii. Social critique in *Pi* (1998).

⁴ To a large extent, capitalism, (Judeo-)Christianity and patriarchy form the three axiological pillars upon which ‘mainstream’ western culture rests. According to Lyotard, a meta-narrative is an over-arching narrative of legitimation, or an apparatus of legitimation, that acts as a “homogenizing force ... marshalling heterogeneity into ordered realms; silencing and excluding other discourses, other voices in the name of universal principles and general goals” (Storey 1998:174). The morality of the Christian meta-narrative is imbricated with both patriarchy and capitalism. Shlain points out that it is no exaggeration to assert that Paul invented the religion called Christianity. He goes on to propose that “the conversion of Jesus’ oral message into the written word was an important reason woman fared so poorly in Pauline Christianity ... Paul’s Trinity consists of a Father, a Son, and ... a Holy Ghost ... [as opposed to a Mother, which] further neutralized the power of [women or] the Goddess” (Shlain 1998: 231-235). Moreover, from the 17th century on, Christianity declared idleness to be rebellion against God and maintained that “sloth ... led the round of the vices and swept them on” (Foucault 1965:56). It thus lent support to the means-end economy of capitalism, and resulted in discrimination against the unemployed, the poverty-stricken and those incapable of working. Mainstream cinema, in order to appeal to the masses, is obliged to support, at an implicit or overt level, ‘mainstream’ cultural beliefs. As a result, capitalism, (Judeo-)Christianity and patriarchy have underpinned (and continue to underpin) the axiology reflected in the majority of mainstream cinematic narratives.

⁵ Marc Vernet’s arguments for the ‘non-existence’ of film *noir* as a specific genre will be discussed later. It is important to digress briefly and consider these arguments in order to facilitate an appreciation of the conceptual terrain that surrounds film *noir*, and to establish a ‘firm’ or ‘solid’ foundation for any discussion of neo *noir*.

⁶ The visual language of mainstream cinema contributes to the construction of subjectivity along the lines of the Cartesian ego. It not only privileges the viewers by laying at their fingertips the ‘entire’ world in mediated form, but as such, also represents the world as an ‘object’ that can be represented in its entirety. This ‘object’, in turn, fulfils the role of an ‘expendable resource’ for the subject-as-viewer, a situation that lends further ‘illusory’ integrity and stability to the subject. Moreover, because an isomorphism exists between an integral sense of self and a stable, ordered society, the visual language of mainstream cinema adds weight to the idea of the integrity of the subject through the ‘content’ of cinematic narratives that resolve themselves ‘amiably’ via the reconstitution of social structures and power hierarchies (Cf. note 43). The idea of an ‘Apollonian’ impulse beneath the narratives of mainstream cinema finds support in Easthope’s explanation for “the pleasure ... derived from some ... children’s film cartoons ... [where] the body is continually burned, squashed, smashed, dropped from a great height, and blown up ... [y]et ... always magically reconstitutes itself in its original form for the next sequence ... [Another example is found in the Channel 4 logo on British T.V. where] the 4 dissolves into dozens of tiny pieces and then is remade from the other side by as many fragments” (Easthope 1990: 41).

⁷ Cf. note 2.

⁸ That is, in *film noir* the world is represented as something that cannot be represented in its entirety, with the chiaroscuro lighting and deep shadows (characteristic of *film noir*) obscuring more than they reveal. Also, the narratives of *film noir* are often littered with ‘problems’ and ‘loose ends’ that do not allow for ‘Apollonian’ resolution along the lines of mainstream cinema, while an acknowledgement of the role of the unconscious in *film noir* subverts the idea that an individual can ever be completely autonomous and self-transparent. This, combined with the reflections of German expressionism in *film noir*, which represent the world as an ‘abyss’, destabilize any view of the world as ordered and structured, and thereby impact negatively on the idea of subjectivity as something stable and integral (Cf. note 6).

⁹ Marc Vernet maintains that *film noir* has never existed as a specific genre but that it is rather the product of what he calls a European ‘misinterpretation’ of American films. He states that, “*Film noir* is ... an affair of heirs disinclined to look too closely at their inheritance, who take pleasure in regularly putting back into circulation topoi like the femme fatale, the shining pavement of the deserted

street, unexpected violence, the private detective... Doubtless there is something true there, but what that truth relates to remains a question: American society, the world history of cinema (German expressionism, French poetic realism and Italian neo-realism), the directors, the actors, the spectators? Complacent repetition is more or less general, rare being those who venture to say that *film noir* has no clothes... that the classical list of criteria defining *film noir* is totally heterogeneous and without any foundation but a rhetorical one" (Vernet 1993:2).

¹⁰ From the perspective of German expressionism the world was an 'abyss' devoid of stable structures and hierarchies in terms of which the individual could orientate him/herself. This was communicated into film through the use of deep shadows and chiaroscuro lighting that, as mentioned above, hid far more than they revealed, such that infinite possibility loomed in the darkness. Two 'expressionist' films that will be discussed later are Fritz Lang's *M* (1939) and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) (Cf. note 23).

¹¹ The detective is by no means 'morally good' in the normal sense, but rather 'morally ambivalent'.

¹² The concept of 'lost plenitude' was inherited from Freud by Lacan.

¹³ That is, the creative, erotic instinct and the death instinct, respectively. In *The Ego and the Id* Freud maintains that, "On the basis of theoretical considerations, supported by biology, we put forward the hypothesis of a *death instinct*, the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state; on the other hand, we supposed that Eros... aims at complicating life and at the same time... preserving it... and life itself would be a conflict and compromise between these two trends" (quoted in http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/articles/1996_eros_thanatos.htm).

¹⁴ Although Curtiz' *Casablanca* (1942) is not often thought of as a film *noir*, it does contain elements of *noir*, such as the corrupt administration, the criminal underworld and a *femme fatale*. Also, although the character of Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), who is caught between the corrupt administration and the criminals, is not a detective in the 'traditional' sense, he nevertheless embarks on an 'emotional' journey of discovery, which involves a voyage into his past, as a result of the arrival of the *femme fatale*. Also, as in the narrative of Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), the 'mythical' moment of plenitude, which in *Casablanca* involves the opportunity of returning to the 'Motherland' of America, remains forever out of the hero's reach.

¹⁵ "Freud's term for these was 'faulty action' (*Fehleistung*), for which his editor/translator adopted the pseudo-Greek scientism *parapraxis*. The colloquial label is 'Freudian slip'... Freud's fascinating 1901 book on the subject... *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*... distinguishes

errors of speech (*Versprechen*), memory (*Vergessen*), and action (*Vergreifen*). In every case there is presumed to be an unconscious [repressed] determinant of the faulty action" (<http://www.haverford.edu/psych/ddavis/p109g/fslip.html>).

¹⁶ Cf. notes 6 & 8.

¹⁷ An "aporia [is]... Greek for... puzzle" (Flew 1979:16), but it is commonly used to denote a problem or dilemma that knows of no possible solution and, as such, can only be returned to time and again, ad infinitum.

¹⁸ "A simulacrum is an identical copy without an original... [when] the very distinction between original and copy has itself... been destroyed. [This occurs through the process of] 'simulation'. So, for example... it makes little sense to speak of having purchased the original... *Dead Man Walking* in Newcastle [or] to be told by someone having seen the film in Nashville or Sydney that he had seen the original [while you] had not. Both [of you] would have witnessed an exhibition of a copy without an original" (Storey 1998:178).

¹⁹ That is, I speak of simulacrum at the level of the visual metaphors of neo *noir*, in relation to Vernet's claims against the legitimacy of speaking of a genre of film noir 'copies' (Cf. note 9) 'originally' produced between 1945 and 1955.

²⁰ Cf. note 2.

²¹ As discussed earlier (Cf. note 6), Apollonian visual language parades and validates these social structures, epistemological concepts and ontological perspectives *as* reality, and shapes the (Apollonian-Cartesian) subjectivity of the viewer in terms of them, the process of which is subverted by *film noir* and neo *noir*.

²² As discussed earlier, the critical appraisal of social structures and power hierarchies can lead to both the subversion of such structures and hierarchies, and to the subversion of the 'integral' and 'stable' sense of self/subjectivity informed by, and constituted in relation to, such structures and hierarchies.

²³ Admittedly, the 'original' story by Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer was more politically subversive insofar as the 'evil' character of Caligari, who was obsessed with power, was a metaphor for the German government that had led Germany into World War One. Similarly, the murderous somnambulist, Cesare, was a metaphor for the male population of Germany who had been 'hypnotized' by jingoism and propaganda, conscripted and, ultimately, turned into killers. While Robert Wiene's amendments to the script diluted, to a certain extent, this subversive political message (Kracauer 1947:183-194), it can be argued that the psychoanalytic implications/connotations of Janowitz and Mayer's text remained intact.

²⁴ Again, this impacts negatively on the integral sense of self (as stable subject or Cartesian ego) because not only is the autonomy of the individual questioned/subverted, but the isomorphism between a stable society and its corresponding 'integral' individuals is replaced by a reflection of the world as an 'abyss' inhabited by 'fragmented' and destabilized individuals.

²⁵ Cf. note 2.

²⁶ There are many different types of alienating technique. In Eisenstein's early film *Strike* (1924) there are no heroes with whom the audience can identify, something which distances them from the narrative and, to a certain degree, prevents them from becoming 'mesmerized' by the film text. Another critical cinematographic technique involves interrupting the continuity of a narrative with 'static' shots that bear little or no connection to the preceding and succeeding narrative, as found in Eisenstein's montage of rhythm of the 'stone lions' in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Here three 'static' shots of three different stone lions are inserted into the narrative at the dramatic moment in which the Battleship Potemkin fires on the General's headquarters at Odessa. The static images break the continuity of the narrative and make the audience aware that what they are watching is the product of editing and not a reflection of reality. Similarly, in *Strike* (1924), Eisenstein re-presents a section of footage in reverse, which also succeeds in making the editing of the film conspicuous. (Another similar technique, found in French New Wave cinema, involves the inclusion of 'harsh' editing such as 'jump cuts' within the film text to achieve the same end). Eisenstein also used captions in *Strike* (1924) to pose questions to the audience, rather than as mere devices to string the narrative along. This is found when the caption 'All quiet at the factory' changes into 'Or', which asks the important question 'Or is it?' This, in turn, relates to the secret unhappiness of the workers that is revealed as the narrative unfolds. In Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) the camera follows the crowds as they are massacred and pursued down the Odessa steps by the Czar's troops. The camera becomes conspicuous in its instability during this scene and although this may have been the result of technical limitations at the time, 'unstable' footage has subsequently been utilized as a critical technique to make the 'equipment' that underpins the cinematic experience, conspicuous. As mentioned earlier, the disguise or 'illusory absence' of this equipment was lamented by Benjamin (Cf. note 2). In addition, another simple technique, which is nevertheless just as 'jarring' to the audience as 'unstable' footage, involves the use of 'disorientating' camera angles, something that Eisenstein used to great effect when capturing images of peasant faces in *The General Line* (1929). All of these critical techniques break the continuity of the narrative, highlight the fact that the film is the product of editing and prevent the viewer from becoming completely mesmerized by the film text. By design, these techniques are meant to 'shock' the audience out of their passive reception of the

visual material and force them to engage critically with the cinematic representations, albeit temporarily.

²⁷ In the narrative of Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), Tyler Durden works part time at a cinema where he splices single frames of pornography into family films. Throughout the beginning of *Fight Club* there occur 'flashes' of images of Tyler in the background. However, this does not seem to me to constitute critical cinematography because one can read it as implying that Tyler is not just a character but a real figure who has spliced images of himself into the text of *Fight Club*, which thereby adds to the 'legitimacy' of the film and allows it to masquerade as 'reality'.

²⁸ As mentioned above, many neo *noirs* operate within the axiological confines of the visual language of mainstream cinema to various degrees. Although in Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987) the intricacies of the plot are revealed, they are, as discussed at the end of the previous section, revealed to the character of Harry Angel by Lucifer, which problematizes their validity and opens up a view of the world as an 'abyss' (of uncertainty). Thus, the 'resolution' of the narrative is ambivalent. Similarly, in Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), although all is 'revealed' at the end of the narrative, the absence of justice for things that occur in Chinatown re-presents the world as an 'abyss' of dark possibility.

²⁹ Cf. note 4.

³⁰ It is possible to interpret the end of this film differently such that it approximates a 'successful' *noir*. In the opening scenes when Tom Welles (Nicolas Cage) drives to his client, Mrs Christian, he passes a gardener raking up dead leaves that have fallen from tall, gaunt, dead trees. This is prophetic as Welles' task will be to tidy up the 'mess' left by the dead Mr. Christian. In the final scene, as mentioned, Nicolas Cage's character rakes up leaves in his own front yard. This might be interpreted as him reassuming his gender role in the household, but it could also be seen as him 'tidying' up the mess or shattered fragments of his erstwhile 'patriarchal' self, the absence of which will entail a lack of stability, security and (illusory) power in the future, in short, a closer proximity to the 'abyss' of possibility and uncertainty. However, these 'critical' or 'subversive' possibilities are only allowed to sally forth in the most subtle and ambiguous of ways, such that it remains possible for the greater audience to interpret the narrative along the 'standard' lines of the visual language of mainstream cinema.

³¹ Cf. notes 6 & 8.

³² Cf. note 26.

³³ In Eisenstein's *The General Line* (1929) there is a 'double' commencement of the narrative and the 'objectification' of the audience by the gaze of the characters on the screen. That is, after the film has already begun, the characters within the film are seen sitting down to watch the audience watch a film of the characters' efforts to begin a collective farm. The

irony of this situation is momentarily hinted at when Marta Lapkina, one of the central characters, smiles wryly at the camera. Aronofsky, in his later film *Requiem for a Dream* (2001) employs a similar double commencement of the narrative, along with the 'objectification' of the audience by the characters within the film on two separate occasions.

³⁴ Cf. note 26.

³⁵ Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2001), although produced in the contemporary era, still makes limited use of captions within the narrative. However, these do not really direct the narrative but rather sub-divide it into three chapters, namely 'Summer', 'Fall' and 'Winter'. They 'fall' upon the screen, accompanied by a jarring sound, and thereby intrude violently into the narrative and break its continuity. Furthermore, just as Eisenstein's caption in *Strike* (1924) contained a critical question (Cf. note 26), in Aronofsky's film text the absence of a 'Spring' caption (which would denote a period of rebirth or rejuvenation) is conspicuous and urges the viewer to reconsider the Apollonian 'lie' of mainstream film narratives that tend to end on a positive note involving some form of 'amiable' resolution.

³⁶ The 'snorrie-cam' is a camera that attaches to the body of the actor or actress and keeps their face and body in focus while blurring the background as they move.

³⁷ What I term 'dialectical language' is the language and disposition that underpins the pursuit of rational solutions to problems/issues via argument and counter-argument. In the *Philebus* Socrates counters Philebus' assertion that pleasure is the greatest good, maintaining instead wisdom and those things akin to it to be the greater good. Socrates wins the argument and asserts that "the first of possessions [involve] measure... the mean... the suitable, and the like... In the second class... the symmetrical... beautiful... perfect or sufficient... in the third class mind and wisdom... in the fourth class... sciences... arts and true opinions... [in t]he fifth class the pure pleasures of the soul... [etc,]" (Plato 1952:638). It is noteworthy that the 'truth' and 'validity' of each category and division are attained through 'dialecticism'. Similarly, in Book IV of the *Republic*, Plato defines the four qualities that the State will possess as "wisdom, courage, [self-] discipline and justice" (Plato 1955:197), and it is through dialectical endeavour that the 'knowledge' of the indisputable pre-eminence of these four virtues is uncovered. Later, in Book VIII of the *Republic*, Plato indicates the importance of dialectics in approaching the truth when he states that, "Dialectic... is the only procedure which proceeds by the destruction of assumptions to the very first principle, so as to give itself a firm base. When the eye of the mind gets... bogged down in a morass of ignorance, dialectic gently pulls it out" (Plato 1955:344). This privileging of the dialectic is a constant theme in the middle to late *Dialogues*. Desmond Lee reminds us that "in the *Ion*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*... Plato

speaks of artistic and other creation as something that cannot be reduced to rule; it is a form of madness... that... cannot be simply subjected to sober social purposes; [this]... very power of the arts makes them dangerous" (Lee 1955:39). Again, in the *Republic* Book X, Plato maintains that "the tragedians and other writers of the kind... definitely harm the minds of their audiences, unless they're inoculated against them by knowing their real nature... Homer [might well be the] master and guide of all the great tragic poets. But one must not respect an individual more than the truth" (Plato 1955:422). However, ironically, this valorization of the 'language' of dialectics rests on the Platonic myth/metaphor/allegory of the cave found in Book VII of the *Republic*, in which the Sun(Apollo) is arbitrarily privileged over the cave. In Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998) this 'hierarchy' is inverted and the value of dialectical language is called into question via a subversion of the dominant narrative structure of mainstream cinema (Cf. note 8).

³⁸ In the *Apology* Socrates states, "I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts... [and] took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them... [However,] I am almost ashamed to confess the truth... [namely that] they... say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them" (Plato 1952: 202). While the poets and rhetoricians possessed the skill of captivating their audiences at an emotional level, they, according to Socrates, lacked the penetrating insight that accompanied dialectics (Cf. note 37). Yet, to a large extent, poetry rests on ambiguity, with the best poetry being that which breeds an infinite number of poetic interpretations.

³⁹ Derrida articulates two different kinds of economy, namely a 'restricted' and a 'general' economy. These are characterized by a predominantly Apollonian or Dionysian disposition, respectively. In his essay *Différance*, Derrida articulates "the 'restricted economy' [as] that [which] takes no part in expenditure without reserve... [and] a general economy [as] that [which] takes into account the nonreserve, that keeps in reserve the nonreserve" (Derrida 1982:19). Within a restricted economy one will only engage in a calculated expenditure, or an expenditure of only that which is calculated to be *expendable*. This expenditure never undermines the underlying integrity and stability of that which expends insofar as whatever is invested/spent must offer an appropriate return, i.e. "investment for return" is the stable and integral point around which the restricted economy orientates itself. The maintenance of the cycle of investment, return and reinvestment is the *raison d'être* of that economy (an example of this might be the Roman principle of *quid pro quo*). This contrasts with a general economy that, in the absence of such an underlying, integral point around which it might orientate itself, expends not only the expendable but also that which is necessary for the survival and maintenance of that which expends, i.e. an expenditure that involves the 'madness' of a giving without reserve (as in the Buddhist precept that all giving should be

accompanied by the reflection, "There is no gift, no giver and none that receive"). A restricted economy would manifest itself in calculated charity (e.g. a welfare system in order to keep crime at bay) while a general economy would become manifest in the madness of infinite generosity, to the point of giving up life itself.

⁴⁰ Mathematics itself is not a restricted economy, unless it involves the practical application of mathematics in the interests of commandeering/appropriating the world and turning it into what Heidegger would term the "standing reserve" (Heidegger 1977:14) or, in other words, an expendable resource at the disposal of the Cartesian ego. Max's pursuit of the ultimate mathematical equation is not only in the interests of understanding the world, but also in the interests of appropriating the world through such understanding. Possible evidence for this occurs in his words to Marcy Dawson's (Pamela Hart), namely, "I'm trying to understand *our* world [My Italics]." His reference to the world as a possession (that is, what may be understood in this context as the possession) of a rational, Cartesian ego, betrays the degree to which he is immersed within dialectical language that, unlike the more general economy of poetry, is delimiting rather than (associatively) holistic.

⁴¹ A good illustration of the 'Dionysian' quality of these dreams occurs at one point when Max, on the subway, dreams that a stranger begins 'singing' to him. This occurs in response to his intense concentration on the (Apollonian) figures of the stock market report in the newspaper.

⁴² Although Max merely sits and looks (at leaf patterns, shadows, etc.) without being inspired to engage in more calculations, mathematics is still present in the narrative through the discourse of Jenna, who sits with her calculator next to Max and continues to 'work out' sums.

⁴³ In mainstream cinema the hero, villain/s and the individual/s in distress usually meet in the same frame, at which point the hero exercises power to reconstitute the social structures and power hierarchies. However, in Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2001), there no heroes and the characters do not meet in the same frame but are rather increasingly distanced from each other in time and space. The lack of any 'Apollonian' resolution at the end of the narrative/montage of tempo parodies the montage of tempo of mainstream cinema.

⁴⁴ Cf. note 4.

⁴⁵ Desmond Lee reminds us of certain aspects of 'Pythagorean' influence in Plato's philosophy that make their presence felt in the idea of a 'purity' of thought attained after a great deal of "rigorous intellectual discipline, a training, as we might say, in the technique of exact thinking... aimed... [at] personal experience... [where] the pupil is not a passive recipient of knowledge, but must grasp the truth for himself... [I]t is clear that [Plato]... intended

to express in pictorial and poetic form the general philosophic and religious conviction... that the temporal is only the shadow of the eternal, and that the human soul is responsible not simply to itself but to God" (Lee 1955:40). As such, Max's question also attacks, at an implicit level, the myths that underpin Plato's philosophy. This links with the overall theme of the narrative of *Pi*, namely the inversion of the Platonic myth of the cave.

⁴⁶ The 'arbitrary' privileging of males within the Kabala sect has already been discussed above. With regard to Plato's privileging of males, it will suffice to recall that he only speaks of a philosopher *king*.

⁴⁷ Cf. note 4.

⁴⁸ In Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) the villains are identified by their poverty while the Lonedale Company's right to wealth/capital is never questioned.

⁴⁹ Just as patriarchy invests the male with power (while 'marking' women as subordinate), and just as Christianity invests the subject with an 'eternal soul', so capitalism legitimates the subject's ownership of wealth. Such 'power' (or lack thereof), 'immortality' and 'ownership' contribute to the idea of the stability and integrity of the subject. However, if they are problematized by social critique then, by implication, the 'stable' subjectivity informed by them is also problematized.

⁵⁰ For example, Max's apartment is only ever represented metonymically, such that the extent of his computer system seems sublime in its magnitude and intricacy.

⁵¹ Cf. notes 38, 39 & 40.