

# Subversion of the dominant narrative structure of mainstream American cinema in Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2001)

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In *Requiem for a Dream* (2001), Aronofsky uses certain techniques of critical cinema to make the audience aware of the “constructed-ness” of the represented material. In doing so he goes against the “norms” of mainstream American cinema that aim to “mesmerize” the audience and “draw” them into the narrative. There are distinct parallels between the techniques used by Aronofsky and those employed by Eisenstein in his critical cinema, namely the use of non-stable footage, to make the camera conspicuous, the use of montage of rhythm, to disrupt the continuity of the narrative, the use of “word play” in relation to the captions and the representation of footage in “reverse”, which force an audience to engage critically with the material, and the use of “Brechtian” theatre techniques to alienate the audience from the text. However, Aronofsky does not merely mirror Eisenstein’s use of these techniques but rather develops them in his own way. Also, Aronofsky does not attack capitalism and bourgeois axiology in the same way as Eisenstein, but rather aims his criticism at the way in which subjectivity is constituted through the hegemony of the postmodern mass media. Through his critical cinema he subverts this constitution at both an overt level, involving the more blatant and jarring techniques of critical cinema discussed above, and at a subtle level, involving the valorization of a different narrative structure to that of mainstream cinema, namely one that does not edge its way towards some amiable form of Apollonian resolution. I conclude with a brief discussion of how Aronofsky’s film constitutes a criticism of image-saturated postmodern culture.

Aronofsky’s *Requiem for a Dream* (2001) traces the developments in the lives of four people over the course of three-quarters of a year, namely summer, fall and winter, as they all become increasingly dependant on different drugs. However, the film does not only deal with the horrors of addiction but also attempts to say of the un-sayable that it cannot be said, that is, it “tries to listen to and make heard the secret affection, the one that says nothing” (Lyotard 1988:34). It does this through its “non”-articulation of the pain and alienation that prevail in an image-saturated postmodern environment. However, the film not only represents the manner in which this social “dis”-ease impels the respective characters into the quagmire of substance-abuse, but also engages with the image-infatuation of contemporary culture through the use of techniques that mirror Eisenstein’s early critical film style.

Aronofsky’s development of these critical cinematographic techniques in *Requiem for a Dream* (2001) results in a very effective subversion of the film “language” of mainstream American

cinema. Mainstream film “language” involves “comfortingly familiar” structures that not only construct subjectivity in postmodernity, as a result of the dominance of Hollywood productions, but are also represented as constructing the subjectivity of the characters within *Requiem for a Dream*.

In Lewis Jacob’s *The Rise of the American Film*, written in 1939, the author points out that

Hollywood, in its fear of losing profits by making enemies, in its mad desire to appease the prejudices of every group, has submitted to an ever-tightening censorship under which it becomes impossible to deal [honestly] with reality. [For example, f]or almost two full years after the stock-market crash, Hollywood maintained a ‘hands-off’ policy regarding discussion of the deepening depression. Films continued to emphasize sex, sophistication, and spectacle...the public as a whole hated to acknowledge the reality of the economic debacle (Jacobs 1939:508).

Hollywood has not ceased to perform this role of a buffer between its audience and their social reality. Even

when it *appears* to deal with controversial issues or delve into the realm of social criticism, Hollywood's primary endeavour always involves entertainment. Thus, if a social issue is "featured", it is usually as the backdrop against which the struggles of some hero, heroine and/or villain are played out, after which the narrative, invariably, edges its way towards some form of amiable resolution that tactfully avoids "making enemies" by offering no real criticism of the axiology of the status quo. This, in effect, has become the "dream" of mainstream cinema, and it is grounded in a habit of thought that has become instantiated as the film "language" of Hollywood.

Ostensibly, *Requiem for a Dream* (2001) involves the "death" of (and hence requiem for) the dreams of four different individuals. Yet, in addition to this, because of the conceptual angle of the film, and via the distancing techniques employed throughout the film, an approximation of a more critical perspective of the mass media and postmodern "image"-culture is also facilitated, such that the "integrity" of mediated reality and the "truth" of the Apollonian resolutions of mainstream cinematic narratives are revealed to be illusory.

The opening scene of *Requiem for a Dream* involves a T.V. game show, hosted by Tappy Tibbons (Christopher McDonald), which contains all the quintessential features of the postmodern mediated spectacle. This show constitutes Sara Goldfarb's (Ellen Burstyn) dream that acts as a buffer between her and her painful reality of growing old, being alone and remaining unacknowledged.<sup>1</sup> This dream is interrupted; broken into; by the jarring dissolution of the game show when Harry (Jared Leto), quite simply, unplugs the T.V. The result, which involves a straight-cut and jarring "paradigm"-shift that breaks the continuity of the narrative, alienates the audience from the text and is the first "reference" to Eisenstein's critical cinematographic techniques. In his early

films, Eisenstein made use of a host of "alienating" or "distancing" techniques to break the continuity of his cinematic narratives in order to force the audience into a critical appraisal of the represented material. Aronofsky's film contains many similar critical features and is underpinned by a similar endeavour.<sup>2</sup>

The illusion of the classic realist text is predicated on the inconspicuous stability of the camera and on editing that creates a sense of continuity through the use of "smooth" transitions, such as fades and dissolves or, alternatively, the barely perceptible straight-cut (as long as the juxtaposed scenes contribute to the "uninterrupted" unfolding of the narrative and are not experienced by the audience as jarring).

With regard to the stability of the camera, an early instance of the subversion of this principle by Eisenstein is found in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), where he makes the camera conspicuous through its "non-stability" during the scene involving the massacre of the population on the Odessa steps. As the masses retreat down the stairs before the marching troops of the Czar, the camera "stumbles" along with them as it follows their descent from the right flank. Pudovkin, Eisenstein's much acclaimed contemporary, maintained that

The real material of film-art proved to be not those actual scenes on which the lens of the camera is directed...[Rather, if] we consider the work of the film director, then it appears that the active raw material is none other than those *pieces of celluloid* on which, from various viewpoints, the separate movements of the action have been shot. From nothing but these pieces is created those appearances upon the screen that form the filmic representation of the action shot. (Pudovkin 1929:55-56).

Pudovkin, like Eisenstein, valorized editing as the "real" art of filmmaking. Thus, although there may have been many technical reasons for the non-stability of the above-mentioned footage of the retreating crowds on the Odessa steps, it is

highly unlikely that anything in Eisenstein's film is there purely by accident, and more likely that its inclusion within the text contains critical possibilities.

On two occasions in *Requiem for a Dream*, Aronofsky uses similar non-stable footage to make the presence of the camera conspicuous. Directly after the appearance of the title caption, Harry and Tyrone (Marlan Wayans) push Sara's T.V. down the road towards the pawnbroker, while a retreating hand-held camera takes a middle-shot of them from the front through a fish-eye lens. Again, just before the caption "FALL" denotes the end of the period of summer prosperity, the shot of Tyrone fleeing from a drug-related shooting is captured with a "snorrie-cam" that focuses on his terrified face while blurring the background.<sup>3</sup> In both cases the "constructed-ness" of the represented material becomes apparent through the non-stability of the footage.

Eisenstein also subverted the second principle of the classic realist text, namely the use of continuity editing, by using montage of rhythm to interrupt the continuous narrative, the most famous example of which involves the three images of stone lions from *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). In the film, after the shelling of the Generals' headquarters at the Odessa theatre, three images of three different stone lions, one sleeping, one awakening and one rising, are juxtaposed with one another. Their "static" presence in the middle of the dramatic scene breaks the continuity of the narrative and makes the audience aware of the film as a constructed artefact.<sup>4</sup>

Although the juxtaposition involved in any of Eisenstein's montages of rhythm seems to stand out as the predecessor to Aronofsky's use of similar montage techniques in *Requiem for a Dream*, due credit must also be given to the somewhat lesser known directors of early Soviet cinema, whose highly intellectual cinematic visions were informed by

Mayakovsky's post-revolutionary literary "protests against the bourgeois, sugary art of his time" (Leyda 1960:129).<sup>5</sup> One such director was Lev Kuleshov and

the artistic legacy that he handed over to Pudovkin and Eisenstein for further investment, was the discovery that there were, inherent in a single piece of unedited film, two strengths: its own, and the strength of its relation to other pieces of film...Kuleshov maintained that the material of film-work consists of pieces of film...join[ed] together in a particular creatively conceived order...[and that] film art begins from the moment when the director begins to combine and join [them] together (Leyda 1960:175).

These historical considerations hold crucial implications for Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* insofar as his use of similar techniques to those found in the work of Kuleshov, Eisenstein and Pudovkin imbricates his film with the underlying "critical attitude" of Soviet cinema, which involved a very different film "language" to that of mainstream Hollywood productions.

On numerous occasions throughout *Requiem for a Dream*, Aronofsky uses montage of rhythm to disrupt the continuity of the narrative.<sup>6</sup> A variation of this occurs after Harry and Tyrone purchase drugs with the money they receive for Sara's T.V. at the pawnbroker. In general, the montages of rhythm that represents substance abuse involve a rapid succession of close-ups of the apparatus, powder or liquid of the drug and the dilation of pupils, with the metonymic representations of the drug takers remaining anonymous yet numerically correct. For example, if two people are taking drugs, for instance Harry and Tyrone, then either the split screen/duplicate image technique is used, or at least two dilating pupils are shown during the montage. Alternatively, if only one person is involved, then only one dilating pupil is represented and takes up the entire screen. However, what links the various montages together is not the type of image represented,<sup>7</sup> but rather the

rhythm with which they are represented. The montages explode upon the screen with the speed and brevity of a drumbeat or gunshot in a hard, sharp, mechanically compulsive way that communicates the blind power of the demands of addiction.

In *Strike* (1924), Eisenstein uses montage of rhythm involving the juxtaposition of images of animals (a fox, an owl, a monkey and a bulldog) with the faces of the spies who had adopted the names of these animals as their code-names. These montages involve the slow dissolution of the image of the animal into the image of the spy in a rhythm that communicates this “animality” as an inherent part of the spies’ respective natures, as though in a moment of “aletheia” their very being is “unforgotten” through the montage. The rhythm of Aronofsky’s montage seems, rather, to approximate the violence of the later juxtaposition, in Eisenstein’s *Strike*, of the images of the cow being slaughtered next to the images of the unarmed workers being massacred. However, in Aronofsky’s montage the straight-cut is, as mentioned above, accentuated by a drum-like beat, and where in *Strike* the perpetrator of the violence is known (i.e. the butcher), in *Requiem for a Dream* an anonymity surrounds the montage, which communicates the psycho-pathological impetus and lack of autonomy behind actions perpetuated through addiction.

I use the term “psycho-pathology” as opposed to any reference to “physical dependence”, not only because of the psycho-pathological element involved in addiction, but more specifically because of Aronofsky’s use of the same rhythm found in the “drug-taking” montages, in conjunction with a “remote-control” montage that represents Sara’s addiction to television. The same anonymity and mechanical compulsion behind her act of using a remote control are, through the montage, articulated as being identical to the demands made on the others by their drug addiction. Aronofsky, in a recent

interview, stated that the “big point of the film [is] that all addictions are the same: coffee, TV, drugs – it [doesn’t] matter what the chemical [is, because]...mainlining coffee and TV is the same as doing it with drugs” (<http://aronofsky.tripod.com/interview17.html>).

Another technique found in Aronofsky’s text that has its roots in the juxtaposition of montage of rhythm is that of the “split-screen”. In the film, as mentioned above, Harry is a drug addict who, in an effort to acquire money, regularly steals his mother’s television. At a cinematographic level, Aronofsky represents the emotional tension and distance between mother and son through dividing the screen vertically into two frames, with one camera focussing on Harry on the right side of the screen, as he struggles to free the T.V. from the radiator, while another camera focuses on Sara who inhabits the left side of the screen as she hides in another room, having locked the door out of fear for Harry. The contrast between the representation of the “mediated reality” of Tappy Tibbon’s game show, with which the film opens, and the succeeding representation of the emotional turmoil between mother and son in the apartment, along with the screen division in the latter and the different attitudes of focus in the left and right frames, are all very jarring when compared to the standard continuity editing of mainstream cinema and therefore add to the audiences’ sense of alienation from the text.

Mainstream cinema in the silent era used captions to communicate key information about the narrative with the primary aim of “drawing” the audience into the film.<sup>8</sup> Eisenstein, in the beginning of *Strike* (1924), subverts this “traditional” role of the caption by making use of word play. In the opening caption that states “ALL QUIET AT THE FACT-OR-Y”, the “OR” spirals down and to the right and then rises again to eclipse the original caption with the word “OR[?]”, which

questions the validity of any such “FACTUAL” statements. This play on words demands an intellectual appraisal from the audience and thereby removes captions from their erstwhile placid role in mainstream cinema as mere signposts that bear narrative information.

Aronofsky continues this intellectual use of captions in *Requiem for a Dream* (2001). In the beginning of the film, after Harry and Tyrone have left the building and are wheeling Sara’s T.V. down the street, the orchestra commences playing the theme tune and is accompanied by the loud, momentary intrusion of the title in the form of a falling black and white caption, which eclipses the entire screen and interrupts the continuity of the narrative. In addition to this, Aronofsky immediately begins to interrupt the unfolding narrative, accompanied by the music of the orchestra, by having black and white “credit” pages, similar to the title caption, eclipse the progression of Harry and Tyrone as they advance towards the pawnbroker. This “blacking-out” of the image of their progression, which leaves only sections of it represented, alienates the audience from the text by making it necessary for them to piece together a “pseudo”-montage of Harry’s and Tyrone’s journey.

Furthermore, the captions that follow divide the narrative into three sections, namely “SUMMER”, “FALL” and “WINTER”. The audience is left waiting for a “SPRING” that never arrives, the absence of which communicates the hopelessness of the characters’ situation that does not allow for rebirth or renewal. The absence of a “SPRING” caption is therefore linked to Aronofsky’s subversion, through the text of *Requiem for a Dream*, of the narrative structure of mainstream cinema that always moves towards an amiable resolution.<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned, mainstream cinema relies heavily on continuity editing to mesmerize an audience through creating

the impression of a continuous narrative. In contrast to this Eisenstein, in *Strike* (1924), does not merely break or interrupt the continuity of the narrative with a montage of rhythm, but goes one step further by “reversing” that continuity. The piece of footage in question originally involved the reflection, in a pool of oily water, of workers having a violent discussion against the backdrop of the factory smokestacks. When the workers departed a pair of work boots proceeded into the puddle and disturbed the smooth surface and the reflection of the smokestacks. However, this “original” sequence of events is represented in reverse, so that the first image seen is that of the work boots disturbing the oily puddle, followed by the departure of the boots and the miraculous and instantaneous calming of the water, which then facilitates the reflection of the group of discontent workers and their discussion against the backdrop of the smokestacks. Quite simply, Eisenstein’s visual metaphor communicates the need to look beneath the apparent business of production (i.e. the boots that disturb the water) to see the growing discontent of the workers (i.e. their heated discussion). Yet, in terms of critical cinema, the “reversed” footage is very significant as an alienating technique because, as mentioned, it not only interrupts but also, quite literally, reverses the narrative’s progression.

Aronofsky, in *Requiem for a Dream* (2001), uses a variation of “reverse” footage on two occasions to jar the audience and force them to reconsider the represented material *as* represented material. The first time this occurs is after Tyrone and Harry have recovered from their afternoon intoxication, and sit at an outside street café. At this point a policeman sits down next to them and Harry “seems” to steal the policeman’s firearm. Tyrone and Harry then proceed to throw it back and forth between them while the policeman struggles to regain it. However, a split-second later things return to the moment before Harry’s theft of the

pistol, with the policeman still sitting next to Harry and Tyrone, at which point the audience realizes that the scene has only taken place within Harry's mind. Again, later, when Harry's girlfriend Marion (Jennifer Connelly) is forced to visit her psychologist, Arnold (Sean Gullette), to get money for drugs, she sits in a restaurant opposite him and "seems" to stab her fork into his hand. However, a split-second later things return to the moment before her attack and the audience realizes, again, that this event has only taken place within her imagination. On both occasions the progression of the narrative is interrupted and the audience is forced to retrace its steps in a way that alienates them from the text and makes conspicuous the "constructed-ness" of the represented material.

In addition to the use of non-stable footage, montage of rhythm, the use of word play in relation to the captions and the "reversal" of footage, mentioned above, Eisenstein also makes use of other alienating techniques similar to those employed later by Brecht in theatre. For example, in Eisenstein's *The General Line* (1929), the actual narrative of the film only "begins" after a few minutes of footage have already elapsed, during which time we have been introduced to the character of Marta Lapkina and the predicament of the peasants' poverty caused by strip cultivation under the old Czarist regime. After the agronomist declares the collective farm "open", we are presented with the title caption, "The Path of the October Dairy", followed by a short scene involving the "heroine", Marta Lapkina, and a few other stalwarts of the collective, sitting on a bench facing the audience. This scene is jarring because it breaches a fundamental law of cinema by making the audience the object of the gaze of the characters on screen. In this strange role reversal, Marta and her comrades sit down to "watch" the audience/viewer as *they* watch the re-presentation of the efforts of the members of the collective,

namely Marta and the same comrades who are sitting with her on the bench watching the audience (Eisenstein accentuates the irony of this situation by focussing, briefly, on Marta's wry smile).

This alteration in the traditional sequence of beginning a film begins to unravel the dominant narrative structure or film "language" of mainstream American cinema because instead of presenting the audience with a usual "opening" sequence that mesmerizes them and draws them further into the narrative, Eisenstein accentuates the "commencement" of the represented narrative only after the narrative has already begun to unfold. This, together with Marta's objectifying gaze, promotes critical awareness of the representation as a representation.

Aronofsky uses a similar "double" commencement of the narrative in the opening scenes of *Requiem for a Dream*, the effect of which is accentuated by the music of the orchestra. After Harry interrupts the television screening of the game show by pulling out the plug of the T.V., the sounds of an orchestra "tuning-up" add to the "dis"-ease of the above-mentioned scene involving the vertically split screen and tension between Harry and his mother. Only after Harry and Tyrone have left the building and are wheeling Sara's T.V. down the street does the orchestra commence playing the theme tune of the film, accompanied by the loud, momentary intrusion of the falling black and white title caption that declares the "beginning" of the narrative *after* a few minutes of the film have already elapsed.

However, where Aronofsky goes "beyond" Eisenstein is in the objectification of the audience by the actors and actresses. This occurs through Sara Goldfarb's hallucinations that are caused by her growing addiction to diet pills towards the end of the period entitled "FALL". Her desire to "look" slim for her promised appearance on television causes her to over-dose on her medication and

the resultant hallucinations, aggravated by her suppression of her body's demands for food, see her torn between the "mediated reality" of the game show and the "roaring" refrigerator, a metaphor for her body's need for sustenance. In her hallucination the hyper-real figures of Tappy and a younger, more beautiful Sara Goldfarb, exit the realm of mediated reality and enter her living room as phantasms that proceed to become increasingly "solid". This is not only a visual metaphor for the collapse of the real into the hyper-real and vice versa à la Baudrillard, but also entails a far more critical element.

When the "archetypal" screen hero, personified by Tappy Tibbons, along with Sara's desired (projected) self-image, manifest in her living-room, they laugh and jeer at her and her living conditions, which Tappy describes as "disgusting", while Sara tries to defend herself and her apartment by saying, "Let me explain, I'm old, and alone...[etc.]" However, Sara is not the *only* one "on trial" in this scene. When Tappy and the younger, vivacious Sara Goldfarb laugh at the "real" Sara, the studio audience of the game show join them in laughing and pointing. However, of the three shots of the studio audience laughing and pointing, only two of them involve the audience pointing to the left of the screen at the "space" that Sara is supposed to occupy, as she cowers in her chair. The third shot involves them pointing to the right, at the "space" occupied not by the T.V., nor by the aged Sara, nor by Tappy and the younger Sara, but by "us" as the viewers/audience of *Requiem for a Dream*. In other words, in terms of space, "we" as the audience are situated on the right of Sara, looking left at her, Tappy and the younger Sara.

Thus, for a brief moment, the whole studio audience of the game show are laughing at "us" who, like Sara, are "glued" to the screen, privileging the realm of the mediated image, and constructing our desires and projected self-images along the lines of mediated

representations, despite the impossibility of "us" ever attaining the Apollonian "perfection" of such images.<sup>10</sup>

The scene is thus not only a metaphor for the collapse of the real into the hyper-real and vice versa, but also a parody and indictment of our desires that have collapsed into, and become imbricated with, mediated images. Where in Eisenstein's *The General Line*, Marta Lapkina and her comrades stare knowingly at us, in Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*, the game-show audience, and to some extent Tappy and the younger Sara, actually address "us", implicitly, through the hallucinations of the character of the older Sara Goldfarb.

There exists a parallel between Aronofsky's criticism of the postmodern infatuation with the image and an implicit criticism found in Eisenstein's *The General Line* (1929), where the success of the peasants on the collective farm, who put their hands to the milk-separator, designed and manufactured by other workers, contrasts with the emptiness and drought prevalent in the fields of those who simply pray for relief. Just as Eisenstein's devout peasants are characterized as infatuated with the images of God, in terms of the iconography of the Russian orthodox church, and thereby addicted to what Marx rightly termed the opiate of the people, namely a religious meta-narrative that promises an amiable resolution to the narrative of the lives of its devotees, so too Sara, in Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*, is infatuated with the images of mediated reality. She and the other main characters pursue the "image" of their respective dreams, impelled by an unconscious desire to attain "wholeness" through the image. However, as Lacan points out, such "wholeness" is impossible to attain.

According to Lacan, we are born into a condition of 'lack', and subsequently spend the rest of our lives trying to overcome this condition...As we move forward, we are driven by a desire to overcome the

condition, and as we look back, we continue to believe that the union with the mother was a moment of plenitude before the fall into 'lack'. The result is an endless quest in search of an imagined moment of plenitude. Lacan figures this as a search for what he terms *l'objet petit a*: an endless quest for a non-existent object, signifying an imaginary moment in time. We console ourselves with a series of substitutes for a substitute (Storey 1998:93).

However, in *Requiem for a Dream*, all the main characters' respective attempts to recover this moment of plenitude are not only imbricated with the images of mediated reality, but are also couched within the "learned" narrative structure of the dominant voices of mainstream cinema that promise an amiable resolution at the end of all narratives. This has continued from Griffith to the present as a constant theme within mainstream American cinema,<sup>11</sup> and usually involves the restoration of traditional power structures, the victory of the hero or heroine, the triumph of good over evil, and other habitual "comfortingly familiar" patterns that facilitate optimistic conclusion to cinematic narratives.

In the opening scene Sara, the T.V. addict, "speaks" to her absent husband, Seymour, from her refuge behind the locked door, as her son Harry steals her television. She says, "This isn't happening, and if it should be happening it would be all right...in the end its [always] all right." This sentiment, relating to the necessity for everything to work out amiably in the end, is echoed later by Harry's girlfriend, Marion Silver, who repeatedly says, "It'll be O.K.," despite their increasingly desperate situation as a result of Harry's difficulty in obtaining drugs. Sara's and Marion's similar responses to their respective predicaments are not merely instances of innocuous "wishful thinking" but bear testimony to the collapse of "reality" into the language of the "hyper-real", or the film "language" of mainstream American cinema, with its

"necessity" for an inevitable, amiable resolution at the end of all narratives.

Further evidence for this occurs when Harry confronts Sara on the subject of her growing addiction to amphetamine-barbiturate diet pills. In response to Harry's question concerning the significance and value of appearing on television, Sara says, "I'm somebody now...soon millions of people will see me and they'll like me...it's a reason to get up in the morning, it's a reason to lose weight, to fit in the red dress, it's a reason to smile, it makes tomorrow all right." Her use of clichés, learned from television advertisements, game shows and mainstream cinema, to articulate her psychological pain, exposes the frightening degree to which mediated reality has limited avenues of thought through the exclusive privileging of certain "styles" of language and certain narrative structures. Denzin lends support to the idea that mainstream cinema constitutes subjectivity when he states that

American cinema created a space for a certain kind of public, communal urban life...[it] elaborated the epistemology of scientific realism already deeply rooted in American culture...[and] reproduced a realistic and naturalistic discourse about the universe of experience and appearance. The movies became a technology and apparatus of power that would organize and bring meaning to everyday lives. They would function as adjuncts to the twentieth century surveillance societies, deploying the cinematic gaze and its narratives in the service of the state (Denzin 1995:14-15).

Two significant American cultural myths 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). Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* does not conclude with any such optimism but rather exposes these two cultural myths as illusory because at the end of the film the "wrongs are not made right", and the "little people", namely the



characters of Harry, Marion, Tyrone and Sara, remain powerless victims, forever distanced from each other and their dreams.

*Requiem for a Dream*, as mentioned earlier, is not only concerned with the death of the characters' respective dreams, but also with the subversion of the implicit, collective "dream" of mainstream cinema that is represented as constituting the subjectivity of the characters in the film, namely the dream of the "necessity" for all narratives to conclude with an amiable resolution. However, if mainstream cinema constitutes subjectivity, then a subversion of the film "language" of mainstream cinema, through critical cinema, makes possible a moment in which the habitual patterns of the dominant film "language" become conspicuous to the subject who is usually constituted by those patterns.<sup>12</sup> In this moment the subject is brought to the abyss of infinite possibility that looms at the brink or edge of film "language", since the utter metaphoricality of all cinematic representations and their narrative structures are revealed to the subject, who was previously constituted in terms of those representations and narrative structures.<sup>13</sup> In other words, because subjectivity is constituted by mainstream cinema through the subject's "mis"-recognition of mainstream representations and narrative structures as "real", critical cinema, through revealing such representations and narrative structures to be merely metaphor, subverts the integrity of the subjectivity informed by mainstream cinema.

The ways in which Aronofsky does this are both overt and subtle. At an overt level, as mentioned earlier, he mirrors and develops certain techniques of Eisenstein's critical cinema through his use of non-stable footage, montage of rhythm, "split-screens", captions involving word play, "reversed" footage, delayed or "double" commencement of the narrative, and the objectification of the audience through the gaze of characters

within the film. At a more subtle level, Aronofsky engages in a subversion of what is possibly the most time-honoured spectacle of mainstream cinema, namely montage of tempo. Montage of tempo, or accelerated montage, is used to create excitement and tension through implying the possibility of the inversion of traditional power hierarchies, the defeat of the hero or heroine, or the death (or injury) of a besieged individual. However, in keeping with the tendency of mainstream cinema, the narrative always concludes on an amiable note with a resolution in which the power hierarchies are restored, the villains are vanquished by the hero or heroine, and the besieged individual is rescued.

Eisenstein writes of Griffith that, "Griffith is a great master of montage constructions that have been created in a direct-lined quickening and *increase of tempo*" (Eisenstein 1969:234-235), and a good example of this is found in Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), which contains all the quintessential features of the "traditional" montage of tempo. The *Lonedale Operator*, because of illness, absents himself from work and is temporarily replaced by his daughter (Blanche Sweet) who, in the course of her work, takes charge of a large sum of money belonging to the *Lonedale Company*. Two vagabonds then attempt to steal the money and force her to barricade herself behind the doors of the telegraph office and send for help. As the train with the hero (i.e. the boyfriend of the *Lonedale Operator's* daughter) gets closer, so the villains succeed in penetrating deeper into the telegraph office, while the *Lonedale Operator's* daughter exhibits increasing distress in the office interior. Tension is created because the rapid inter-cutting between the "three primary spaces...[of] the telegraph office interior, the criminals outside, and the rescue train – with an escalating rhythm," (Simmons 2000:37) implies that the separate events, although they occur in different places, are racing towards each other in time and

space such that they will soon meet in the same frame. However, when they eventually do meet, the narrative, as mentioned above, concludes with an amiable resolution in which the hero emerges from the crisis victorious, the individual under siege (i.e. the Lonedale Operator's daughter) is rescued and the villains are arrested.

As such, the tension of montage of tempo is underpinned by an underlying bourgeois axiology in terms of which capitalist values are entrenched. For example, the Lonedale Company's right to capital and the legitimacy of the economic system by means of which they attained such wealth are never questioned, while the villains are identified as much by their dark attire as by their *poverty*. Moreover, the tension of the narrative results from the "possibility" that the villains might achieve their goals of stealing the company's money and ravishing the Lonedale Operator's daughter, which, in turn, would imply their successful inversion of the dominant socio-economic hierarchies and bourgeois class structures.

In *Strike* (1924), Eisenstein engages critically with this underlying axiology through parodying the "traditional" montage of tempo. Towards the end of the film, Cossacks are seen attacking the striking workers and, by the sheer weight and impetus of their brutality, are able to ascend with their horses onto higher and higher levels of the buildings that house the workers. A shot of two innocent children, sitting high above the fracas and playing, is juxtaposed with the ferocity of the struggle below, while the Cossacks succeed in ascending higher and higher up the stairs. Finally the Cossacks reach the highest part of the building and the children, at which point a Cossack grabs one child and throws him to his death over the side of the high building.

Through this Eisenstein subverts the usual narrative progression of montage of tempo à la Griffith. The Cossack constitutes the "hero" from a bourgeois axiological perspective, because he has

come to restore law and order. He arrives and defeats the striking workers who, because of their low social status and poverty, fall into the category of the "villains", while the children playing on top of the building, because of their youth and innocence, constitute the "besieged individuals". However, the Cossack (i.e. the hero), after defeating the striking workers (i.e. the villains), proceeds to the top of the building where he murders the child (i.e. the besieged individual), instead of rescuing him. Eisenstein's montage of tempo thus mirrors the restoration of the power structures and social hierarchies in terms of the axiology that underpinned Griffith's montage of tempo, but reveals such structures and hierarchies to be unjust and unequivocally corrupt.

In *Requiem for a Dream*, Aronofsky goes one step further than Eisenstein in his subversion of the "traditional" montage of tempo. His montage of tempo has its foundations just prior to the period designated by the caption "WINTER". At the end of the previous period, namely "FALL", Sara Goldfarb finally goes insane as a result of her isolation and growing addiction to, and abuse of, amphetamines and barbiturates. The last scene of "FALL" involves her walking down the street, dazed and disorientated, on her way to the television station to enquire as to when she is going to be on the game show. The next scene of Tyrone and Harry (now in "WINTER") is of them on their way to Florida in search of drugs, while the next time we see Marion is when she is alone in her dimly lit bathroom, experiencing withdrawal symptoms because of her difficulty in obtaining drugs. Although, the latter two scenes are separated from the former by the caption of "WINTER", they should be perceived as connected to it since, in that scene, Sara leaves her home and begins her "final" journey over the edge of sanity just as, after the caption "WINTER", Harry and Tyrone commence with their journey to Florida, a journey that in many ways will be a "final" journey for them

too. Similarly, Marion is forced, through her lack of money and the non-availability of drugs, to “finally” make a telephone call to Little John (Keith David) and enter into prostitution in order to get both. However, where in the *Lonedale Operator* the montage of tempo culminates in the hero, heroine and villains meeting in the same frame, and where in *Strike* the montage of tempo sees the children and the Cossacks finally meeting in a similar fashion, much to the detriment of one of the children, in Aronofsky’s montage of tempo there is no meeting but rather a “drifting apart”.

The cross-cutting between scenes involving the four characters, namely Harry, Marion, Tyrone and Sara, gradually increases in speed and brevity until it approximates the inter-cutting of a montage of tempo, during which the four characters are increasingly distanced from each other, not only by space but also by time.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in addition to this spatio-temporal distance, their individual experiences also distance them, irrevocably, from one another, in a manner that negates the possibility of any final, amiable resolution to the narrative. Through this Aronofsky offers a parody of mainstream cinema’s montage of tempo that, because it disappoints the audiences’ expectations, makes the narrative structure of montage of tempo conspicuous to them. However, the degree to which it becomes conspicuous is relative to the degree to which the characters, in contrast to the “traditional” montage of tempo, are distanced from one another and from their respective dreams, and in what follows I will focus on this. At the same time I will also consider the way in which Aronofsky delivers a social critique of, and subverts, the “image” infatuation of contemporary culture through his treatment of the various characters.

In the narrative Sara develops psychosis and is thereby cut off from her son Harry and from the possibility of realizing her dream of being on television. However, her psychosis represents more

than just a moment of Aronofsky’s subversion of montage of tempo through parody. Because this psychosis is only separated by a matter of degree from the “type” of subjectivity constituted in relation to contemporary mass media, Aronofsky’s thematization of it problematizes the relationship between mediated reality and its contemporary viewers/audience. Lacan maintains that the “lack of lack” of psychosis is pathological because it is really the case that, while

there is no subject except in representation,...no representation captures us completely. I can neither be totally defined nor can I escape all definition. I am the quest for myself...[o]n the other hand, any attempt to ‘totalize’ someone else, to grasp the other completely, is bound to fall short – no description does the other justice. Moreover, one can only see oneself as one *thinks* others see one (Sarup 1988:15-16).

Sara, along with the other main characters, is infatuated with the idea of attaining a stable and integral identity through the “image”. She chooses to see herself not as those around her see her, namely in terms of her facticity involving her personal history, triumphs, failures, personality traits, etc., but rather in terms of how an “imaginary” studio audience might see her, namely as an “image” devoid of failure, loss and lack. For her, the proverbial “15 seconds” of televised fame involving a summarized, superficial and ultimately empty representation of herself, takes precedence over a “non-mediated” identity, where lack is embraced as an integral part of subjectivity. She develops what Lacan would call a kind of psychosis, or “lack of lack”, as the result of her exclusive privileging of her self-image in relation to the game show, where she imagines herself articulating and representing her son Harry’s “imagined” success, health and engagement to the world. With the aid of amphetamines and barbiturates, she engages in a violent repression of her suffering, caused by her lack of company,

lack of recognition and the demands of her body, and privileges instead her self-image as she anticipates it being reflected through the mass media, which results in her experiencing a distinct “lack-of-lack”, or *psychosis*.

In the contemporary age, as a result of the proliferation of the mass media and mainstream cinema, there is an infatuation with an imaginary identity that is informed by the media. As such, the media dictates who “we” are and “speaks” us, and to that extent “we” are all, to a certain degree, psychotic. According to Lacan, psychosis has a linguistic basis.

In the delirium of a psychotic one finds...a form of speaking that ‘has given up trying to make itself recognized’...[and] precisely because of this solipsism, psychotic delusions exhibit a stereotypical quality that demonstrates the fact that the subject here ‘is spoken rather than speaking’...the psychotic’s speaking manifests a fundamental ‘absence of speech’ where speech properly involves some degree of creative dialogue (Lee 1990:68).

This is precisely what manifests after the final scene of “FALL”, when Sara arrives at the television station to enquire as to when she is going to be on the game show. As she pleads with them she intermittently says things such as, “We’re giving the prizes away!” Her psychosis, involving the indistinguishable merging of the “language” of the game show with her own speech, was foreshadowed in a previous scene, mentioned earlier, in which Harry visited her during the early stages of her diet-pill addiction, and questioned her about her anticipated appearance on television. As stated, Sara used clichés from mediated reality to articulate her psychological pain, and thereby indicated the degree to which the visual language of the mass media had already begun to usurp her own speech and thoughts. This usurpation culminates in her psychotic breakdown at the T.V. station.

From there she is escorted to a psychiatric hospital where, after the

failure of various treatments, she is subjected to shock therapy that literally cuts her off from the realm of emotions, evident in her non-expressive facial features when two of her friends come to visit her. Furthermore, in the very last scene of the film Sara lies on her bed with the voices and lights of the show, and “images” of Harry, echoing and flashing now only in her memories, and with her lost in her delusions and thereby, ironically, cut off forever from the “real” Harry and his predicament involving imprisonment, addiction and the amputation of his arm.

In this final scene, her psychosis, from Harry and her “dream”, are not only integral to Aronofsky’s parody of montage of tempo, but also constitute part of Aronofsky’s attempt to subvert the power of the mass media. His film, as mentioned, has a self-critical aspect in that it shows the dreadful power of the media to dictate who “we” are and to “speak” us. *Requiem for a Dream* thereby challenges “us”, in view of this power, to reclaim the power of creative individual thinking, and it is therefore really a “call to arms” to take the power of the media seriously and to resist it.

Aronofsky strengthens this “call to infatuation of contemporary culture” via his treatment of the character of Marion Silver. Through her he reveals the hypocrisy of an infatuation with “beauty” defined purely in terms of appearances, and shows such “beauty” to be only a beautiful façade underpinned, in reality, by horror and anguish. Her dream (i.e. of attaining “wholeness”) involves her identification with, and exclusive privileging of, the image of her own beauty in a way that is tantamount to addiction.

During the “SUMMER” she articulates the degree to which her reflected image is of fundamental importance to her when she lies head to head with Harry and whispers, “I love you Harry, you make me feel like a person.” She doesn’t love Harry for any

enduring quality of which he is possessed, but rather because an image of her beauty is reflected back to her through his adoration of her. However, simultaneously, the psychological distance between them is articulated through a split-screen in which the left camera focuses on Harry and the right on Marion. The split screen is not only an alienating technique that makes conspicuous the "constructed-ness" of the representation, as discussed earlier, but it also articulates the impossibility of them really communicating or having a relationship because of Marion's narcissism. Further evidence for her narcissism occurs, during the 'SUMMER' period, when she takes drugs alone and stands half-naked before a mirror, adoring her own reflection. Her dream, involving complete intoxication with the image of her own beauty, is facilitated by drugs that silence the subversive voices of discontent that undermine and contradict this image of 'perfection', namely those voices that remind her of her facticity involving the problems she is experiencing with her parents, her lack of career-direction, options, etc.

However, as a result of her narcissism, she is as much addicted to Harry's "reflection" of her beauty as she is to drugs, and when later, through the scarcity of drugs and a lack of money, his "reflection" of her beauty begins to fade, as he draws away from her emotionally, she prostitutes herself with her psychologist, Arnold, in order to get money to buy drugs. In reality, her endeavour is not only geared towards acquiring drugs, but is also geared towards re-acquiring the fading "reflection" of her beauty through Harry's adoration of her.

Marion attempts to counter the steady "erosion" of her self-image, which occurs through the subversive dictates of her growing addiction that force her into prostitution, by applying make-up. This becomes heavier and darker as the

narrative progresses and contrasts markedly with the "purity" of the above-mentioned scene, during the period entitled "SUMMER", when she stood in front of a mirror, alone and "free" of make-up.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, in the absence of Harry and without money, she is overcome by the impetus of her addiction and pays her first visit to Little John to exchange sex for drugs. This leads to a second visit to Little John's apartment where she becomes the object of the gaze of a group of men when she is forced to perform a variety of sexual acts with other women that she finds utterly demeaning. Where before, in terms of her narcissism, she was both subject and object, at Little John's apartment she is reduced to a mere object by the men who take pleasure in exploiting her image of beauty. Through this event Marion is forever cut off from her dream, involving intoxication with the image of her own beauty, because after her ordeal it is impossible for her to re-constitute the "purity" of that image. Quite simply put, she is never able to look at herself in the mirror in the same way as before.

The loss of her dream, and her separation from Harry through her prostitution, deny the narrative the possibility of resolving itself amiably and thereby play an important role in Aronofsky's parody of the montage of tempo, while the reflection of the emptiness and pain beneath her beautiful image subverts the illusion upon which the image infatuation of contemporary culture is predicated.

A similar theme is visually articulated in relation to the character of Tyrone, who is also represented as infatuated with his self-image. During the period entitled "SUMMER", when Harry's and Tyrone's drug business was profitable, there occurs a scene in which Tyrone looks at himself in some mirrors that he has bought with his newly acquired wealth. The fact that he purchased mirrors is particularly

important because it relates his infatuation with his reflected image to Marion's (and Sara's) similar pursuit, i.e. the desire to attain stability and integrity of the self through an Apollonian image that does not admit the existence of subversive Dionysian voices. Lacan maintains that

the imaginary order is best exemplified by the mirror stage...[when] the subject arrives at an apprehension of both its self and the Other – indeed of itself as the Other...assisted by the...[subject] seeing...its own reflection in a mirror. That reflection has a coherence which the subject itself lacks. But this self-recognition is, Lacan insists, a mis-recognition (Sarup 1988:27).

Although Tyrone is no longer in the "mirror phase",<sup>16</sup> he is subject to a similar "mis"-recognition of himself through the image. This involves his identification with the integrity of the image despite the fact that, as a subject created through, by, and within language, he is denied such coherence and stability. His desire for such integrity manifests itself in an exclusion or "forgetting" of those factors that destabilize the integrity of his self-image, for example, his criminal occupation that detracts from, and undermines, the image of "perfection" reflected back at him in the mirror.

However, in addition to this, a second theme broached through his character concerns the degree to which romantic involvement is underpinned by the unfulfillable pursuit of the lost moment of plenitude *and* involved with the figure of the mother. Mainstream cinematic narratives that focus on romance characteristically involve some kind of resolution whereby the pursued love-object is either found or found wanting and replaced by a satisfactory alternative (not always another person), without a hint of the link between the desired object and the figure of the mother. From Lacan's perspective, romance is a discursive practice that maintains "that 'love' is the ultimate

solution to all our problems...[that it] makes us whole...full...[and] completes our being. Love in effect promises to return us to the blissful state of the moment of plenitude, warm against the body of the mother" (Storey 1998: 96). However, Lacan also correctly points out that we never find such complete satisfaction. In contrast to this, the aesthetic effect of mainstream cinema, as it pertains to romance, relies heavily on a silencing of both the psychoanalytic dynamic of lack, which underpins intimate relationships, and the links between the desired object and the figure of the mother, and instead promotes a false psychology of the possibility of attaining the moment of plenitude through finding one's "other-half".

However, in *Requiem for a Dream*, Tyrone's dream is represented as orientated, unequivocally, around the pursuit of a substitute for the lost moment of plenitude in the womb and for maternal approval, both of which are also represented as forever beyond his grasp. Tyrone, at one point, remembers his childhood and mother, in the presence of his girlfriend, whilst looking in the mirror. This scene involves a play on language similar to the manner in which the unconscious plays with words and symbols, where "reflection" could mean both reflection in a mirror and a remembering of the past. Having set the "psychoanalytic" tone of the scene as such, Aronofsky goes further by representing Tyrone's thoughts as returning to his childhood where he imagines himself as a small boy, sitting in his mother's lap and embracing her while saying, "See, I told you one day I'd make it." Tyrone's desire for financial success is revealed as underpinned by the desire for maternal approval, and in his brief verbal exchange with his girlfriend, immediately after his "reflection" in the mirror and "reflection" on the past, it is revealed that his girlfriend constitutes a substitute for his lost moment of plenitude. When asked by his girlfriend what he is thinking of, he

replies, "I'm thinking of you," although the images have been of his mother. Moreover, in a later scene during the period entitled "FALL", Tyrone sits alone in his apartment, after his girlfriend has left him, and stares down at a picture as the rain pelts against his window. However, the picture is then revealed to be of his mother and not of his girlfriend. Aronofsky, by "unforgetting" the psychoanalytic impulses beneath "romance" that involve the figure of the mother, seriously problematizes the "aesthetic" of romance found in mainstream cinema.

At the end of "WINTER", both Harry and Tyrone are arrested, and in the final moments of Aronofsky's montage of tempo Tyrone is seen performing hard labour in a Florida prison and dreaming, at night, of his mother. His incarceration cuts him off not only from her and her "approval", but also from his dream of reacquiring the lost moment of plenitude through the substitute of a girlfriend, and the tragedy of this contributes to the parody of the montage of tempo in the final scenes that does not facilitate amiable Apollonian resolution.

Harry's "primary" dream involves the reacquisition of the moment of plenitude through the substitute of intoxication that dulls the pain of his facticity. However, his retreat from his facticity is as much inspired by the "image" infatuation of contemporary culture as the pursuits of the other characters. Aronofsky, in a recent interview, stated that the "big point of the film [is] that all addictions are the same: coffee, TV, drugs – it [doesn't] matter what the chemical [is, because]...mainlining coffee and TV is the same as doing it with drugs" (<http://aronofsky.tripod.com/interview17.html>). Harry, like the rest of the characters, inhabits a culture of the "image" that refuses to acknowledge the "Dionysian" reality of a facticity that does not correspond to the Apollonian integrity of the image. The presence of such

facticity causes pain, which is then neutralized with "drugs", which can take the form of illegal substances, T.V. or even coffee. The real reason for Harry's abuse of drugs is revealed after the scene in which he visits Sara and tells her about the television he has bought for her. After seeing her pathetic circumstances and realizing that she is developing an addiction to amphetamines and barbiturates, he leaves and cries in the taxi, at which point a quick montage of rhythm represents a drug fix that he uses to retreat from his pain.

Inspired by the illusory integrity of the image and the "image infatuation" of contemporary culture, Harry's attempts to resist his facticity result in him becoming separated from his world, which is visually articulated through the use of a "split-screen". This first occurs early in the film, before the title caption, and communicates the psychological/emotional distance between Harry and Sara. When Harry steals Sara's T.V., he is isolated from her in the right frame, while she, hiding in the next room, is sealed within the left frame. Later, this same cinematographic technique is utilized to articulate the emotional and psychological distance that exists between Harry and Marion where, despite lying naked beside each other and exchanging overtures of love, they are represented as insurmountably separated from each other.<sup>17</sup>

Harry's relationship with Marion, like that of Tyrone with his girlfriend, is also characterized by the unconscious pursuit of a substitute for the lost moment of plenitude that involves the figure of the mother. Evidence for this is the red dress that features prominently in Sara's imagined appearance on the television game show and in her later delusions. She last wore the red dress to Harry's high school graduation and there are two scenes during which Harry hallucinates and sees Marion wearing a similar red dress. Harry, like Tyrone, also seeks maternal approval from his "substitute"

for the lost moment of plenitude, namely Marion, and he must win Marion's affection through feats of ingenuity or daring, in a manner akin to a child who seeks validation through the smiling gaze of the mother. In the scene in which they break into a building and ascend to the rooftop to throw paper jets, Harry wins Marion's affection because he bypasses the security twice, once through conning his way past the intercom system at the front door and a second time through bypassing the alarm attached to the rooftop door. Yet despite this, Marion purposefully tests him further by setting off the alarm before they leave, giving him the additional obstacle of having to evade the alerted security guards. Again, once they have eluded capture, we see them in the elevator engaging in a game of "thumb-wrestling" which, far from being an innocuous gesture, continues this theme of constant challenge and tension between them. Also, during the "SUMMER" period when he is able to sell drugs and make a profit, he returns home to Marion and tells her of his success, at which point she says "Come to me!" and rewards his achievements with a "maternal" embrace.<sup>18</sup>

However, despite all this, Harry's relationship with Marion is couched within the "image infatuation" of his culture, and therefore operates only at a superficial level, evidence for which occurs at one point during "SUMMER" when Harry tells Marion that he fell in love with her only because of her beauty. As mentioned above, Harry's "primary" dream, inspired by this "image infatuation", involves his negation of his facticity through intoxication. This manifests not only in his separation from Marion and Sara, represented through the use of a "split-screen", but also in his request that Marion sleep with her psychologist, Arnold, to get money for drugs.<sup>19</sup> Further evidence for the "superficiality" of their relationship occurs in the scene in which Harry, lounging in front of the T.V. as he waits

for Marion to come home from prostituting herself, only experiences anguish when he "sees" Marion, through something tantamount to a hallucination, having sex with someone on T.V. In other words, because he only relates to Marion at the level of the image, his verbal exchange with her prior to her prostituting herself, in which she expressed her concerns about visiting Arnold, did not impact significantly on him. In contrast to this, he is greatly affected by the hallucinatory "image" of her, superimposed upon a mediated image of a wedding ring. Yet this "Dionysian" facticity that does not correspond to his image of Marion is quickly suppressed through a drug fix, visually articulated by a montage of rhythm. This constitutes a counterpart to the earlier scene in which he took drugs in the taxicab to suppress the emotional pain he experienced after his visit to Sara, during which he became aware of her pathetic circumstances and growing amphetamine-barbiturate addiction, and is thus further evidence of the role drugs play in Harry's "dream" of attaining, and maintaining, wholeness.

However, despite Marion's sacrifice, Tyrone and Harry are still unable to obtain drugs and therefore, in the first scene of "WINTER", they set off for Florida in the hope of finding a new source. In Florida, Harry's left arm, into which he injects drugs, develops gangrene, and when he seeks medical assistance both he and Tyrone are arrested. After this, they are both imprisoned and Harry's arm is amputated. When asked earlier by Tyrone why he didn't inject himself elsewhere, Harry stated that his left arm was the only place where he could "get it right". Thus, through the loss of his arm, Harry is literally cut off from his dream that involved the attainment and maintenance of an illusion of "wholeness" via the negation of his facticity through intoxication, which was, in turn, inspired by the (illusory) "integrity" of the mediated image.



The tragedy of Harry's immersion within this mindset, like the predicaments of the others, adds weight to Aronofsky's parody of montage of tempo. Yet because Harry's addiction receives its impetus from the demands of an "image-infatuated" culture that refuses to acknowledge its facticity, his suffering also constitutes an indictment of the hegemony of the visual language of mainstream cinema and the mass media that produces such a culture.

Aronofsky's montage of tempo in *Requiem for a Dream* does not culminate in a meeting of the hero, villain and besieged individual in the same frame. Rather, all the victims are separated from one another, not only at the level of the narrative, but also at the level of cinematography and editing, by being placed in four different frames at the end of the montage of tempo. Through this Aronofsky, following Eisenstein, subverts the "traditional" form of montage of tempo with its amiable resolution and its accompanying bourgeois axiology, while through thematizing the psychoanalytic dynamics that underpin romance, and that are linked to the figure of the mother, he further subverts "aesthetic" aspects of mainstream cinematic fiction. However, because montage of tempo is a cornerstone of mainstream film "language", and because mainstream film "language" plays a significant role in the constitution of subjectivity, Aronofsky's parody of montage of tempo *also* subverts the integrity of the subjectivity constituted by mainstream cinema. It achieves this by facilitating a moment in which the habitual patterns of mainstream cinema become conspicuous, through their non-fulfilment, to the subject who is usually constituted by those patterns.

*Requiem for a Dream* criticizes the non-critical superficiality of infatuation with the image that prevails in postmodernity, as a result of the proliferation of the mass media. Infatuation with the image of their own desires predisposes all of the characters in

the narrative to pursue, uncritically and exclusively, this Apollonian illusion that falsely promises wholeness. Their respective drug-addictions, in turn, function as an integral part of a mechanism of repression that seeks to deny and overcome the subversive Dionysian voices of their facticity, which, as the post-structural discourse makes clear, echo the instability and temporality of all subjectivity constituted by language.

The contemporary credence granted to the film "language" of mainstream cinema is reflected through the characters' expectation that everything would eventually turn out "all right", as it does in mainstream film narratives. Ironically, it is their uncritical pursuit of the image that eventually cuts them off from their very dreams that were inspired by the contemporary image-orientated culture.<sup>20</sup>

Yet their seemingly inescapable dilemma is not exclusively theirs, but is rather the inheritance of everyone who inhabits an image-saturated postmodern environment. One scene in *Requiem for a Dream* that sums up this underlying theme is the final scene of the period entitled "FALL", involving the image of Sara Goldfarb in a faded and threadbare red dress, walking dazed and disorientated towards the television station, having succumbed entirely to her psychosis. Within the scene, her red dress is juxtaposed with the shades of the grey street, snow and anonymous pedestrians who speed past her. The colour composition of the scene harks back to one of the final scenes in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), where just before the Potemkin engages with the squadron whom they believe to be loyal to the Czar, a last image of the "red" flag flying boldly above the Potemkin communicates their resoluteness, courage and defiance. This is the only instance of colour in *Battleship Potemkin* and thus the juxtaposition of the redness of the flag with the various shades of grey of all the other footage is very striking. However, what is important is the content of the

visual metaphor that communicates hope and possibility. In *Requiem for a Dream*, Sara's red dress also functions as a "flag", namely the flag of her desire and dream. Yet, in contrast to Eisenstein's film, the red "flag" of Sara's dress flutters in the bitter cold of the winter one last time before being lost forever as she dips below the horizon of sanity. Her "final" journey is, as mentioned earlier, paralleled by Tyrone's and Harry's "final" journey to Florida and Marion's "final" journey to Little John, all of which result in "shipwreck", loss and increasing isolation.

Yet, insofar as their respective predicaments are symptomatic of the postmodern condition, the final fluttering of the "flag" of Sara's red dress could also be construed as a tragic symbol that denotes a requiem for the dream of the Enlightenment. While this dream may have become manifest in the technical triumph of the mediated reality of mass-communication, the possibility of the continuation of the critical spirit that gave birth to it has been undermined by the uncritical image orientation of contemporary postmodern culture.

## Notes

1 The degree to which she relies on T.V. as an 'opiate' is articulated later by her son Harry (Jared Leto) when he refers to T.V. as her 'fix' and calls her a T.V. 'junkie'.

2 For example, the use of the straight-cut and jarring 'paradigm'-shift in the opening scene involves a symbolic gesture that, from the outset of the film, articulates the fragility and 'lack of substance' behind the mesmerizing moving images of the mass media.

3 The 'snorrie-cam' is a camera that attaches to the body of the actor/actress and it is designed specifically to keep his/her face and body in focus while blurring the background.

4 Buckland maintains that the montage could also function as a symbol "to suggest that even a stone lion would be shocked by the massacre on the Odessa steps...[Also,] the lion could represent the Russian people who have finally risen against their oppressors" (Buckland 1998:24).

5 Mayakovsky was the 'leading poet of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and of the early Soviet period' (<http://www/kirjasto.sci.fi/majakovs.htm>).

6 Aronofsky often refers to his montage of rhythm as 'Hip Hop Montage' (<http://aronofsky.tripod.com/interview16.html>), presumably because, while it is a descendant of Kuleshov's juxtaposition of images, it is far more dynamic.

7 This differs depending on the type of drug being consumed because of the different forms of preparation required by different drugs before they can be consumed.

8 "[T]he more vociferous complaint that the Russian filmmakers had was with the narrative structure of Hollywood filmmaking. They believed, as many Marxists since believe, that Hollywood cinema is designed to draw you into believing in the capitalist propaganda...[and contains] device[s] to make you align yourself with this unhealthy ideology" [http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist\\_film\\_theory](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist_film_theory).

9 This will be discussed later in connection with Aronofsky's parody of montage of tempo.

10 In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche maintains that the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses each underpin a different world of art. "Apollo stands...as the transfiguring genius of the *principium individuationis*, through which alone true redemption in appearance can be attained, while under the mystical cry of exultation of Dionysus the spell of individuation is burst apart" (Nietzsche 2000:86). An Apollonian image is seen as possessing an integrity and stability denied to the voice of Dionysus that manifests itself in the temporality and uncertainty of music and intoxication. However, a subject's pursuit of the false Apollonian promise of integrity and stability, through exclusive identification with image, involves a denial of the degree to which their subjectivity is underpinned by the instability and temporality of language, which dooms such a pursuit to failure.

11 While Edison made a significant contribution towards film projection, D.W. Griffith is considered the founding father of film 'language'. "Prior to [Griffith's] the Birth of a Nation...film was anything but an art form or a vehicle for serious expression...The Birth of a Nation was the cinematic landmark that blew apart all convention...[Its] grand spectacle, the brilliant storytelling techniques...close-up shots...iris, panning, scanning – these were the magical elements that established the language of cinema" (<http://www.nyfavidio.com/content/cat-GRIFFITH.htm>).

12 In *Being and Time*, Heidegger refers to equipment that, when broken, becomes *conspicuous*, in that it no longer 'disappears' through the habit of use. He states, "When we discover its unusability, the thing becomes conspicuous. *Conspicuousness* presents the thing at hand in a certain unhandiness... [Accordingly, w]hen we notice its unhandiness, what is at hand enters the mode of *obtrusiveness*... Unhandy things are disturbing and make evident the *obstinacy* of what is initially to be taken care of... With this obstinacy the objective presence of what is at hand makes itself known in a new way as the being of what is still present and calls for completion" (Heidegger 1953:68-69). Similarly, when the narrative structure of a film, that usually goes unnoticed, does not conclude with an amiable resolution, it becomes *conspicuous* as 'lacking' in some way. That is, the lack of resolution becomes *obtrusive* and the audience becomes aware of how the narrative *obstinately* resists completion along the usual lines of mainstream cinema.

13 There are distinct parallels between this perspective, attained through critical cinema, and Nietzsche's perspective regarding 'truth' and 'facts' that constitute subjectivity. Nietzsche maintains that language is an abyss of possibility in which there are no definite, eternally-stable "facts". Instead, he asserts that truth "is a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transposed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a nation fixed, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which have become worn out and have lost their sensual power; coins which have lost their pictures and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal" (Megill 1985:51).

14 For example, Marion's ordeal at Little John's occurs at night while Tyrone is seen working at the prison during the day.

15 This is accentuated by the light and haziness of the earlier scene in 'SUMMER', which contrasts with the weighty shadows, clarity and deep purple and blue hues that characterize scenes involving Marion during 'WINTER'.

16 According to Lacan, this occurs somewhere between the ages of six and eighteen months.

17 Ambiguity exists here because Sara's addiction to television also separates her from Harry. Similarly, Marion's narcissism separates her as much from Harry as his infatuation with the *integrity* of the image separates him from her.

18 She does not approach him in this scene but rather sits and, opening her arms, consents to his approach and affections.

19 The demands of their addiction, combined with a lack of drugs and money, place increasing strain on their relationship and begin to distance Harry from Marion. As mentioned, Marion, because of her narcissism, is as much addicted to drugs as to Harry's 'reflection' of her beauty through his adoration of her. She consents to prostituting herself because failure to do so would result in a continued lack of money and drugs that, in turn, would result in her loss of Harry's 'reflection' of her beauty.

20 Baudrillard lends support to the idea of the contemporary hegemony of film 'language' when he states that, "In America cinema is true because it is the whole of space, the whole way of life that are cinematic. The break between the two, the abstraction which we deplore, does not exist: life is cinema" (Baudrillard 1988:101).

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### **Internet Resources**

[Http://aronofsky.tripod.com/interview16.html](http://aronofsky.tripod.com/interview16.html)

[Http://aronofsky.tripod.com/interview17.html](http://aronofsky.tripod.com/interview17.html)

[Http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/majakovs.htm](http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/majakovs.htm)

[Http://www.nyfavideo.com/content/cat-GRIFFITH.htm](http://www.nyfavideo.com/content/cat-GRIFFITH.htm)

[Http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist\\_film\\_theory](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist_film_theory)