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**The American Imaginary in the  
Contemporary American Multi-Protagonist  
Film**

**by**

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degree of

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## Contents

List of illustrations .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	vi
Declaration .....	vi
Abstract .....	vii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1    CHAPTER ONE – Literature review .....	12
1.1    Complex form – complex debate.....	12
1.2    The early debate: multiple narratives or several lead characters .....	14
1.3    Forking paths and films with many characters .....	18
1.4    Puzzle films and complex narratives .....	24
1.5    Consolidation of debate: the same as it ever was? .....	28
1.6    Global gaze of accidentality .....	31
1.7    Several connection principles .....	37
1.8    More than stories about contingency .....	43
1.9    Popularisation of the multi-protagonist film’s scholarship .....	45
2    CHAPTER TWO – Explorations of contingency and equality in <i>Thirteen Conversations about One Thing</i> .....	50
2.1    Beyond either/or: what is contingency in the multi-protagonist film? .....	50
2.2    Are films with several lead characters necessarily proposing a single idea? .....	53
2.3    In the beginning there was equality .....	57
2.4    Personal happiness and the equality of all .....	63
2.5    Happiness will tear us apart.....	68
2.6    I knew a happy man once .....	73
2.7    May you get what you want and want what you get .....	79
2.8    My eyes have been opened, I can never go back.....	85

<b>3 CHAPTER THREE – <i>We are all just on our own</i>: Embracing independence in <i>Killing Them Softly</i> .....</b>	<b>96</b>
3.1 What to do with films that are inspired by Žižek? .....	97
3.2 Is the king of controversy naked?.....	101
3.3 Blast from the past.....	111
3.4 Provocation from start to finish .....	118
3.5 Politics, business, and the deadlock of contemporary thought.....	127
3.6 Why is it that we do the things that we do?.....	134
3.7 Back to the simple times.....	142
<b>4 CHAPTER FOUR – The politics of aesthetics and the perverted pleasures of <i>The Big Short</i> .....</b>	<b>147</b>
4.1 Above all a question about an economic liberalism .....	148
4.2 Starting with equality.....	159
4.3 The perverted spectatorship.....	163
4.4 Continuing with equality .....	171
4.5 Neither fish nor fowl: is uncertainty in a film a bad thing?.....	176
4.6 Seeing through the American Imaginary .....	184
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>196</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>FILMOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>216</b>
<b>WORD COUNT .....</b>	<b>223</b>

## List of illustrations

Figure 1-1 Representation of the everyday in <i>Short Cuts</i> .....	16
Figure 1-2 Multiple characters restricted to one reality in <i>Slacker</i> .....	20
Figure 1-3 Here we go again – the same scene replayed from a different perspective in <i>Elephant</i> . .....	26
Figure 1-4 <i>Babel</i> 's global gaze – a teenager in Tokyo comes across news about an American tourist being shot in Morocco.....	32
Figure 1-5 <i>71 Fragments</i> ' depiction of “casual cruelty” – a random character is oblivious of the consequences of his actions.....	36
Figure 1-6 Character ensemble or the multi-protagonist film proper? Jim as the centre of the action in <i>American Pie</i> . .....	42
Figure 1-7 <i>Disconnect</i> ponders if people are more connected in the Information Age. ....	48
Figure 2-1 Related after all – <i>Magnolia</i> withholding information about character-relations..	55
Figure 2-2 Looking, but not seeing. ....	65
Figure 2-3 Agreeing to disagree.....	72
Figure 2-4 What just happened? An accident that comes as surprise also for the viewer. ....	82
Figure 2-5 Parallels make the connections.....	86
Figure 3-1 Dominik offering a psychoanalytical interpretation of his latest film in the 2012 Cannes Film Festival .....	99
Figure 3-2 The gritty social realism of <i>Killing Them Softly</i> that troubled many critics.....	115
Figure 3-3 A genre film or arthouse? The confusing credit sequence of <i>Killing Them Softly</i> . .....	120
Figure 3-4 Politics shown to be literally beyond Frankie's horizon of interest. ....	126
Figure 3-5 These days everybody is an entrepreneur.....	130
Figure 3-6 Patriotism has nothing to do with business, or has it? A photo of American troopers in Johnny's business.....	133
Figure 3-7 Russell pondering how he got to this point. ....	142
Figure 4-1 <i>The Big Short</i> 's invitation to see the American Imaginary from within. ....	160
Figure 4-2 A “cool” heist film freezeframe shot exemplifying the film's use of generic devices against the grain. ....	165
Figure 4-3 The pattern of American success.....	173
Figure 4-4 Ghastly presence of finance.....	180
Figure 4-5 Characters controlling property, or vice versa?.....	183

Figure 4-6 *The Big Short*'s questioning of the American Imaginary..... 186

Figure 4-7 The burden of sharing the American Imaginary..... 194

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## Declaration

This thesis contains no material derived from prior work, nor for another degree. It has not previously been submitted for examination at another institution. The thesis is the candidate's own work.

## Abstract

In this thesis I explore the contemporary American multi-protagonist film's use of contingency and representation of the American Imaginary. The multi-protagonist film is a film form of increasing significance that moves away from the classical narrative cinema's reliance on a psychologically motivated goal-oriented character and causally coherent narrative, and favours instead a formation of several lead characters and contingency as a way to create coherence in the narrative world. I exemplify why contingency should be understood in these films to mean the opposite of necessity and not simply standing for accidentality. Although accidentality has an important role in the multi-protagonist film, as the thesis highlights and the current scholarship rightly recognises, I explore the way in which accidents can bring forth a larger sense that the given order could have been otherwise. The American Imaginary is understood as a cinematic depiction of a complex intellectual and material framework informing the characters' worldview. My focus is not on arguing how the American Imaginary presents itself in the society of the United States, instead I explore the way in which the chosen films represent and interrogate a set of ideas and values that they depict as specific to the U.S. With that being said, the films can also be argued to be empirical examples of social constructions of the U.S.

I engage with the subject via close textual analysis of three multi-protagonist films – *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing* (Sprecher, 2001), *Killing Them Softly* (Dominik, 2012), and *The Big Short* (McKay, 2015). The films are chosen above all based on their deep interest in both contingency and the American Imaginary. While *Thirteen Conversations* and *The Big Short* are representative of the form and could be argued to be close to the generic core of the multi-protagonist film because they treat all their lead characters equally, *Killing Them Softly* is a less obvious example because it seems to favour one character over the others. Yet, the film is chosen because I see it as representing a tension common to all multi-protagonist films – a struggle of striking a balance between treating all characters equally and to some extent following the norms of the classical narrative cinema, which, among other devices, applies psychological complexity for creating coherence in the story-world.

I make use of the thinking of Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek to highlight the chosen multi-protagonist films' similarity to contemporary continental philosophy. The philosophers are chosen based on what I illustrate to be a “family resemblance” between some of the authors' main ideas and the chosen films. I will explore how Rancière's understanding of equality, its connection to contingency, and his thinking on the aesthetic regimes of art offer a way to rethink

the central tension of the multi-protagonist film – that between the form’s interest in contingency and its own rigid structure. Žižek’s psychoanalytical thinking of the Real, the unsymbolisable, and its relation to ideology as the latter’s main structuring principle, can be seen to create a close parallel with the chosen multi-protagonist films’ profound interest in the contingent nature of all social structures. As such, the thesis departs from much of the current writing on the multi-protagonist film by demonstrating that the form’s interest in contingency is not restricted to an easy way of connecting the various lead characters nor is it simply a method through which the film form is aiming to reflect the increasing complexity of modern society. Rather, I show the example multi-protagonist films to be exploring contemporary American society with a particular emphasis on capitalism and neoliberalisation, understood by the films as a social process where business and financial logic comes to inform the most various aspects of life. Instead of recognising the contemporary American multi-protagonist film as only adapting to the rapidly transforming society, the film form is shown to actively contribute to a changing understanding of America and its role on the global stage.

## INTRODUCTION

After having just explained how his job as a public prosecutor contributes to American society, Troy (Matthew McConaughey) – one of the lead characters of the 2001 *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing*, directed by Jill Sprecher – runs over a pedestrian with his car.<sup>1</sup> All of a sudden Troy’s happy life becomes a nightmare as he realises that he cannot bring himself to bring himself to justice. The friendly New York around him swiftly becomes a strange and isolated place. Andrew Dominik’s 2012 *Killing Them Softly* evokes a similarly sombre impression of the United States. The film switches the Boston setting of its source material, 1974 crime novel *Cogan’s Trade* by George V. Higgins, for a post-Katrina Louisiana.<sup>2</sup> In this dire setting, small-time criminal Frankie (Scoot McNairy), realises that life is meaningless on a very fundamental level. *The Big Short*, Adam McKay’s 2015 playful comedy about the 2007–2008 economic crisis, seems to be set in an entirely different version of America. The film depicts a colourful and affluent world of high finance and luxury housing. Even so, at one point hedge fund manager Mark Baum (Steve Carell), after having accidentally come upon the idea of securing his company against the potential collapse of the U.S. housing market, sends his team to Miami to investigate the housing situation. Upon seeing all the extravagant, but abandoned, houses a member of Baum’s team cannot withhold his surprise, likening the location to Chernobyl.

Despite these being very different films, they share several similarities. All these are examples of the multi-protagonist film, a type in which several lead characters are given equal attention.<sup>3</sup> They are also all interested in the present state of America, and they are all considerably invested in exploring contingency. The latter, as I will demonstrate, is not merely understood in these films as standing for accidentality, but as describing a much larger sense of how the present social conditions could very well be entirely different. While these films do often depict car crashes and accidental connections between its main characters, I will explore

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<sup>1</sup> “America” will be used throughout as a synonym of “the United States”. Understanding the problematic encompassed by the term, which is that the country does not represent the plurality of Americas, the term not only simplifies the following discussion but can be seen to be an important part of the American Imaginary that I will go on to explore.

<sup>2</sup> Higgins 2011 (1974).

<sup>3</sup> María del Mar Azcona offers one of the neatest definitions of the form by calling the multi-protagonist film a group of films “with a multiplicity of characters of similar narrative relevance”, Azcona 2010: 2. The term “multi-protagonist film”, as the following literature review shows, is just one of the many terms used to describe the form; it is, however, one of the most consolidated terms and as such will be used throughout the thesis.

this feature from a new angle by showing how such accidents often reveal to the main characters contingency on a much larger scale. By going beyond the general assumptions of current scholarship on the multi-protagonist film, according to which contingency is a convenient way to unite multiple, sometimes disparate characters, or serves as an easy way of reflecting an increasingly complex society, I will demonstrate how these films can be seen to be combining the multi-protagonist form with a strong emphasis on contingency in order to interrogate what I describe as the American Imaginary – a cinematic representation of the complex material and cultural framework that inform the characters' engagement and understanding of contemporary America.<sup>4</sup> Given that the thesis makes some use of psychoanalytical thinking, it is important to stress that the term “imaginary” is not used here in the specific psychoanalytical sense, but rather stands for what the films depict as widely shared American values. The relationship between these values and the lead characters, as I will demonstrate, allows the films to interrogate the changing nature and importance of social imaginaries in what the films depict as contemporary America. Although the social imaginary that I am interested in is fictional and located in the films’ depiction of America, these films through their interest in American society can be seen as actively contributing to our understanding of the changing impression of America and its role on the global stage.

The films’ respective approaches to the American Imaginary are markedly different. *Thirteen Conversations* subtly questions the idea of the American Dream, according to which personal dedication to one’s profession results in upward social mobility and benefits American society more broadly. *Killing Them Softly*, on the other hand, sharply cuts through any positive sentiments that the American Imaginary can evoke, displaying a country in ruins and filled with criminals and low-lifes attempting to outsmart one another. To make this representation of the U.S. even grimmer, the 2008 presidential elections and market crash provide the backdrop of *Killing Them Softly*, and as such politicians are shown to represent only the interests of big businesses, leaving everybody else to rely on their wits in a dog-eat-dog world. In contrast, *The Big Short* downplays the differences between its own and pop-culture’s representations of America; both incorporate glossy images that celebrate the forward-looking American spirit. Still, the film questions the role of the American Imaginary, with its stress on the affluent nature of the U.S., pondering whether it partially led to the biggest economic downturn of the century.

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<sup>4</sup> Regarding the multi-protagonist film’s use of contingency as a way of connecting the lead characters see Bordwell 2006 and 2008; concerning ideas about the multi-protagonist film being an ideal representation of the contemporary zeitgeist see Azcona 2010 and Deleyto 2012: 218–236.

Thus, while different in their style of investigation, the films share a similar interest in exploring contemporary American culture and economy.

The multi-protagonist format of these films is recognised as vital to evoking a universalised sense of contingency, exemplifying that it affects, albeit differently, all of the lead characters. The American protagonists of these films come across accidental occurrences that dramatically change their lives. Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate, these accidental occurrences do not form the core of the films' interests as is often assumed, nor do they simply offer a narrative strategy for coincidence and overlap, but serve rather as a catalyst that leads the characters to a far-reaching understanding of contingency – that is that the present social order could have been otherwise.<sup>5</sup> This understanding of an all-encompassing contingency – that ultimately contingency is the only necessity in the world, as Quentin Meillassoux puts it – to which all are subject cannot be covered up by the American Imaginary; neither via its emphasis on constant progress, promises of freedom from governmental interference, nor by stressing America's endless affluence.<sup>6</sup> The universalised sense of contingency that these films propose through their multi-protagonist structure, allows them to explore the U.S. from different and unexpected angles via contingent occurrences. The films are recognised as exemplifying some of the form-specific ways in which the multi-protagonist film can engage in complex politico-philosophical explorations via their representation of contingency. I will explore the case-study films via close textual analysis in order to avoid getting caught up in the problematic of categorisation and to stress the value of close textual analysis regarding the multi-protagonist film. The chosen methodology of closely inspecting the given films' representations of the American life will provide concrete examples for understanding the form's heavy focus on contingency in an entirely new way.

The multi-protagonist film has received significant attention since the early 1990s.<sup>7</sup> This attention correlates with the increasing pool of the multi-protagonist films over the last several decades.<sup>8</sup> There are numerous reasons for the rapid rise in films using the multi-protagonist form. The effects of globalisation over the past decades have become clearer to the public and the widespread questioning of traditional values has itself become a familiar practise. Many multi-protagonist films, as I will demonstrate, are engaged in bringing even the most widely

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<sup>5</sup> David Bordwell can be seen to be suggesting that accidentality is often the central interest of the form, when he calls the multi-protagonist films "stories about coincidence", Bordwell 2006: 99.

<sup>6</sup> Meillassoux 2008.

<sup>7</sup> The following chapter, offering a literature review, will explore the form's history in detail.

<sup>8</sup> Amanda Ciafone makes a convincing argument about the growth of the multi-protagonist film based on Bordwell's initial list of such films, see Ciafone 2014: 2680–2704 and Bordwell 2008.

shared values into question, and have therefore often been associated with the relativist stance of postmodernity.<sup>9</sup> Yet, these same examples are also part of what could be described as a return to realism, because the multi-protagonist film is, according to a widely held view, recognised as offering an authentic depiction of the everyday.<sup>10</sup> Such apparent paradoxes of combining, for instance, the playful self-reflexivity, which can be associated with postmodernity, with the earnest and realistic representation of society, are inherent to the multi-protagonist film, which, because of its complex structure and multiple lead characters can suggest contrasting impressions and propose very different viewpoints. The multi-protagonist film is a form well-equipped to deal with such frictions and concerns, ranging from globalisation and postmodern eclecticism, to realism and a modernist dream of a universal aesthetics. The multi-protagonist film's interrogative nature emerges primarily from the fact that the several lead characters can often be located in different parts of the globe and represent very different layers of society. The lead characters of multi-protagonist films commonly vary regarding their class, race, sex, and age. The thesis will illustrate that the multi-protagonist film does not even have to bring its characters together in order to propose ideas with a universalising intent. The latter is accomplished instead via comparisons and contrast between the lead characters who sometimes have independent storylines and can be worlds apart. In cases where the lead characters are brought together on screen, the thesis will emphasise the need to also pay attention to the films' thematic concerns and what is proposed through these connections. Under close inspection it becomes evident that the thematic concerns can often run counter to the formal connections as multi-protagonist films regularly suggest that an increasingly shrinking world is pushing people further apart through cultural and social conflicts and growing individualism. I will thus be less invested in furthering the generic argument of the multi-protagonist film, and more interested in demonstrating the specific ways in which representations of contingency are used by the case-study films to investigate what the films depict as widely held American values.

In addition to the different lead characters representing vastly different aspects of a society, the multi-protagonist film's universalising intent and interrogative stance emerge from the fact that it is a film form that combines a variety of different elements. Most authors who have written on the form have understood a central tension to be specific to the multi-protagonist film.<sup>11</sup> Such a tension can be recognised as emerging from the multi-protagonist

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<sup>9</sup> Vivian Silvey recognises the representation of “the postmodern promise of endless complexity” to be one of the central concerns of the form, Silvey 2009: n.p.

<sup>10</sup> Margrit Tröhler provides a thorough analysis of this aspect of the multi-protagonist film, see Tröhler 2010: 459–477.

<sup>11</sup> A more detailed overview of the debate will be provided in the beginning of the second chapter.

film's aim of offering a realistic depiction of the everyday, whilst simultaneously displaying noticeable artificiality due to the form's tendency to be self-reflexive.<sup>12</sup> The multi-protagonist film's deep interest in contingency also sits somewhat uncomfortably with the form's rigid structure, that establishes a pervasive sense of control.<sup>13</sup> On yet another level, the multi-protagonist film's desire for complexity runs counter to the form's unintentional effect of creating a sense of a "small world" where the lead characters will randomly meet time and again.<sup>14</sup> In many ways, these concerns are specific to the multi-protagonist film, because, with its different characters and storylines it cannot be, or is not, interested in creating the same level of coherence as more traditional classical narrative cinema does via its psychologically motivated goal-oriented protagonist. On the other hand, I aim to open up an avenue for thinking about whether this conflict at the heart of the multi-protagonist film makes it the philosophical film form *par excellence*. Do the several protagonists and their micro-narratives not make particularly apparent the way that most mainstream films aim to control images, from which contingency cannot be removed and which never serve only the narrative. The theoretical framework that this thesis will apply allows us to rethink this central tension of the multi-protagonist film and wonder if the debate around the form is not an ideal space in which to think about the nature and role of cinema more broadly. In order to highlight the need to rethink the traditional approach to mainstream narrative cinema, assigning film to a single genre and associating it with a fixed ideological position – which, as I will show, is represented by a lot of journalistic writing on the films – I will analyse the critical reception that the films have received. This is done not in order to debunk journalistic criticism from an academic position, but rather to think the multi-protagonist film anew as a space of contradictions.

Another central claim that I will explore here is how the philosophical potential of these films could be understood to emerge from their interest in contingency – understood both as standing for accidentality and for the fact that the current social order could have been different – and from the structural equality between all of the lead characters, irrespective of their social standing, race, gender, or age. The chosen films' philosophical intent becomes particularly apparent when the films' interests are compared with contemporary thought that is likewise concerned with theorising contingency, equality, and the social imaginary. The two thinkers that the thesis will engage with are chosen based on what I will demonstrate to be a close similarity between their thinking and the chosen multi-protagonist films. While parallels could

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<sup>12</sup> Such an understanding of the form is provided by Tröhler 2010: 459–477.

<sup>13</sup> A view held by various authors, see Cameron 2006: 65–78, Silvey 2009: 1–15, and Azcona 2010.

<sup>14</sup> This aspect is brought out by Bordwell 2006 and 2008.

be drawn with many other contemporary thinkers, for instance despite coming from very different traditions both Richard Rorty and Meillassoux have written a book dedicated on theorising contingency, I have chosen philosophers who in addition to their interest in contingency have also contributed significantly to our understanding of film and who explore cinema as an important and integral part of their larger body of work.<sup>15</sup>

The French thinker Jacques Rancière's understanding of equality, which runs through his entire *oeuvre*, is particularly apt for exploring some of the concerns of the chosen multi-protagonist films. Rancière argues that the traditional understanding of politics, concerned with governing, actually masks the fact that people are equal to begin with.<sup>16</sup> Rancière understands that truly political acts reveal the equality of all, and render apparent the absolute contingency of all social orders.<sup>17</sup> Because equality and its ability to bring to light the contingent character of a social order are so closely interlinked in Rancière's writing, there appears to be a close fit between such thinking and the chosen multi-protagonist films' interest in establishing an equality between all of the characters and exploring the constant manifestation of the contingent dimension of life. The Slovenian thinker Slavoj Žižek's understanding of ideology – where it is identified not as some secret fabrication of the ruling class, but rather as a complex system of material and mental coordinates that help one adjust to reality – can be seen to create a close parallel with the chosen films' interest in the American Imaginary.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the unsymbolisable Real, a residue experience from early childhood, that is of prime importance to Žižek's thinking on ideology, can only ever manifest itself as a contingent occurrence, as an accident. It is what Jacques Lacan describes as a *tuché* and which he differentiates from the automaton; while the latter can be repeated endlessly as all signs can, the former cuts through symbolisation, marking a space between perception and consciousness.<sup>19</sup> As I will illustrate, all three films are heavily invested in exploring the ways in which the American Imaginary is closely related to a changing understanding of capitalism. Žižek's understanding of perverse spectatorship, where a film can be seen to be calling upon viewers to align with viewpoints that many audience members would not consciously or willingly hold, allowing the viewers to potentially peek behind signs, offers an additional way into some of the complex ways that multi-protagonist films explore their interests.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rorty 1989, Meillassoux 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Rancière 1999: 4.

<sup>17</sup> Rancière 1999: 15.

<sup>18</sup> Žižek 1989: 3.

<sup>19</sup> Lacan 1964: n.p.

<sup>20</sup> Although, I am presenting Rancière's and Žižek's thinking side by side and illustrate a comparable idea in both philosophers' work, according to which a minor coincident (the opportunity to declare one's equality to

Both Rancière and Žižek hold cinema in high regard. For Rancière cinema is fascinating artform not only because of its mass appeal, but because it combines the different aesthetic regimes of art – that is to say the different ways of creating and understanding art – that are often regarded as mutually exclusive.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, Rancière explains, cinema was welcomed by many such as the filmmaker and theoretic Jean Epstein as the most modern and independent art because it allowed to see the world in ways that humans themselves could not.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the new art did not stop at only exploring the novel ways in which it could affect the viewers' perception, but restored many narrative and genre conventions that the modernist literature had attempted to overcome.<sup>23</sup> Žižek, on the other hand, regards cinema as essential to our being because it provides a direct link to our subconscious and allows us to come in contact with and even enjoy things that we would consciously not endorse.<sup>24</sup> Film is therefore seen by Žižek not as reflecting or describing reality, but as exploring aspects of reality that would otherwise be nearly impossible to access.<sup>25</sup> Cinema, thus, for both Rancière and Žižek is inherently political and philosophical media, one that does not simply observe or barely represent reality, but one that affects our very thinking about the world. Because for both thinkers the world around us is rendered through our understanding of the world, cinema can be seen as ultimately affecting the very world we live in.

It should also be pointed out that even if the thesis does not explicitly engage in the debates of the thriving field of Film-Philosophy, the achievements in the area have left an undeniable mark on the thesis. As such, the methodology applied here draws insight from several authors in the field. The film-philosophical exploration undertaken here is in debt to Daniel Frampton's bold manifesto *Filmosophy*, which is strikingly firm in its insistence – a view that the thesis also shares – that films are fully capable of engaging in complex thinking without any necessary help from other disciplines.<sup>26</sup> The thesis also aims to explain complex ideas in simple language, similarly to the fascinating readings offered in Stephen Mulhall's *On*

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everybody else for Rancière and an encounter with the Real for Žižek) can reveal the sheer contingency of all social orders, Rancière's relationship with psychoanalysis is complex as Solange Guénoun has shown and beyond the scope here, see Guénoun 2004: 25–53.

<sup>21</sup> Rancière 2001: 4–6. It should be added that the different aesthetic regimes of art, the different ways of understanding and directing the creation of arts, are not restricted to the realm of arts, but affect our thinking about the world more broadly. It is because of this quality that the arts and politics can be seen as being similarly invested in guiding our sense of the world.

<sup>22</sup> Rancière 2001: 3.

<sup>23</sup> Rancière 2001: 10.

<sup>24</sup> Žižek 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Žižek 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Frampton 2006.

*Film* (2001).<sup>27</sup> Partially for being written by a philosopher, the book triggered an extensive debate about how film and philosophy should be brought together.<sup>28</sup> Going against expectations always demands courage and causes friction and as such I recognise Mulhall's approach as a Rancièreian act *par excellence*, questioning who has the right to merge philosophy with cinema. This is a question to which this thesis also aims to contribute. The thesis, while drawing more from authors who belong to the Continental tradition of philosophy, attempts to manage a respectful balance between different schools of thought of the kind produced by Robert Sinnerbrink in his *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images*; a book that delicately, but accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses of both the Analytical and Continental sides of philosophy, while not being dismissive of either tradition.<sup>29</sup> The writing on the importance of thought experiments in philosophy and what they could mean to our understanding of cinema's philosophical potential, explored, independently, by both Catherine Constable and Thomas E. Wartenberg, is a direct source of influence for the methodology applied here.<sup>30</sup> Finally, some of the ideas expressed in John Ó Maoilearca's (Mullarkey) *Refractions of Reality: Philosophy and the Moving Image* – particularly the difficulty of moving beyond the circularity of one's arguments, where a film appears to confirm the theoretical framework with which one approaches it – points towards further questions, central to the thesis, regarding how film and philosophy should be brought together.<sup>31</sup>

The first chapter, offering a literature review, provides an overview of a variety of different positions on the multi-protagonist film. I will illustrate how the different viewpoints on the multi-protagonist film generate a certain consolidation of the related terminology and understanding of the form. That being said, the literature review will also show how the debate around the multi-protagonist film is far from over and that the vigorous interest in exploring new aspects of the form remains prevalent. The overview of the related literature will primarily demonstrate the specifics of the multi-protagonist film and how the form differs from other complex narrative films. Moving from the early debate to the later writings on the form, the literature review will pay particular attention to the thinking on the multi-protagonist film by authors such as David Bordwell, Margrit Tröhler, and María del Mar Azcona, all of whom have analysed the category in detail.

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<sup>27</sup> Mulhall 2016 (2001).

<sup>28</sup> See Andersen 2003: n.p.; Baggini 2003: n.p.; Mulhall 2003: n.p. and 2007: 279–294.

<sup>29</sup> Sinnerbrink 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Constable 2009; Wartenberg 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Mullarkey 2009.

The following three chapters, chapters two to four, will explore the case-study films. While *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing* and *The Big Short* are representative of the multi-protagonist film and as such serve as ideal illustrations of the form, *Killing Them Softly* is a more challenging choice because of the great attention that one the characters receives over the others. That being said, the particular character is entirely omitted from the first act, which is a common feature of the multi-protagonist film. Similarly to Azcona I see some films as being closer to the generic core of the multi-protagonist films, while others are further apart from it, yet this does not necessarily negate the status of the latter films as multi-protagonist films.<sup>32</sup> Where I depart from Azcona, as I will exemplify in more detail in the literature review, is the question what constitutes the generic core of the multi-protagonist film. Via my analyses of the three case-study films, I aim to show how an idea close to Rancière's understanding of equality – which reveals the contingent nature of all hierarchies – is the ideal that the three multi-protagonist film aim towards, but which they cannot fully depict because some characters are bound to have more screen time or attention than others.<sup>33</sup> As such, *Killing Them Softly* can be seen as diverging from the form's ideal to a greater extent than the other examples. Yet, it is because of this aspect that the film serves as an ideal example of the multi-protagonist film's central tension.

Another reason why Rancière's understanding of equality can only ever be an ideal for the multi-protagonist film and why it cannot fully materialise in cinema is the fact that, according to Todd May, Rancière considers equality to be active in nature, meaning that it is not distributive, but declarative.<sup>34</sup> As May explains, in more traditional theories of justice (May discussing John Rawls' ideas in particular) “the act of choosing becomes secondary in the face of the principles that are chosen; and thus the active equality bound up in with the choosing of principle is overtaken by the passive equality of receiving equal consideration”.<sup>35</sup> As fictional characters are not active agents the comparison with Rancière's understanding of active equality can only be tentative. Yet, my aim here is to show via the case-study films how the multi-protagonist film is a film form inherently invested in exploring equality.

The second chapter will closely study *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing*. It will offer a close textual analysis of key scenes of the film to show why the multi-protagonist film's interest in universal ideas needs more attention than it has currently received. *Thirteen*

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<sup>32</sup> Azcona 2010: 32.

<sup>33</sup> Rancière 1999: 15.

<sup>34</sup> See May 2008: 38–77.

<sup>35</sup> May 2008: 10.

*Conversations* is generally understood to be interested in the notion of happiness and in contingency.<sup>36</sup> The latter is often recognised, in the multi-protagonist film more broadly, as being represented via car crashes.<sup>37</sup> Through a close reading of the central accident scene in the film, I will show why there is a need to explore car crashes beyond the current emphasis on seeing them as a structuring device and the main representation of contingency.<sup>38</sup> I will also draw out a number of ways in which the film can be seen to be problematising the idea that everybody's right to pursue happiness unites all the lead characters. As the pursuit of happiness is closely related to the idea of the American Dream, I will explore the various ways in which *Thirteen Conversations* can be seen to be interrogating the American Imaginary that leads some of the characters to poverty, while legitimising the higher social position of others. Throughout the chapter I will also show how the film's interest in contingency and equality can be fruitfully brought together with the thinking of Rancière, which can be seen to highlight a significant connection between these two seemingly unrelated notions. The chapter will show that not only is there a striking similarity between *Thirteen Conversations*' interest in the American Imaginary and Rancière thinking on equality, but that the latter can be seen as suggesting an entirely new understanding of the importance of contingency in the multi-protagonist film.

The third chapter will further explore the connection between contingency and the American Imaginary, through close textual analysis of the bleak representation of the U.S. offered by *Killing Them Softly*. The sombre depiction of American crime, with the action taking place during presidential elections and the economic crash, and the social criticism that *Killing Them Softly* proposes through such an approach, has been widely recognised as reminiscent of the Hollywood Renaissance.<sup>39</sup> While the latter, as I will show, is itself a contested notion, the fact that *Killing Them Softly*'s explicit use of political found footage can be seen as recalling the Hollywood Renaissance's attempt to respond to the turbulent political events of the 1960s and 70s has received less attention. Via the thinking of Žižek, I will exemplify how the film suggests, through the moments of sudden realisation that a number of lead characters experience, that the American Imaginary should not be seen as masking the harsh social reality, as some critics have claimed, but how it rather serves an entirely different function in one's life.<sup>40</sup> The characters can be seen to be arriving to such profound realisations because the film

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<sup>36</sup> See Ebert 2002: n.p.; Cardullo 2003: 148; Bradshaw 2005; Kemp 2005: 76; and Okapal 2011: n.p., on happiness in *Thirteen Conversations*.

<sup>37</sup> See Bordwell 2008, on the prevalence of car accidents in the multi-protagonist film.

<sup>38</sup> Bordwell 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Johnston 2014 (2012): n.p.

<sup>40</sup> Johnston 2014 (2012): n.p.

develops the American Imaginary of freedom from governmental interference and the right of private enterprise to its absolute limit, revealing a potential flaw encaptured in the idea.

The fourth chapter, concentrating on the opening segments of *The Big Short*, studies the film's view of contemporary finance. *The Big Short* is a highly playful film that, particularly in its beginning, freely mixes different genres and applies found footage in a way that makes these elements suggest entirely new ideas. The film through its multiple main characters shows the contingent nature of today's finance and its capacity to affect the lives of millions of people. Nonetheless, the chapter, making use of both Rancière's and Žižek's thinking, highlights some of the ways in which the film's playfulness and emphasis on contingency can be seen to be working against some of the ideas that the film proposes. *The Big Short* – valuing equality not only between its lead characters, but also in terms of its aesthetic choices – can be seen to be identifying itself as part of the American Imaginary. Yet, this does not make the film any less sceptical of what it depicts as America's constant drive towards a certain idea of success and emphasis on affluence. Together these three films are shown to make use of the multi-protagonist form in order to propose ideas with universal intent and to be actively, and philosophically, questioning what the films depict as some of the most widely held and characteristic values of contemporary American culture.

The interweaving of film and philosophy in the following pages does not suggest that the bond between the chosen films and philosophers is in some ways necessary. Both the films under scrutiny and Rancière and Žižek are fully capable of engaging in complex thinking without each other's help. Most certainly it is not the case that the films require explication by written philosophy in order for their full philosophical potential to become recognisable. As I will demonstrate, it is often the case that film can embody certain ideas far easier than it is possible in written philosophy. Nonetheless, I do believe that the kind of relationship between film and philosophy proposed in the following pages is beneficial to both sides. We could think of this relationship as two optical lenses brought together in order to bring into focus certain characteristics of contemporary American society, more clearly than either lens is individually capable of doing. It would be wasteful to deprive either side of such a fruitful dialogue for the sake of disciplinary protectionism. This is particularly the case when the object of study, the multi-protagonist film, can be seen to be engaging in a philosophical exploration of contingency, equality between all its characters, and the significant role of the American Imaginary in the characters' lives.

# 1 CHAPTER ONE – Literature review

## 1.1 Complex form – complex debate

Under different names and guises the multi-protagonist/network narrative film has received significant attention in Film Studies, particularly from the 2000s onwards.<sup>41</sup> In related literature, the film form has names as varied as “the multi-protagonist film” or “the multiple protagonist film”, “network narrative film”, “forking-path narrative” or “forking plots”, “modular narrative”, “hyperlink movie”, “complex narrative”, “thread structure”, “parallel narratives”, “alternative plots”, “multiple-draft film”, “tandem narratives”, “inter-action movie”, “database narrative”, and “mosaic film”.<sup>42</sup> While most of these terms denote similar categories, others are somewhat broader. In other words, many of these terms also tend to encompass examples that are not multi-protagonist films. The multi-protagonist film is understood here on the most basic level – according to María del Mar Azcona’s definition – as depicting a “multiplicity of characters of similar narrative relevance”.<sup>43</sup> More specifically, the thesis will concentrate on films that correspond to Margrit Tröhler’s category of a “character mosaic” – where the characters no longer form an actual group, but are connected by “labyrinthine dynamics, sometimes also dispensing with these, so that the characters never actually meet in the fictional world whereas readers and spectators can perceive them as interrelated”.<sup>44</sup> The multi-protagonist film can also have similarities with “puzzle film” and “mind-game film”, although, as I will explain, the overlapping features have also caused confusion about the precise nature of the multi-protagonist film.<sup>45</sup>

A further distinction can be made concerning the multi-protagonist film’s “labyrinthine dynamics” by querying whether the characters have to interrelate to some extent or at least exist in the same time and space setting in order for such films to be considered as the generic core

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<sup>41</sup> As I will show there is a large corpus of *ad hoc* terminology of the form. In the interest of clarity, I will use the term “multi-protagonist film” throughout the thesis.

<sup>42</sup> Carmago 2002: 1–18; Azcona 2010; Melzer et al 2004: 193–203; Tröhler 2010: 459–477; G. M. Smith 2005: 117–133. Bordwell 2006 and 2008; Silvey 2009: 1–15 and 2012; Beal 2009: 405–409; Ciafone 2014: 2680–2704. Bordwell 2002: 88–104; Branigan 2002: 105–114. Cameron 2006: 65–78. Quart 2005: 48–51, Ebert 2005. Simons 2008: 111–126. E. Smith 1999–2000: 88–96. M. Smith 2001: 155–164. Berg 2006: 5–61. Branigan 2002: 105–114. Aronson. Although Linda Aronson also uses the term “the multiple protagonist narrative”, she describes with it a more traditional ensemble film, while preserving the term “tandem narrative” for the multi-protagonist film as it is understood in this article, see Aronson. Melzer et al 2004: 193–203; Israel 2010: 122–146. Manovich 1999; Kinder 2002: 2–15. Pisters 2011: 175–190.

<sup>43</sup> Azcona 2010: 2.

<sup>44</sup> Tröhler 2010: 462.

<sup>45</sup> Buckland 2009: 1–12. Elsaesser 2009: 13–41.

of the multi-protagonist film, or if the characters and their storylines can remain semi-autonomous with the action potentially set in different times and places. In other words, it is a question whether *Intolerance* (Griffith, 1916) or *Grand Hotel* (Goulding, 1932) should be considered the “true” predecessor of the contemporary multi-protagonist film.<sup>46</sup> In Jim Jarmusch’s work, for instance, it is a question whether only *Mystery Train* (1989) is the ideal generic example of the form, or is it also *Night on Earth* (1991). While I recognise this difference, and will concentrate here mostly on examples that are closer to *Grand Hotel/Mystery Train*, than to *Intolerance/Night on Earth*, I will not be overly strict in this differentiation. The main aim here is to draw out how the example films propose a universalising notion of contingency and what is its significance, and both types are fully capable of making such universal claims due to their numerous characters.

The multi-protagonist film has, according to many, shown itself as a practical alternative to the single- or paired-protagonist film narrative.<sup>47</sup> It has also been noted that an understanding of the single protagonist film’s perceived prominence is itself partially caused by a theoretical short-sightedness that has overlooked the presence of various character configurations since the birth of cinema.<sup>48</sup> Despite the form’s long history, which has recently started to receive detailed academic attention, and that is commonly traced back to at least *Intolerance*, most commentators highlight the substantial rise of the form over the last three decades.<sup>49</sup> The noticeable growth of films using the multi-protagonist narrative has led some authors to consider the multi-protagonist film as “a new template” of storytelling, while David Bordwell finds it to be even the “dominant principle of offbeat storytelling” today – having a similarly important role in contemporary cinema as the flashback format had in the 1960s.<sup>50</sup>

Because the multi-protagonist film tends to downplay an individual hero and explore its broad interests – such as globalisation and the effects of social interconnection – via several

<sup>46</sup> Tiago de Luca has recently raised a similar question regarding the form, tracing his exploration of “the multinarrative film” back to *Intolerance*, see De Luca 2017: 18–37. In literature the rough equivalent would be a multi-protagonist novel versus a collection of short stories.

<sup>47</sup> Bordwell 2008: 191; Tröhler 2010: 463; Azcona 2010: 5.

<sup>48</sup> Azcona 2010: 3–5.

<sup>49</sup> See Tröhler 2007, Azcona 2010, Bordwell 2008, De Luca 2017: 18–37. Bordwell 2008: 197; Tröhler 2010: 464; Silvey 2009: 1–15; E. Smith 1999/2000. Amanda Ciafone, while admitting the form’s long history, makes a convincing argument regarding the multi-protagonist film’s relative novelty, by showing in a graph how Bordwell’s initial list (see, Bordwell 2008: 245–250) of some 200 multi-protagonist films is divided in terms of their release year (Ciafone 2014: 2276). While around 30 films that Bordwell mentions are released from the 1920s all the way to the 1990s, almost 170 titles fall within the two latter categories, consisting of the years from the 1990s onwards. Bordwell’s book was published in 2008, meaning that the largest column with 123 titles does not even form an entire decade, but ends with 2007. While the filmography proposed by Bordwell could surely be complemented, the ratio, especially when considered that the popularity of the multi-protagonist film shows no signs of decreasing, would likely remain similar to that highlighted by Ciafone’s graph.

<sup>50</sup> E. Smith 1999/2000: 95. Bordwell 2008: 191.

lead characters, it is often related to a modern *zeitgeist*.<sup>51</sup> Azcona summarises this aspect by saying:

Although the multi-protagonist film is by no means the only way to convey contemporary intimate relationships or the psycho-cultural impact of globalisation and attendant processes, it has become a powerful template for organising contemporary experience on film.<sup>52</sup>

Yet, others find that the multi-protagonist film's global reach and extended history should caution against associating the high number of characters solely with “a questioning of the Western subject that would transfer the modernist experience of ambivalence and postmodern arbitrariness and exchangeability of values”.<sup>53</sup> Some have argued that the downplaying of a central hero is potentially problematic, because it makes the protagonist film incapable of fully developing all the characters in a feature length format.<sup>54</sup> Others identify this as a deliberate artistic choice emphasising the form's broad interests.<sup>55</sup> Although such characterisations are not necessarily always mutually exclusive, disagreements over even the most easily recognisable features of the form highlight the ongoing nature of the debate, which has lately begun to see some consolidation due to the extensive writing on the topic, above all by authors such as Bordwell, Tröhler, and Azcona.<sup>56</sup>

## 1.2 The early debate: multiple narratives or several lead characters

The first accounts on the form around the turn of the century concentrate mostly on the multiple narrative lines, rather than the large number of characters. Murray Smith, discussing multi-protagonist films such as *Jackie Brown* (Tarantino, 1997), *Mystery Train*, and *Slacker* (Linklater, 1991), calls the form “parallel narratives”, while Evan Smith identifies the “new model” of cinematic storytelling that has emerged alongside “2000 years of the same structure rhythms” as “thread structure”.<sup>57</sup> The latter encompasses “a thin, light-weight story line, that is interwoven with and dependent upon other story threads”, and is different, Evan Smith argues,

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<sup>51</sup> Delyeo 2012: 231.

<sup>52</sup> Azcona 2010: 7.

<sup>53</sup> Tröhler 2010: 463.

<sup>54</sup> E. Smith 1999/2000: 88–89; Bordwell 2008: 197; Bordwell 2006: 96.

<sup>55</sup> Delyeo 2012: 231, Azcona 2010: 55; Tröhler 2010: 475.

<sup>56</sup> See Bordwell (2006; 2008), Tröhler (2007; 2010: 459–477), and Azcona (2005: 11–22; 2008: 1–13; 2010).

<sup>57</sup> M. Smith 2001: 155–164. E. Smith 1999/2000: 88.

from the more traditional ensemble films, such as *The Big Chill* (Kasdan, 1983), *Steel Magnolias* (Ross, 1989), and *Independence Day* (Emmerich, 1996), that despite many characters are following a single story in a linear fashion.<sup>58</sup> The multi-protagonist film's substantial difference from not only the single- or paired-protagonist film, but also from the ensemble cast is therefore identified already by the earliest accounts on the topic.

However, while Evan Smith's definition and "the multiple storylines model" more broadly, which still forms a minor trend in the related literature, might appear sufficient in distinguishing the multi-protagonist film, it leads several authors to include single character films with a number of storylines, such as *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer, 1998), *Sliding Doors* (Howitt, 1998), and *The Butterfly Effect* (Bress, Gruber, 2004).<sup>59</sup> For instance, Evan Smith discusses *The English Patient* (Minghella, 1996), arguably on the narrative level a rather conventional love story narrated through flashbacks, alongside some of the most innovative and well-known multi-protagonist films such as *Short Cuts* (Altman, 1993) and *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) that develop an array of different central characters.<sup>60</sup> More than a qualitative question of the different films' artistic merit, focus on multiple narratives appears to work against the early debate's common emphasis on how drastically "the new form" of cinematic storytelling differs from more traditional models. After all, the recollections of the sole protagonist in *The English Patient* create multiple narratives rather similarly to the 1960's flashback films.

The early criticism's emphasis on multiple narratives also contrasts with some of the later criticism, which stresses that if the classical Hollywood narrative is concerned with individual main characters, their psychological motivations, and with creating causal coherence, multi protagonist films "develop another logic of narration from the outset" by showing little interest towards these more traditional qualities of narration.<sup>61</sup> Given that the multi-protagonist film's narrative generally favours decentralising devices, such as undermining causal logic through an emphasis on contingency and abandoning psychologically motivated goal-oriented protagonists, it seems counterintuitive to nonetheless define the film form via the label "narrative", as if the term would have exactly the same meaning in this context as it does when referring to the classical Hollywood narrative.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the multi-

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<sup>58</sup> E. Smith 1999/2000: 90-95.

<sup>59</sup> Parshall 2012; De Luca 2017: 18–37. M. Smith 2001: 155–164; E. Smith 1999/2000: 88; Parshall.

<sup>60</sup> E. Smith 1999/2000: 88.

<sup>61</sup> The main qualities of the classical narrative model are explained in Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 2005 (1985): 12. Tröhler 2010: 461 (emphasis in original).

<sup>62</sup> See also Tröhler 2010: 461–462.

protagonist film's common focus on everyday life also sits somewhat uneasily with a strong emphasis on narrative, because if the characters are designed to be recognised as regular people, then it is important to remember that people lead lives and not stories [Figure 1–1].<sup>63</sup> Clearly “protagonist” is likewise a term that originates from narratology, but I would argue that while most consider themselves a protagonist of their own life, many would agree that although one's life can be narrated, it is not itself a narrative. Given the multi-protagonist film's common thematic interest in the ordinary life, even if represented in its complexity, I find that a primary focus on its story structure is not able to do the film form full credit.

Furthermore, all the above mentioned multi-narrative films – which all have a single lead character – can be argued to tell a story of that character without an intent to suggest that the character-action holds a larger, universally applicable message. A multi-protagonist film such as *Short Cuts*, on the other hand, by comparing and contrasting its drastically different characters' lives, surely aims to say something about life in Los Angeles (and perhaps in contemporary metropolises more broadly) that is larger and more significant than the sum total of all the characters' everyday actions. These concerns, particularly the multi-protagonist film's favouring of the everyday and universalisation, suggest that there is value in keeping the term separate from the multiple narrative model, which can also include single protagonist examples and often tells a peculiar tale about an extraordinary individual (e.g. *Run Lola Run* and *The Butterfly Effect*).



Figure 1-1 Representation of the everyday in *Short Cuts*.

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<sup>63</sup> Tröhler considers the form a representation of a larger interest in “transcultural everyday practices”, see Tröhler 2010: 464.

Nonetheless, both Evan Smith and Murray Smith who have discussed multi-protagonist films under the multiple narratives title have identified several features that are highly relevant for understanding the multi-protagonist film. Analysing *2 Days in the Valley* (Herzfeld, 1996), another multi-protagonist film, Evan Smith notes as significant the way each story is given “roughly the same dramatic weight”.<sup>64</sup> It is important to note that Evan Smith emphasises this quality in relation to the *characters*, for instance when he says: “the *2 Days* that we spend with thug Dosmo (Danny Aiello) are just as important as the time spent with psychopath Lee (James Spader), or cop Wes (Eric Stoltz), or has-been Teddy (Paul Mazursky)”.<sup>65</sup> The author does not develop this potentially democratic or even egalitarian principle any further and concentrates instead on a discussion of formal elements.<sup>66</sup> This illustrates Evan Smith’s goal to draw out concrete rules of the form, such as arguing for the relative independence of each story thread from the central narrative compared to subplots of ensemble films, rather than to offer interpretations of the films’ thematic concerns.<sup>67</sup> Now that such structural differences between ensemble films and multi-protagonist films are widely familiar to public, I will demonstrate why it is vital to also pay more attention to how such formal elements are used to explore form-specific thematic concerns.<sup>68</sup>

Murray Smith argues that the multi-protagonist film’s (i.e. the parallel narratives’) ability to repeat a situation from different viewpoints, such as the money exchange in *Jackie Brown*, is one of the ways in which the form is different from films using the more traditional crosscutting method.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, as my overview of the “forking path” discussion, offered in the next subchapter, will exemplify, this characteristic of looking at the same action from different perspectives, while very common in the multi-protagonist film, is not specific to the form. For instance, the time traveling Evan (Ashton Kutcher), the sole protagonist of *The Butterfly Effect*, likewise sees the same situations from multiple perspectives, allowing the viewer to first witness the situations as they originally take place and later, when Evan revisits the past, to perceive them anew from another angle. The multi-protagonist films’ ability to represent the same situation from different viewpoints, according to Murray Smith, “creates a

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<sup>64</sup> E. Smith 1999/2000: 88.

<sup>65</sup> E. Smith 1999/2000: 89.

<sup>66</sup> My usage of “formal” does not simply refer to cinematography as the term is sometimes used, but to formalism/neo-formalism, which central interest is perhaps best described by the title of Boris Eikhenbaum’s 1919 study *How Gogol’s Overcoat Was Made* [Как сделана Шинель Гоголя] (Eikhenbaum, 1982)], in other words formalism aims to principally understand how an artistic text is assembled.

<sup>67</sup> E. Smith 1999/2000: 90.

<sup>68</sup> Azcona shows how the discussion regarding the multi-protagonist film has become widespread with terms such as Altmanesque, referring to films with several lead characters, becoming particularly popular, see Azcona 2010: 25–32.

<sup>69</sup> M. Smith 2001: 155.

kind of formal fascination, heightening our sense of the way the various lines of action interweave with one another”.<sup>70</sup> *The Killing* (Kubrick, 1956), *Go* (Liman, 1999), *11:14* (Marcks, 2003), *Elephant* (Van Sant, 2003), and *Vantage Point* (Travis, 2008) would be some other examples that call for a heightened attentiveness in order to bring all the different character-actions together.

The “formal fascination” that Murray Smith notes is regularly discussed also in the later writing on the multi-protagonist film.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, it has also been brought out that while the constant attention to parallels and allusions that multi-protagonist films most often expect, can appear fascinating to film scholars, it can cause difficulties of comprehending and enjoying these films for others.<sup>72</sup> In addition to highlighting the generic traits of the form, Murray Smith also suggests a potential thematic use of such “parallelism as a way of raising questions about the objectivity of any particular account of a person or event”.<sup>73</sup> Again, as Murray Smith’s examples – a single protagonist film *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941) and a multi-protagonist film *Rashômon* (Kurosawa, 1950) – demonstrate, tendency to question the objectivity of potentially any account is not specific to the multi-protagonist film. It is, however, a much more common feature of the multi-protagonist film, than of the single- or paired protagonist film. Both Evan Smith and Murray Smith therefore highlight several important qualities of the form, such as its inherent favouring of equality and its tendency towards questioning the objectivity of various notions via the different character-perspectives, that are vital for understanding the multi-protagonist film.

### 1.3 Forking paths and films with many characters

Some of the multi-protagonist film’s qualities, such as its ability to switch between various characters and time- and storylines, have sparked very different opinions and triggered a rather confusing debate. This discussion could be seen as being foreshadowed already by Murray Smith’s understanding of *Slacker* as a collection of “endlessly forking narrative pathways”.<sup>74</sup> While such an assessment is in itself correct, the term “forking-path” has a very specific connotation and can therefore lead to confusion when used in a different context. The

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<sup>70</sup> M. Smith 2001: 155.

<sup>71</sup> Bordwell 2006: 95, Tröhler 2010: 469.

<sup>72</sup> Azcona 2005: 11–22.

<sup>73</sup> M. Smith 2001: 159.

<sup>74</sup> M. Smith 2001: 158.

term originates, as Murray Smith also notes, from Jorge Luis Borges' short story *The Garden of Forking Paths* [2007 (1941)], and is commonly used by authors to discuss the multi-protagonist film.<sup>75</sup> Borges' story is about an impossible temporal puzzle where each of one's choices create its own modal world. The emphasis here is on a *single* character who can initiate an endless number of possible worlds via different choices. A similar comment about possible worlds, as Murray Smith highlights, is made explicitly in the beginning of *Slacker* by one of the random characters, this one played by the director Richard Linklater himself.<sup>76</sup> It is important to note though that while in *Slacker* Linklater's character explains the idea in true Borgesian fashion, the film itself takes a different course, depicting a *myriad* of characters that the film follows only as long as one of them comes across another random character. Despite the lavish monologue offered in the beginning of the film about a totally different time-space reality, *Slacker* is not a Borgesian "forking-path", but a multi-protagonist film with uncommonly many characters.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, such a limitation of (cinematic) reality is self-reflexively expressed by the Linklater's character, when he explains about *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, et. al., 1939) that if Dorothy (Judy Garland) and her magical friends would have chosen a different path, it would have resulted in "entirely different movies, but we will never see it [the different possible worlds], because, you know, we are kind of trapped in this one reality restriction type of thing" [Figure 1–2]. In other words, *Slacker* is rather explicit about the ease with which one can conjure such alternative realities in thought and dreams, but how the film has to limit itself to one possible world at the time, in order to maintain its verisimilitude to our everyday experience of reality.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> M. Smith 2001: 158. Borges 2007: 19–29. See Bordwell 2002: 88–104; Branigan 2002: 105–114.

<sup>76</sup> M. Smith 2001: 158.

<sup>77</sup> The film takes the multi-protagonist principle to a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* level, because if all the characters are protagonist, none of them are.

<sup>78</sup> It could be claimed that in its narrative structure *Slacker* is even less complex than *The Wizard of Oz* that includes two narrative levels that are both audio-visually represented – Dorothy's reality frames her dream-narrative. As both levels exist simultaneously, although the film is tied to representing one of them at the time, they could be considered a forking path. *Slacker*, on the other hand, remains entirely on a single narrative plane, even though its characters narrate the most various stories.



Figure 1-2 Multiple characters restricted to one reality in *Slacker*.

The moral impasse caused by choosing all the available options in life simultaneously and therefore not actually choosing anything at all, is rather depicted in true Borgesian manner by a single protagonist film such as *Mr. Nobody* (Van Dormael, 2009). Comparing a multi-protagonist film like *Slacker* with a forking-path film, such as *Mr. Nobody*, highlights a fundamental difference between the two types of films. Whereas the forking-path films mainly deal with the supernatural – Mr. Nobody (Jared Leto) is unique in his ability to choose multiple options simultaneously – or with various complex mental states, toying with the possibility that the protagonist is simply imagining things – the time-travelling Evan in *The Butterfly Effect*, like Mr. Nobody, is a medical curiosum – the multi-protagonist film most often simply represents its universalising vision of reality through several main characters – as is the case also in *Slacker*. Forking-path is also a very common generic device in science fiction films where advance technology often allows these films to manipulate spacetime [*The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984), *Timecop* (Hyams, 1994), *Looper* (Johnson, 2012), *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014)] or affect one's understanding of reality [*Total Recall* (Verhoeven, 1990), *Vanilla Sky* (Crowe, 2001), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004)]. However, an interest in such future technology and its effect on reality and subjectivity is rarely explored in the multi-protagonist film. Even an exceptional example of the multi-protagonist film, such as *Cloud*

*Atlas* (Tykwer, Wachowski, Wachowski, 2012) that depicts characters who are separated by great amounts of time and space, explores a common interest of the form – portraying how the characters' actions affect one another. Therefore, the accounts that recognise *Run, Lola, Run* and *The Butterfly Effect* as structurally the same as *Nashville* (Altman, 1975) and *Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys* [*Code inconnu: Récit incomplet de divers voyages* (Haneke, 2000)], cannot help but leave an impression that this confusion emerges partially from the fact that too little attention is paid to the thematic level and to the ideas that the films themselves propose.

Bordwell noted paradoxes similar to the ones explored in *Mr. Nobody* long before the forking paths films themselves became openly self-reflexive about them.<sup>79</sup> The forking paths films' self-reflexivity is often illustrated already in their titles, *Mr. Nobody* is called that because choosing all the available possibilities in life has left him with no personality of his own, while *The Butterfly Effect* refers to a popular culture understanding of chaos theory, according to which a minor act such as a flapping of a butterfly wing in one part of the globe, can have a significant effect, potentially creating a natural disaster in another part of the world. Bordwell argues that the forking path films, mentioning examples such as *Blind Chance* [*Przypadek* (Kieslowski, 1987)], *Run Lola Run*, *Sliding Doors*, and *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* [*Jat go zi tau di daan sang* (Wai, 1997)] – which are all single protagonist films – represent in much more simplistic terms than in Borges' fiction, situations where several outcomes are played out after a character's path splits.<sup>80</sup> The films are more basic, Bordwell claims, not because the directors lack the talent to present more complex visions, but because the films are partially staying true to how the viewers make sense of the world around them more generally.<sup>81</sup> Bordwell labels such cognitive comprehension "folk psychology" and argues that as the forking paths want to offer a complex understanding of time and space, while also maintaining their coherence for the largest possible audience, the films make use of several conventions that are based – as is the case with the classical Hollywood narrative – on our actual sense of the world.<sup>82</sup> In other words, the forking path film (and as Bordwell later argues the multi-protagonist film) are not as different from the classical Hollywood narrative as many have considered, because all these forms seek a fine balance between novelty and tradition, with the latter largely determined by our everyday understanding of reality.

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<sup>79</sup> Bordwell 2002: 88.

<sup>80</sup> Bordwell 2002: 88–89.

<sup>81</sup> Bordwell 2002: 102–103.

<sup>82</sup> Bordwell 2002: 90–103.

Bordwell's assessment that it is easier to create forking paths in written form than it is in an audio-visual medium, and that the high cost of filmmaking suggests certain conservatism regarding how far such experimentations can be carried, seem very plausible. Yet, Bordwell proposes several simplifications in order to establish the universalising intent of his arguments. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith brings out that Bordwell's understanding of cinema is highly plausible because it considers film principally comprehensible, yet, in doing so, according to Nowell-Smith, Bordwell applies a severely "impoverished" version of cognitive comprehension.<sup>83</sup> Although Bordwell's take on classical narrative cinema has changed over the years, it has always relied on an understanding that spectators relate all the different elements of a film to its narrative unity. As such, Nowell-Smith reasons, Bordwell's understanding of classical narrative cinema applies well to detective stories where the audience is attempting to piece the puzzle together, but does not explain that convincingly films that have a less clear narrative structure.<sup>84</sup> The multi-protagonist film falls to the latter category, because, as I have begun to suggest, the form tends to deliberately undermine classical narrative rules by favouring comparisons over causality and a number of equal characters over a psychologically motivated goal-oriented protagonist. Regarding "folk psychology" as the basis of most filmmaking, it could also be pointed out that such understanding slides too smoothly from classical to natural, because the crux of understanding cinema can be argued to stand precisely in the issue why something that is highly unnatural and constructed appears so natural. These were the types of questions that drove Christian Metz and other psychoanalytically inclined theorists, whom Bordwell challenges with the classical narrative model, to psychoanalysis in the first place. Finally, the classical narrative cinema might not be as coherent and unified category as Bordwell leads to believe, because the form does not have a monopoly on either causality or coherence. The classical narrative cinema should therefore be treated as one of the possible modes of cinema, rather than essentially *the* mode of cinema that all other cinemas attempt to cope with or challenge.

Edward Branigan, in a response to Bordwell, expands the forking paths discussion by offering an alternative category called "forking plots" or "multiple drafts", and which he understands as a group of films that openly exhibit the process of making artistic choices that are involved in all filmmaking, but which are usually excluded from the final product.<sup>85</sup> It is important to stress that Branigan recognises the multi-protagonist film – mentioning examples

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<sup>83</sup> Nowell-Smith 2002: 13–14.

<sup>84</sup> Nowell-Smith 2002: 14.

<sup>85</sup> Branigan 2002: 105–114.

such as *Nashville*, *After Hours* (Scorsese, 1985), and *City of Hope* (Sayles, 1991) – as bridging the gap between Bordwell’s forking paths and art cinema classics such as *Last Year in Marienbad* [*L’année dernière à Marienbad* (Resnais, 1961)], *Stalker* (Tarkovsky, 1979), and *Sans Soleil* (Marker, 1983).<sup>86</sup> Branigan finds that the forking path films, as understood by Bordwell, are a more conservative and generic strand of the broader and more innovative narrative trend, which he calls forking plots or multiple-draft films.<sup>87</sup> Branigan is not alone in recognising the multi-protagonist film as a form that occupies a unique place between arthouse and a more conventional mainstream cinema. Tröhler makes a similar assessment when she argues that films such as *Syriana* (Gaghan, 2005) exemplify that the artistic patterns of Independent cinema have a noticeable effect on Hollywood production, while also acknowledging that the multi-protagonist film cannot be considered a serious competitor to Hollywood on either economic or aesthetic terms.<sup>88</sup> This is increasingly so, because unlike the early 1990s, some of the most recognisable contemporary American multi-protagonist films today are produced by big studios.

Branigan also brings attention to the fact that folk psychology, which Bordwell understands as “the ordinary processes we use to make sense of the world”, is not necessarily an entirely neutral category, but could be rather understood as an “ideologically charged” process.<sup>89</sup> Branigan thus suggests that our understanding of the world is not necessarily as natural as it might seem from our everyday experience. Not only does Branigan’s emphasis “on the social grounding of cognition” raise interesting questions about our habitual comprehension – especially regarding the oblique area where cognitive and social and cultural categories meet – but it also complicates the understanding that films should, or at least generally do, limit themselves artistically in order to remain easily comprehensible for the largest possible audience.<sup>90</sup> Again, these arguments should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but rather as concentrating on the opposite extremes of cinema’s large spectrum. While Bordwell is certainly right in arguing that majority of films are easily comprehensible, because they follow our common knowledge and habitual rules of perception, so is Branigan in arguing that our ordinary understanding of reality is itself partially contingent and dependent on socio-cultural factors, and therefore it offers no fundamental basis for an understanding that films must oblige with certain naturally seeming perceptions.

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<sup>86</sup> Branigan 2002: 105–114.

<sup>87</sup> Branigan 2002: 108.

<sup>88</sup> Tröhler 2010: 465.

<sup>89</sup> Bordwell 2002: 90; Branigan 2002: 106.

<sup>90</sup> Branigan 2002: 112.

Branigan's argument could also be expanded to claim that not only do films not have to indulge our habitual comprehension, but that films can also affect "the social grounding of cognition". Such a development of Branigan's argument, as I will exemplify via the close textual analyses to follow, stands rather close to Rancière and Žižek's suggestions that arts have a political dimension because of their ability to influence that which is perceived as the most natural and widely shared. In such case, what is considered political is not the traditional understanding of the word, meaning party politics and governing, but the struggle over the interference and rearrangement of what is regarded as natural and self-evident. The latter processes are recognised to be capable of potentially altering one's very understanding of reality. From this perspective, it is clear why authors such as Rancière and Žižek cannot take for granted notions such as folk psychology, which legitimate themselves by appealing to their seeming naturalness.

## 1.4 Puzzle films and complex narratives

A similar position to Branigan's is taken up by Warren Buckland and other authors in the 2009 collection *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*.<sup>91</sup> As puzzles are meant to challenge our understandings and not simply confirm them, the book makes clear from its onset that folk psychology is recognised as insufficient in addressing the complexity of puzzle films.<sup>92</sup> The authors define the latter as "a popular cycle of films from the 1990s that rejects classical storytelling techniques and replaces them with complex storytelling".<sup>93</sup> *Puzzle Films* does not specifically concentrate on the multi-protagonist film, but Buckland does mention several examples of the form such as *Pulp Fiction*, *The Usual Suspects* (Singer, 1995), *Go, Amores Perros* (Iñárritu, 2000), *Timecode* (Figgis, 2000), *The Hours* (Daldry, 2002), and *21 Grams* (Iñárritu, 2003), as puzzle films that need further attention.<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, it could be argued that while the multi-protagonist film can be puzzling at times – *Cloud Atlas* would again serve as an example that could potentially be discussed under both rubrics – the form does not generally concentrate on quite the same themes as those discussed in Buckland's collection. The topics, among others, seen as central to the puzzle film are the following: a)

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<sup>91</sup> Buckland (ed.) 2009.

<sup>92</sup> Buckland 2009: 1.

<sup>93</sup> Buckland 2009: 1. Although *Puzzle Films* challenges Bordwell's understanding of the importance of folk psychology in filmmaking, it is important to note that Bordwell has also discussed the puzzle film at length (prior to the publishing of Buckland's collection), see Bordwell 2006: 80–82.

<sup>94</sup> Buckland 2009: 11.

mental problems, such as the loss of short-term memory in *Memento* (Nolan, 2000), b) the supernatural, such as the ability to see the undead in *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan, 1999), or c) outright psychological obliqueness, such as the complex murder mystery proposed by *Lost Highway* (Lynch, 1997), a film that abandons some of the most classical storytelling conventions such as the character-unity.

In short, both Buckland's conception of puzzle films and Branigan's understanding of forking plots/multiple-drafts are larger categories than either the forking paths, as Bordwell identifies it, or the multi-protagonist film, as it is understood here. It can be claimed that Bordwell's understanding of forking paths does not have a direct relation to the multi-protagonist film, which does not usually play out several realities simultaneously through the *same* character. Instead, what has caused the confusion between the two types is that the multi-protagonist films often return to the same time-space situation from a *different* character's perspective in order to offer as complete of an account of the same event as possible. Again, while breaking the traditional conception of a linear timeline is a common generic trait of the science fiction genre, which regularly displays several alternative timelines and dimensions of reality, this is hardly ever the case in the multi-protagonist film. Although science fiction genre has probably been a potential inspiration to the contemporary multi-protagonist film's seeming time-shuffling, the form actually offers different perspectives via various characters on the same events taking place on a linear timeline. Moreover, the events are predominantly "natural", even if the films are, at times, dealing with uncommon events such as assassination attempts (*Vantage Point*), car crashes (*Go, Amores Perros*, and *11:14*), and high school shootings (*Elephant*) [Figure 1–3]. Staying true to everyday reality is clearly not the goal of, for instance, *Run Lola Run* where the sole protagonist relives the same event multiple times with varying results. The latter film is consequently identified both as forking path by Bordwell and as puzzle film in Buckland's collection, highlighting that the difference between the two approaches lies in methodology and not so much in the source material. Bordwell's understanding of forking paths stays true to Borges' short story, while Branigan and Buckland expand the category in order to challenge Bordwell's notion of folk psychology and its suggested influence on filmmaking, but also allowing for a potential confusion between the different types of films.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Buckland 2009: 3.



Figure 1-3 Here we go again – the same scene replayed from a different perspective in *Elephant*.

Under the label “complex narratives”, capable of including all the above-mentioned categories, Jan Simons takes a meta-level approach to this debate.<sup>96</sup> Simons, similarly to my earlier suggestion, claims that while Bordwell’s and Branigan’s arguments might seem contradictory – one says that these types of narratives are not so complex at all, while the other claims that all narratives are complex because they go through various “what if” scenarios in the process – these positions are actually “complementary rather than contradictory, since both authors deal with different aspects of the same process”.<sup>97</sup> Whereas Bordwell, according to Simons, discusses the formal choices filmmakers have available to them to guide viewers’ comprehension, Branigan instead concentrates on how viewers themselves also go through a number of “nearly true” versions that the filmmaker did not apply to the film.<sup>98</sup> Simons’ approach thus importantly brings the intellectual investment of filmmakers and viewers onto a more equal level, which is an especially important position when dealing with such complex film forms as the multi-protagonist film. Such equality of filmmakers and spectators is

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<sup>96</sup> Simons 2008: 111–126.

<sup>97</sup> Simons 2008: 112.

<sup>98</sup> Simons 2008: 112.

something, as I will demonstrate in the main body of the thesis, that Rancière also values highly in cinema and which he theorises to a great extent.

Important in the current context – as I will go on to explore how the multi-protagonist film represents contingency – is that Simons offers significant insight to the understanding of contingency in film. Simons claims that a recent popular trend in the humanities is to oppose various game, database, and other novel modal-models to narratology, arguing that the latter is a more restrictive category than the former.<sup>99</sup> Simons instead claims that all these approaches are similarly a-temporal, meaning that it is incorrect to consider some of these aesthetic structures as proposing more freedom to the spectator/reader/gamer than narrative does.<sup>100</sup> According to Simons, it does not matter whether one is dealing with various game logics or narratives, because the possible choices are still similarly predesigned in both cases and the end goal justifies the options taken.<sup>101</sup> However, while narrative itself is a-temporal, Simons argues, because the events told have already happened, the reading experience or watching a film revitalises the actions and choices captured in it.<sup>102</sup> Thus, Simons concludes that “a sequence of events does not become less “determined” or more contingent by altering the order in which it is presented”.<sup>103</sup> Although the focus on a film form’s a-temporality is an important contribution to the understanding of contingency in the multi-protagonist film, I also think that as the sense of contingency in the multi-protagonist film is most often created via the accidental connections between the multiple lead characters, which are often replayed from different perspectives – in short, through a “new” type of narrative logic – the emphasis on modality as a move away from the more traditional causally organised film narrative has been partially justified. It is true that in a strict sense the multi-protagonist film abandons neither causality nor narrative, but it is also important to recognise how these films aim to leave an impression of deserting both.

Simons goes on to state that narratives do reduce complexity compared to real life, as Bordwell claims, because this is one of the main functions of a narrative.<sup>104</sup> Yet, Simons also considers that complex narratives “remind not only viewers, but also film scholars and new media theorists that there is a whole range of possibilities and probabilities, of chance and contingency, between deterministic causality and chaotic randomness”.<sup>105</sup> Simons thus stresses

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<sup>99</sup> Simons 2008: 111–126.

<sup>100</sup> Simons 2008: 111–126.

<sup>101</sup> Simons 2008: 111–126.

<sup>102</sup> Simons 2008: 111–126.

<sup>103</sup> Simons 2008: 117.

<sup>104</sup> Simons 2008: 111–126.

<sup>105</sup> Simons 2008: 111–126.

that thinking in binaries is still all too common in the humanities. The multi-protagonist film, being encompassed by the complex narrative term, is likewise interested in showing that the complexity of everyday life greatly exceeds the explanatory logic of simple oppositions. This complexity, as I will go on to examine, is most often achieved by emphasising the contingent dimension of life. Even though the multi-protagonist film's structure is similarly a-temporal to that of the classical Hollywood narrative, the film form most often aims to leave an impression of a large unbound reality – something that is difficult to achieve with a sole protagonist. In order to do justice to this complex representation of everyday life in the chosen films, I will pay close attention to their treatment of contingency.

## 1.5 Consolidation of debate: the same as it ever was?

Bordwell, in his 2006 *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, is one of the first to discuss the multi-protagonist film at length in a manner that stays true to perhaps the most noticeable feature of the form – the high number of lead characters.<sup>106</sup> Bordwell starts the discussion by arguing for Hollywood's long tradition of innovation, illustrated, for instance, by the trend of flash back films that followed *Citizen Kane* and *How Green Was My Valley* (Ford, 1941).<sup>107</sup> Similarly to his take on the forking path film, Bordwell stresses that such artistic developments never stray too far from classical cinema's conventions, claiming that: “However creatively a movie twisted causation or temporal order or point of view, its revisions were always intelligible to mainstream audiences”.<sup>108</sup> The 1990s stream of innovation, which the multi-protagonist film is often considered to be a part of, according to Bordwell, likewise keeps “one foot in classical tradition”.<sup>109</sup> As suggested earlier, there appears to be a constant conservative tone to Bordwell's arguments that keep tracing various types of films back to the rules of the classical narrative cinema, as laid out by himself together with Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* [2005 (1985)]. According to such logic, to put it crudely, no matter the innovations of past or current cinema, practically all films, at least to some extent, stay true to the classical storytelling principles.

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<sup>106</sup> Bordwell 2006. Bordwell also adds to the discussion on the form in his 2008 *Poetics of Cinema* by expanding his original ideas and adding several close analyses of multi-protagonist films. As the central argumentative logic is in both cases largely the same, for the sake of brevity I will concentrate in this chapter only on the chapter in *The Way Hollywood Tells It*.

<sup>107</sup> Bordwell 2006: 72.

<sup>108</sup> Bordwell 2006: 72.

<sup>109</sup> Bordwell 2006: 73.

It is highly probable that most filmmakers consider to what extent can they pursue their artistic aims without losing their target audience, but for Film Studies it is important to also analyse more closely how the contemporary multi-protagonist film thematically explores several current and fashionable understandings. Bordwell is quite aware of such a crossroad in cinema and frequently stresses that films attract their audience by combining the novel with the traditional.<sup>110</sup> My concern, however, is that a strong scholarly interest in the structural and generic, inevitably leads to the undervaluing of the thematic interests of a specific film. Even though these methods do not have to be mutually exclusive leaning too far to either direction nonetheless tends to do injustice to the other strand. Thus it is not only filmmakers who have to find a balance between tradition and innovation, and a focus on formal games and attention to complex ideas, but the same also applies to film scholarship.

Bordwell associates the wave of experimentation and innovation in cinema that emerged from the late 1980s with the profitability of independent productions, the progress of home video that provided greater control over spectatorship and consequently allowed for more complex film narratives, and with a new generation of filmmakers who “brought TV, comic-book, videogame, and pulp-fiction tastes to the movies”.<sup>111</sup> Importantly for the multi-protagonist film, Bordwell mentions that *Nashville*, *A Wedding* (Altman 1978), and *Network* (Lumet, 1976) served as a great inspiration for the later “converging fates” films.<sup>112</sup> The latter category most often consists of multi-protagonist films, because at least two characters are needed in order for their fates to converge. Although Bordwell does not explicitly make the connection, it could be argued that he recognises the multi-protagonist films’ tendency to often connect their main characters through accidental encounters, as being foreshadowed by several Alfred Hitchcock films, such as *The Trouble with Harry* (1955) and *Family Plot* (1976), that “intertwine story lines connected by happenstance”.<sup>113</sup> Bordwell also notes how *Intolerance* and some modern independent films, such as *Mystery Train*, *Slacker*, *Night on Earth*, *Flirt* (Hartley, 1995), and *The Hours*, differ from the classical storytelling norm by favouring parallelism over causality.<sup>114</sup> It is important to clarify that while parallelism is certainly important in both the *Grand Hotel/Mystery Train* type of multi-protagonist film and in the

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<sup>110</sup> See, for instance, Bordwell 2006: 78–79, where he says about *Memento* that “seldom has an American film been so daring and so obvious at the same time”.

<sup>111</sup> Bordwell 2006: 73–74.

<sup>112</sup> Bordwell 2006: 74.

<sup>113</sup> Bordwell 2006: 74.

<sup>114</sup> Bordwell 2006: 94.

*Intolerance/Night of Earth* version, only the former plainly converges fates as the latter does not actually bring the characters from the different storylines into direct contact.

Bordwell also aptly demonstrates the extended history of the multi-protagonist film and its great constancy by arguing that many features of the contemporary multi-protagonist film were present already in early examples of the form such as *Grand Hotel* (an important comment to which I will return also in the context of the next chapter).<sup>115</sup> These characteristics, according to Bordwell, being: a circumscribed time and space, star actors, and a number of protagonists connected through contingent encounters.<sup>116</sup> Perhaps the least changed from these qualities is the function of well-known Hollywood actors. Whereas *Grand Hotel* features such legends of the classical Hollywood era as Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, John Barrymore, and Lionel Barrymore, the following actors, among many others, regularly perform in contemporary multi-protagonist films: Julianne Moore [*Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* (Anderson, 1999), *The Hours*, and *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (Ficarra, Requa, 2011)], Brad Pitt [*Snatch* (Ritchie, 2000), *Full Frontal* (Soderbergh, 2002), *Babel* (Iñárritu, 2006), *Burn After Reading* (Coen, Coen, 2008), *Killing Them Softly*, and *The Big Short*], Kevin Spacey [*The Usual Suspects*, *L.A. Confidential* (Hanson, 1997), *Hurlyburly* (Drazan, 1998), *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999), and *Margin Call* (Chandor, 2011)], Matthew McConaughey [*Dazed and Confused* (Linklater, 1993), *Boys on the Side* (Ross, 1995), and *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing*], Philip Seymour Hoffman [*Hard Eight* (Anderson, 1996), *Happiness* (Solondz, 1998), and *Magnolia*], John C. Reilly [*Hard Eight*, *Magnolia*, *The Hours*, and *Carnage* (Polanski, 2011)], and Benicio Del Toro [*The Usual Suspects*, *Snatch*, *Traffic* (Soderbergh, 2000), *21 Grams*, and *Sin City* (Miller, Rodriguez, Tarantino, 2005)]. While the marketing strategies of contemporary multi-protagonist films undoubtedly differ from those of the early 1930s, Hollywood stars are still meant to attract a larger attention and audience for a film.

With some of the abovementioned character actors in mind, it could be argued that the regular appearance of the same actors in multi-protagonist films is not only a marketing principle, but related to their talent of fleshing out a personality type with limited screen time. In addition to production and marketing benefits that well-known actors can grant to a project, they are chosen also for thematic reasons – because of their ability to create believable characters in a multi-protagonist setting. This reasoning is supported by some of the other film experts who repeatedly work on multi-protagonist films. These people, among many others, include scriptwriters, such as Guillermo Arriaga (*Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*, and *Babel*),

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<sup>115</sup> Bordwell 2006: 94.

<sup>116</sup> Bordwell 2006: 94.

cinematographers, for instance Rodrigo Prieto [*Ten Tiny Love Stories* (García, 2002), *21 Grams*, and *Babel*], editors, such as Stephen Mirrione [*Go*, *Traffic*, *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing*, *21 Grams*, *Babel*, *Contagion* (Soderbergh, 2011)], and of course directors, to name but a few, Robert Altman [*Nashville*, *3 Women* (1977), *A Wedding*, *Short Cuts*, *Prêt-à-porter* (1994), and *Gosford Park* (2001)], Linklater [*Slacker*, *Dazed and Confused*, and *Fast Food Nation* (2006)], Steven Soderbergh [*Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989), *Traffic*, *Full Frontal*, and *Contagion*], Rodrigo García [*Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her* (2000), *Ten Tiny Love Stories*, *Nine Lives* (2005), and *Mother and Child* (2009)], and Alejandro González Iñárritu (*Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*, and *Babel*). This pattern suggests that there is a form specific expertise involved in making multi-protagonist films that is above all related to creating a coherent world out of the “lives” of several lead characters and which the viewers have only very limited access.

## 1.6 Global gaze of accidentality

More noticeable changes have taken place in the contemporary multi-protagonist film’s use of temporal and spatial restrictions and in the form’s interest in contingency. If we were to focus mainly on the formal level of *Grand Hotel* and some contemporary examples such as *Syriana* or *Babel*, then it might seem that the main characters are in all three cases similarly connected via happenstance and that the multi-protagonist film still circumscribes its spatial and temporal setting as it always has – even if the film is trying to encompass the entire globe as in *Babel*. This proves Bordwell’s reasoning that similarly to films of the past, contemporary multi-protagonist films likewise reduce their complexity in the interest of coherence. Nonetheless, it is also important to recognise the differences. While the action of *Grand Hotel* or *Dinner at Eight* (Cukor, 1933) is developed linearly and the space is limited to a sole hotel or apartment, then both *Syriana* and *Babel* repeatedly rearrange the plot’s temporal order and their action takes place over several continents in order for the films to present what could be described as their “global gaze” [Figure 1–4]. Not only does the aim of encompassing practically the entire world inevitably change the depiction of space and the nature of character-connections in these films, but it is also apparent that it is *Syriana* and *Babel*’s interest in providing a complex representation of the profound effects of globalisation that has led them to the multi-protagonist film, as a form most capable of such depictions, and not the other way around.

Bordwell claims that young scriptwriting students these days will often have a particular narrative gimmick in mind before they have even considered what their story is going to be about.<sup>117</sup> Their more experienced colleagues, on the other hand, who have much more at stake considering the expenses of making a major feature film, appear to put more thought into the matter and value thematic connections over formal games. This is exemplified by Iñárritu, who explains the uniting logic behind his first three films in the following terms: “The reason that I call it [*Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*, and *Babel*] a trilogy is because they are about parents and children; thematically, it’s more important for me why they are a trilogy than formally”.<sup>118</sup> From the global gaze’s perspective, the most accurate predecessor to the contemporary global multi-protagonist thriller and drama is rather *Night Flight* (Brown, 1933), a film, where a fateful depiction of an epidemic almost demands the action to swap between different cities at the very minimum. In this seemingly omnipotent viewpoint, over the lives of many lead characters who are separated by vast spaces, *Night Flight* is surprisingly similarly to some of its contemporary counterparts such as *Contagion*. The latter film likewise depicts an extensive search for a cure to a deadly virus, in this case such search crosses much of the globe. Because of its thematic interest *Night Flight* is very much unlike some of its contemporaries such as *Dinner at Eight*, where the central setting and thematic trope is a dinner party. A thematic interest, as I will demonstrate, also guides the contemporary multi-protagonist film’s representations of contingency.



Figure 1-4 *Babel*'s global gaze – a teenager in Tokyo comes across news about an American tourist being shot in Morocco.

<sup>117</sup> Bordwell 2006: 75.

<sup>118</sup> Iñárritu 2006.

Tracing the development from ensemble films to the more complex multi-protagonist examples, Bordwell notes the potential confusion that lifting “more than a couple characters to prominence” can cause for the viewers.<sup>119</sup> To counter this perplexity, Bordwell identifies that circulating objects, family, work, or intimate ties, and temporal and spatial constraints are often used to aid the viewers’ comprehension.<sup>120</sup> Another device used to bring the different protagonists together, according to Bordwell, is an event that the characters attend to – this is the case in multi-protagonist films such as *A Wedding*, *Gosford Park*, *200 Cigarettes* (Garcia, 1999), and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Newell, 1994).<sup>121</sup> To further illustrate the tendency of connecting the number of lead characters in a restricted time and space conditions, Bordwell brings attention to several hotel films such as *Grand Hotel*, *Week-End at the Waldorf* (Leonard, 1945), *Hotel Berlin* (Godfrey, 1945), *Plaza Suite* (Hiller, 1971), and *Four Rooms* (Anders, et. al., 1995). However, as noted, not only is the spatial restriction significantly looser in most contemporary multi-protagonist films than this selection suggests, but the list of films also exhibits the potential difficulty of affirmatively differentiating one type of multi-protagonist film from the other. Whereas *Grand Hotel* and *Week-End at the Waldorf*, both based on Vicki Baum’s 1929 novel *Grand Hotel (Menschen im Hotel)*, arrange romantic and adventurous encounters between their random characters, *Plaza Suite* and *Four Rooms* are divided into autonomous segments that are connected solely by the fact that the actions take place in the same location.<sup>122</sup>

The multi-protagonist film often applies several of the abovementioned cues simultaneously to create coherence. As such, in the case of *Plaza Suite* and *Four Rooms* a character acts as the “circulating object” – in the first film Walter Matthau plays the male lead in all three segments, while in *Four Rooms* Ted the Bellhop (Tim Roth) is the only character to connect the various segments, all directed by different directors. Making use of circulating objects is a popular device in the multi-protagonist film and it can be recognised also in small state cinemas such as Finnish and Estonian, and it is not uncommon even in art cinema classics.<sup>123</sup> Similarly to *L’argent* (Bresson, 1983) and *Twenty Bucks* (Rosenfeld, 1993) a bill of money connects the different characters in the Finnish multi-protagonist film *Frozen Land* [*Paha maa* (Louhimies, 2005)], which, like *L’argent*, is inspired by Leo Tolstoy’s 1911 novella

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<sup>119</sup> Bordwell 2006: 96–97.

<sup>120</sup> Bordwell 2006: 97.

<sup>121</sup> Bordwell 2006: 97.

<sup>122</sup> Baum 2016.

<sup>123</sup> Teinemaa 2017.

*The Forged Coupon* [Фальшивый купон (2006)].<sup>124</sup> A Winchester rifle – itself a reference to *Winchester '73* (Mann, 1950) – connects *Babel*'s global characters. An Estonian film with an arthouse inclination, *Autumn Ball* [Sügisball (Õunpuu, 2007)], makes use of a quote from Fernando Pessoa's *The Tobacco Shop* [Tabacaria, 1933 (1998)], which is told from one character to the other.<sup>125</sup> In *Au Hasard Balthazar* (Bresson, 1966) a donkey connects the different characters. Circulating elements are thus used from mainstream to art and small state cinemas – although to a varying degree – in order to guide the viewers' comprehension. That being said, we should not overlook the fact that the use of Pessoa's quote or a saint of a donkey is intended to create entirely different connotations than the circulation of something so mundane as a currency bill.

Addressing the more contingency centred strand of multi-protagonist film where such visual markers are not so clearly pronounced, Bordwell uses the term “converging fates”.<sup>126</sup> Regarding these films – Bordwell mentions examples such as *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World* (Kramer, 1963) and *Honky Tonk Freeway* (Schlesinger, 1981) – he states, that if “there is no overarching event frame, unacquainted characters might be granted more autonomy, pursuing their own lives but intersecting occasionally by sheer accident”.<sup>127</sup> In an expected manner, Bordwell finds that this contingency centred version of the multi-protagonist film in nothing new and “has several precedents”, such as *Three Strangers* (Negulesco, 1946).<sup>128</sup> However, beyond the fact that the protagonists in *Three Strangers* – worshiping a Chinese idol in order to grant their wish – meet by chance, the film has almost nothing in common with the “overseas imports” that Bordwell mentions alongside it – *Paris Belongs to Us* [*Paris nous appartient* (Rivette, 1961)], *L'amour fou* (Rivette, 1969), and *Playtime* (Tati, 1967); the latter being widely considered as some of the most complex examples of European cinematic storytelling.<sup>129</sup> Leaving the artistic merit aside – as Bordwell's approach treats the most various films equally – it can be argued that besides the one shared element, these films form a group neither structurally nor thematically.

This suggests a need to address the covering fates feature further because the narrative device can be used for very different ends. Although some multi-protagonist films such as *Crash* (Haggis, 2004) can overuse accidental connections to the extent where all character-

<sup>124</sup> Tolstoy 2006.

<sup>125</sup> See Teinemaa 2017; Pessoa 1998.

<sup>126</sup> Bordwell 2006: 97–99.

<sup>127</sup> Bordwell 2006: 97–99.

<sup>128</sup> Bordwell 2006: 98.

<sup>129</sup> Bordwell 2006: 98.

actions appear to be governed by fate and seem predetermined to a far greater degree than in most classical causally organised narratives, the multi-protagonist film is generally quite successful of leaving an impression of a world based on contingency that is governed neither by god nor fate. For instance, the violent attack of a complete stranger by the emotionally impotent Jerry (Chris Penn) at the end of *Short Cuts* – similarly to the earthquake that ends up concealing the murder – comes as a total surprise for the other characters, including Jerry's good friend Bill (Robert Downey Jr.). Although Jerry's unexpected and unfounded violence can be retrospectively recognised as being motivated by the character's insecure personality and the cold demeanour of his unresponsive wife Lois (Jennifer Jason Leigh), it is likely intended to come an equal surprise for the viewers. It could be argued that such loosely motivated acts are designed to decisively counter a feeling of a predetermined narrative, let alone a world governed by fate, and are instead aimed to create an impression of a boundless world where anything can happen at any given moment.

Not only are many multi-protagonist films explicitly not concerned with fate, they are often also meticulous about how they converge their characters. This is regularly highlighted by the characters' unawareness of such connections taking place at all or by their ignorance of the impact of these connections. For instance, in *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* [*71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls* (Haneke, 1994)] a rude gas station clerk, a hostile customer in a bank, and an angry driver (all uncredited), remain entirely unaware of the fact that it was their negative behaviour that partially led a young man Max (Lukas Miko) to go on a lethal rampage, after which he decided to take his own life [Figure 1–5]. While on a formal level these characters still converge, it should not go without notice how the film thematically stresses the characters' total lack of understanding of a meaningful connection. Bordwell leaves the interpretation of such accidental encounters mostly open by saying, for instance, about *Pulp Fiction* that the accidental meetings can be seen as “emphasising either pure contingency (“If Vincent had not gone to the toilet at just that moment...”) or the hand of destiny (“It serves a paid killer right that...””).<sup>130</sup> Yet, such undecidedness can overlook the specificity of these films. Regarding literature Hilary P. Dannenberg has traced the development of coincidence as being a convenient plot trick in the 19th century novel to its contemporary use as an integral part of increasingly complex narrative strategies aimed at creating a heightened sense of verisimilitude with the reality that one is familiar with from real-life experience.<sup>131</sup> Both Tröhler and Azcona, as I will show in more detail below, likewise associate the multi-protagonist film

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<sup>130</sup> Bordwell 2006: 99.

<sup>131</sup> Dannenberg 2008.

with a contemporary version of realism. This suggests that there is little reason to believe that the development from using contingency as a simple plot trick to applying it to represent an increasingly complex understanding of reality has been any different in cinema.



Figure 1-5 71 Fragments' depiction of "casual cruelty" – a random character is oblivious of the consequences of his actions.

To address the multi-protagonist film's interest in the contemporary *zeitgeist*, Bordwell introduces a neologism, "network narrative", to describe multi-protagonist films where the characters have significant independence and that display a number of accidental encounters.<sup>132</sup> The term network narrative, similarly to the multi-protagonist film, is one of the few from the extensive *ad hoc* terminology surrounding the form that has seen repeated usage since its initiation.<sup>133</sup> Bordwell argues that while coincidences in these films might appear to work against causality, the different character actions are still causally organised "by the usual goals, obstacles, appointments, deadlines, and the like".<sup>134</sup> While it is certainly true that the multi-protagonist film has not entirely abandoned causality, there are examples – such as *Magnolia* that Bordwell addresses – where the depicted causality often has a remarkable low probability and where a film emphasises its profound interest in contingency from the onset.<sup>135</sup> *Magnolia* begins with a documentary-style prologue that depicts a number of "real life" chance occurrences where the probability of something like this happening is so incredibly small that

<sup>132</sup> Bordwell 2006: 99–100.

<sup>133</sup> Bordwell 2006 and 2008; Silvey 2009: 1–15 and 2012; Beal 2009: 405–409; Ciafone 2014: 2680–2704. Carmago 2002: 1–18; Azcona 2010; Melzer et al 2004: 193–203; Tröhler 2010: 459–477; G. M. Smith 2005: 117–133.

<sup>134</sup> Bordwell 2006: 98.

<sup>135</sup> Bordwell 2006: 99.

the voice over narrator repeatedly stresses his inability to treat them as “just something that happened” – potentially suggesting that he holds the world to be contingent to a much larger extent than generally recognised. Concerning such films that do not allow their interest in contingency to be treated merely as a narrative gimmick, Bordwell concludes that “coincidences, in short, are wholly acceptable in stories about coincidence”.<sup>136</sup> However, as my close textual analyses to follow will highlight, by paying close attention to the contemporary multi-protagonist film’s interest in contingency one can also arrive at a drastically different conclusion.

After offering some suggestions for the recent increase in network films such as the emergence of network theory, Bordwell illustrates how obviously contingency can be used to structure the network plot with an analysis of *Love Actually* (Curtis, 2003).<sup>137</sup> This also serves as a perfect example of the matter that not all multi-protagonist films use contingency the same way or for the same reasons. While it is not difficult to recognise that *Love Actually* uses contingency as an easy way to bring together its various characters, creating an almost miraculous holiday setting, the film’s use of contingency says little about how the notion is used in many other multi-protagonist films. Whereas a romantic comedy such as *Crazy, Stupid, Love* can make use of contingency to create a plot twist, this is not necessarily the intention of multi-protagonist films that are, among other things, interested in interracial relations, transnational business, financial crises, and global wealth disparity. Without any intention to favour one type of multi-protagonist film over the other, it is undoubtable that the earnest (global-)thrillers and dramas such as *Traffic*, *Code Unknown*, *21 Grams*, *Babel*, *The Edge of Heaven* [*Auf der anderen Seite* (Akin, 2007)], or *Margin Call* represent contingency very differently from the abovementioned rom-coms.

## 1.7 Several connection principles

Closely following Bordwell’s first detailed engagement with the multi-protagonist film is Tröhler’s 2007 monograph *Open Worlds Without Heroes: Plural Figurative Constellations in Film* [*Offene Welten ohne Helden: Plurale Figurenkonstellationen im Film*] that offers a substantial contribution to the developing debate.<sup>138</sup> As emphasised already by the title, the two

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<sup>136</sup> Bordwell 2006: 99.

<sup>137</sup> Bordwell 100–102.

<sup>138</sup> Tröhler 2007.

main stands of Tröhler's book seek to identify the downplaying of the sole hero by the multi-protagonist film and to explore its various constellations. As I have shown, even some of the earliest writing on the form noted that having multiple lead characters in a film reduces the possibility to psychologically develop them all in a way possible for a single protagonist film. Tröhler develops this principle much further, claiming that the multi-protagonist film particularly favours undermining "the causal logic of the plot and the conception of the main characters as motivated by individual psychology".<sup>139</sup> In other words, rather than a structural shortcoming, Tröhler recognises the multi-protagonist film as deliberately moving beyond a format that prefers a sole, usually male goal-oriented hero, who:

organises the *character constellation* through a hierarchy of values, vertically so to speak: he stands at the apex of a pyramid or at the centre of a solar system while grouped around him are secondary main characters, actual minor characters, background or ornamental figures, and extras or supernumeraries.<sup>140</sup>

The multi-protagonist film's democratic structure that treats all of its main characters more or less equally, therefore suggests several "inherent" differences from the more classical narrative cinema where all the different elements of the story world are gravitating towards offering a detailed representation of a sole hero. The multi-protagonist film's anti-hierarchical qualities can be identified as potentially downplaying gender inequality, suggesting a critical attitude towards a solitary hero's power to undertake significant (social) changes, and neglecting the importance of an individual or at least questioning the need to prioritise one's psychological complexity. As I will go on to explore, the multi-protagonist film's abandoning of hierarchical character constellations suggests a fruitful common ground with a thinking that places great emphasis on equality.

Concerning the different multi-protagonist formations, Tröhler suggests that there are at least three main types of multi-protagonist films.<sup>141</sup> I will briefly lay out all three types and concentrate on the differences between the latter two. This demonstration allows me to stress, why I consider the third type to be the contemporary multi-protagonist film proper. Tröhler calls the first type a) "the group character", which unites multiple characters to offer an argument or a demonstration.<sup>142</sup> Various band of brothers or heist films belong to this category

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<sup>139</sup> Tröhler 2010: 461–462.

<sup>140</sup> Tröhler 2010: 460 (emphasis in original).

<sup>141</sup> Tröhler 2010: 462–463.

<sup>142</sup> Tröhler 2010: 462.

such as *The Great Escape* (Sturges, 1963) and *Italian Job* (Gray, 2003). The films above all demonstrate the cunning and excellent planning of its (mostly male) characters. The group of characters in these films are commonly united in order to accomplish a shared goal. *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah, 1969) could be said to offer an example of the argumentative strand of the category, making use of the group character to illustrate the potentially nihilistic and destructive nature of masculinity.

The second type, Tröhler suggests, is b) “the character ensemble” – offering “a heterogeneous group, which develops individual roles and values in a shared polyphonic space and installs a flattened narrative style”.<sup>143</sup> *American Pie* (Weitz; Weitz, 1999) can be recognised as an example of this formation, where the heterogeneous nature of the high school group is accentuated, for instance, by contrasting the goodhearted, but timid Jim Levenstein (Jason Biggs), with an active and shameless “perverted womanising antagonist” Steve Stifler (Seann William Scott), as the character is described on IMDb.<sup>144</sup> Comparing the first type, the group character, with the second, the character ensemble, makes evident that in the latter the characters tend to be somewhat more developed and not so clearly oriented towards accomplishing a shared goal or as being used by the film mostly to make an argument. The third type in Tröhler’s triad is the already mentioned c) “character mosaic” that I will focus on here, and which does not form an actual group as the characters might not even meet each other on the story level.<sup>145</sup> Most often contingency, in the form of accidental connections between the main characters, is used in the third type to create some coherence of the film world.

While all these three types have multiple main characters, I will draw out some of the reasons why I would suggest using the multi-protagonist film term only for the type that Tröhler calls character mosaic. To exemplify my reasoning, I will return to *American Pie*, a film that Azcona considers a multi-protagonist film, but which in Tröhler’s classification, I would argue, belongs to the ensemble group. It is important to note that Stifler is not actually an antagonist of Jim (as IMDb describes him) such as those common in the more traditional sole or paired protagonist narratives. Rather both Jim and Stifler are, among various other characters, the different facets of the depicted high-school life. They are united by the same high-school environment and their mutual friends. In short, they both help to make up the polyphonic space that Tröhler notes. The sharp contrast between Jim and Steve rather emerges from the flattened narrative style that Tröhler accentuates. Both the multi-protagonist film as it is understood here

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<sup>143</sup> Tröhler 2010: 462.

<sup>144</sup> Anonymous A, n.d: n.p.

<sup>145</sup> Tröhler 2010: 462–463.

and the character ensemble often lack a proper development of its characters, yet where they differ in this regard is that the multi-protagonist film, because of its formal constraints, often deliberately avoids developing its characters, while the character ensemble frequently reduces its characters to a little more than an embodiment of a stereotype.

The multi-protagonist film commonly emphasises verisimilitude to everyday life and leaves an impression that the characters are complex individuals and that the spectator has only limited access to their lives. The character ensemble instead regularly opts for an easy understanding via typecasting. In the case of *American Pie* we have the attractive and popular athlete Chris “Oz” Ostreicher (Chris Klein), the beautiful virtuous girl Heather (Mena Suvari), the sophisticated weirdo Paul Finch (Eddie Kaye Thomas), the sexy and gullible foreign exchange student Nadia (Shannon Elizabeth), and array of different kinds of high school “rejects” starting with Jim. Suggesting that these generic types are easily recognisable to a wider audience, there are several spoof versions of films such as *American Pie* that concentrate mainly on caricaturing high school stereotypes. *Not Another Teen Movie* (Gallen, 2001) not only ironizes the high school film’s generic mould already in its title (because indeed it is just another teen movie), but expresses such self-reflexivity also with the film’s poster that explicitly identifies its characters as various high school typecasts – such as, among others: the popular jock, the pretty ugly girl, the cocky blond guy, the nasty cheerleader, the beautiful weirdo, and the desperate virgin. This suggests that although *American Pie* can display considerable complexity at times, which has been explored in detail by Azcona, writing on the multi-protagonist film, it is hard to see the film as standing at the crossroads between art cinema/independent production and mainstream where both Branigan and Tröhler recognise many multi-protagonist films of belonging.<sup>146</sup> This is not a charge against genre film. Both *Love Actually* and *Syriana* are genre films, even if the latter incorporates the earnest mood common to many independent films, while the former presents no such pretension.<sup>147</sup> They are also both multi-protagonist films. On the other hand, films such as *71 Fragments, Dog Days* [Hundstage (Seidl, 2001)], *Songs from the Second Floor* [Sånger från andra våningen (Andersson, 2000)], *Ten* [Dah (Kiarostami, 2002)], and *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* [En duva satt på en gren och funderade på tillvaron (Andersson, 2014)], are all multi-protagonist films although they are not genre films. Rather than a question about genre, one of the main

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<sup>146</sup> Azcona 2010: 80–99.

<sup>147</sup> *Love Actually* has sparked a wave of less successful multi-protagonist films implementing the same formula such as *He’s Just Not That into You* (Kwapis, 2009), *Valentine’s Day* (Marshall, 2010), *New Year’s Eve* (Marshall, 2011), *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* (Jones, 2012), and *Mother’s Day* (Marshall, 2016) – that have a tendency to make their structuring principles and central ideas more apparent for the audience.

differences between character ensemble and the multi-protagonist film is that the first simplifies its characters, whereas the other offers only fragments of their lives.

Azcona contrasts her approach, which I will address in more detail below, to an extent with Tröhler's, by arguing that generic labels such as "ensemble" or "mosaic" have "ultimately become too rigid" to address the complex variety of contemporary multi-protagonist films.<sup>148</sup> It is certainly true that it is difficult to ideally pigeonhole the most diverse contemporary multi-protagonist films, yet, I would claim, that Azcona's own emphasis on equality between the lead characters, offered in her definition of the film form, is something that differentiates the character ensemble from character mosaic (i.e. what I consider the contemporary multi-protagonist film proper). As there will always be examples that thwart neat classifications, Tröhler herself anticipates potential criticism to her approach by admitting that "the transitions between these three models are smooth".<sup>149</sup> Still Tröhler maintains that the three versions of the multi-protagonist film remain separate regarding "the individual's relation with the group".<sup>150</sup> A claim that *American Pie* strongly supports by placing Jim at the centre of attention.

I agree with Azcona's conclusion that "the fact that *Grand Hotel* and *Short Cuts* could be considered closer to the generic prototype than, say, *Ocean's Eleven* (Soderbergh, 2001) and *The Great Escape* does not invalidate the status of the latter as multi-protagonist films".<sup>151</sup> But I also think that Tröhler is right in reserving different signifiers for these, arguably, different types of films. In the context of the next chapter I will show how the multi-protagonist film's interest in contingency can potentially serve as a quality that separates it from the character ensemble, but there also appears to be a clear difference between these films in terms of equality between its characters. Not only are the characters in *The Great Escape* and *Ocean's Eleven* united by a sole cause unlike the characters of the multi-protagonist film, suggesting that no obstacle is too great for a determined group (of men), but both films also depict a character who in many ways still forms "an apex of a pyramid or [who stands] at the centre of a solar system" – a feature that Tröhler recognises to be a common principle of the more traditional film narratives. Hilts "The Cooler King" (Steve McQueen) is undoubtedly the most memorable character of *The Great Escape* because the film dedicates so much time and effort to drawing him out compared to the other characters, while the characters of *Ocean's Eleven* are identified to centre around Danny Ocean (George Clooney) – the star of their solar system in both sense

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<sup>148</sup> Azcona 2010: 24.

<sup>149</sup> Tröhler 2010: 462.

<sup>150</sup> Tröhler 2010: 462.

<sup>151</sup> Azcona 2010: 32.

of the word – already in the film's title. Such hierarchy is also largely true in the case of *American Pie* where in addition to Jim receiving the most film time compared to the other characters, it is his sexual experience with an apple pie that gives its name to the theatrical series. Jim's status as the centre of *American Pie*'s solar system is clearly highlighted also on the film's theatrical poster [Figure 1–6].

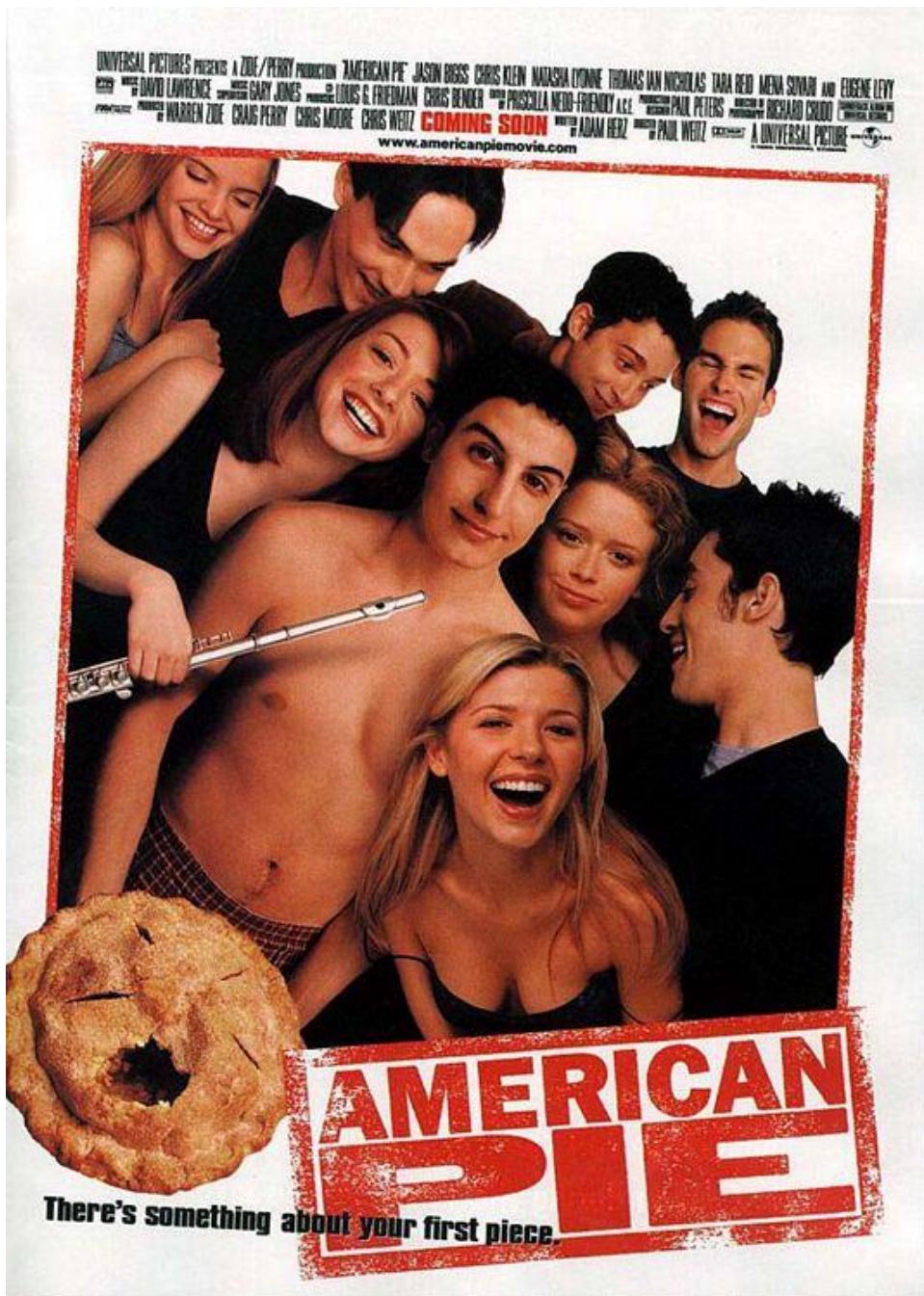


Figure 1-6 Character ensemble or the multi-protagonist film proper? Jim as the centre of the action in *American Pie*.

## 1.8 More than stories about contingency

An important difference between Tröhler's account on the multi-protagonist film and that of Bordwell's is their understanding of contingency in the form. As noted, Bordwell argues that although the multi-protagonist film seemingly works "against the primacy of causal connections" in its interest in contingency, each individual storyline still tends to be conventionally causal.<sup>152</sup> The insistence on causality is important for Bordwell because the influential approach to Hollywood cinema that he, along with Staiger and Thompson, has popularised, largely relies on the proposition that the classical narrative cinema is causally motivated.<sup>153</sup> Tröhler, on the other hand, recognises that the multi-protagonist film pushes back or even questions causality through its staging of contingency.<sup>154</sup> While Tröhler makes clear that she does not doubt that the multi-protagonist film encompasses elements from the classical narrative cinema, she is questioning Bordwell's assumption that simply confirming the causal narrative logic is where the films' or even the spectators' interest in relation to the multi-protagonist film stands.<sup>155</sup> Tröhler's emphasis on the multi-protagonist film's unique appeal therefore stands close to the abovementioned puzzle film collection's approach that is similarly interested in highlighting the *why* viewers are interested in such perplexing films, rather than the *how* they are able to make sense of what they are seeing.<sup>156</sup>

Unlike many authors who are primarily interested in the multi-protagonist film's formal features, Tröhler's approach also emphasises the ethical and ideological dimension that multiple character formations suggest. Tröhler claims that the multi-protagonist film is often steered by emotional, ideological, and sometimes explicitly political tensions.<sup>157</sup> Via the downplaying of the individual hero and by comparing and contrasting its different characters' worlds the multi-protagonist film is recognised as able to address far-reaching political, social, cultural, economic, emotional, and ideological concerns. Tröhler understands the multi-protagonist film as ideally capable of representing what she terms "expressive, ethnographic realism" – a transcultural and transmedia practice applying multiple protagonists in its exploration of the everyday, in order "to negotiate an encounter with the social and/or cultural

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<sup>152</sup> Bordwell 2006: 98.

<sup>153</sup> Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 2005 (1985).

<sup>154</sup> Tröhler 2006: 96.

<sup>155</sup> Tröhler 2006: 96.

<sup>156</sup> To an extent such a separation is artificial. As Branigan argues: "Any complete model of narrative comprehension will need to incorporate both type of knowledge" – the one stemming from the "why" as well as that emerging from the "how" questions, see Branigan 1992: 66.

<sup>157</sup> Tröhler 2006: 101.

Other".<sup>158</sup> That is, by knitting together its representations of the mundane with several racial, cultural, social class, gender, sexual, and national parameters, the multi-protagonist film can via the image of the familiar also offer various new insights. Tröhler acknowledges that bringing the viewers into contact with the social and cultural Other via an easily recognisable representation of the everyday, is just one of the interests of the multi-protagonist film.<sup>159</sup> I will go on to demonstrate how the same method of combining the familiar with the strange is applied by the case-example films to engage in complex questioning of what these films depict as widely held American values.

Tröhler also notes that the multi-protagonist film's image of the everyday always has an element of artifice to it, because features such as expressive acting, the form's tendency towards self-reflexivity, and its complex structure tend to exteriorise its characteristics.<sup>160</sup> I will offer a closer overview of the many contradictions within the multi-protagonist film that various authors have identified in the next chapter, but it is important to stress again that Tröhler does not recognise this as a structural shortcoming or necessity, but sees the multi-protagonist film as deliberately uniting a contemporary understanding of realism with an inherent structural artificiality.<sup>161</sup> As stated, the easily recognisable image of the everyday, according to Tröhler, allows the multi-protagonist film to stage a contact with the Other, while the artificiality grants for the viewer a reflexive distance towards the depicted.<sup>162</sup> The multi-protagonist film therefore, Tröhler argues following Barbara Maria Stafford's understanding on the importance of visual analogy, invites the viewers to see the "similarity-in-difference", while not subjugating the Other to the same.<sup>163</sup> Although Tröhler does not equate fictional characters to real-life people between whom interactions rely on direct feedback, she does maintain that from the myriad of characters the spectators will likely prefer some to others, which calls for a reflection.<sup>164</sup> In short the multi-protagonist film, according to Tröhler, by decentralising perception and calling for comparisons proposes new opportunities for a nuanced thinking.<sup>165</sup> One of the avenues for nuanced thinking that the multi-protagonist film suggests, as I will explore, is using contingency to question what the films depict as the American Imaginary.

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<sup>158</sup> Tröhler 2010: 464, concerning the role of the cultural other in the form, see also Tröhler 2006: 104–6.

<sup>159</sup> Tröhler 2010: 474.

<sup>160</sup> Tröhler 2010: 468, see also Tröhler 2006: 104–6.

<sup>161</sup> Tröhler 2006: 109.

<sup>162</sup> Tröhler 2006: 109.

<sup>163</sup> Stafford 1999. Tröhler 2010: 469.

<sup>164</sup> Tröhler 2010: 471.

<sup>165</sup> Tröhler 2006: 111.

## 1.9 Popularisation of the multi-protagonist film's scholarship

Azcona's approachable 2010 *The Multi-Protagonist Film* has done a lot to further popularise the discussion on the multi-protagonist film. *The Multi-Protagonist Film* is published as part of a larger series dedicated on introducing new approaches to film genre, and as such the book's main focus is on drawing out the form's generic qualities and highlighting its common ground with other more established film genres such as thriller, rom-com, and high school film. Genre is understood by Azcona from the onset as a “generic label in critical discourse”.<sup>166</sup> Azcona means that it is more important to note how generic qualities are increasingly recognised by many as a genre develops, rather than to focus on how genre can be used, mostly by film scholars, as tool for a supposedly neat classification.<sup>167</sup> The emphasis on critical discourse, as I will show below, allows Azcona to highlight how closely the emergence of the multi-protagonist film is related to the form's ability to accurately represent topics such as globalisation.

Although the surge of films using the multi-protagonist formula is generally seen as beginning in the early to mid-1990s, Azcona begins her overview of the multi-protagonist film by tracing the increase of films using this structure back to the early 1980s, mentioning examples such as *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (Sayles, 1980), *Diner* (Levinson, 1982), *The Big Chill*, and *St Elmo's Fire* (Schumacher, 1985).<sup>168</sup> Azcona does not elaborate further on these examples, because of which it remains unclear how she sees these ensemble films differing from earlier examples of the form, for instance the popular trend of ensemble films from the 1960s such as *The Magnificent Seven* (Sturges, 1960), *The League of Gentlemen* (Dearden, 1960), *The Chapman Report* (Cukor, 1962), *The Great Escape*, *The List of Adrian Messenger* (Huston, 1963), *The V.I.P.s* (Asquith, 1963), *Palm Springs Weekend* (Taurog, 1963), *The Great Race* (Edwards, 1965), *Ship of Fools* (Kramer, 1965), *The Group* (Lumet, 1966), *The Dirty Dozen* (Aldrich, 1967), *Casino Royale* (Hughes et. al., 1967), *The Road to Nashville* (Zens, 1967), *Hotel* (Quine, 1967), *Bye Bye Braverman* (Lumet, 1968), and *Monte Carlo or Bust!/Those Daring Young Men in Their Jaunty Jalopies* (Annakin and Itzkovitch, 1969). Although there is no definitive answer to this question, I would suggest that the rise of the contemporary multi-protagonist films from the early 1990s onwards was seen as different

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<sup>166</sup> Azcona 2010: 1.

<sup>167</sup> I have shown elsewhere how Azcona's assessment about easily recognisable generic qualities circulating in the multi-protagonist film related discourse holds true even concerning lesser known films from small states' cinemas, see Teinemaa 2017.

<sup>168</sup> Azcona 2010: 2.

from the more traditional ensemble films largely because of the contemporary multi-protagonist film's tendency to abandon or at least repress the connections between its main characters. The main characters of ensemble and multi-protagonist films are often played by well-known actors and because of this the 1960s ensemble films most often did not resist the urge to bring its all-star cast together in a single time and space setting.<sup>169</sup> The 1990s and after multi-protagonist film, on the other hand, frequently – it could be argued for the sake of verisimilitude – avoids face to face contacts between all of its lead characters. For instance, the majority of the most recognised multi-protagonist films from the 1990s, such as *Short Cuts* or *Pulp Fiction*, do not connect all of their star actors. It is also worth emphasising that Azcona's understanding of genre as a discursive category supports placing the beginning of the surge of the contemporary multi-protagonist film in the 1990s, because, as I have shown, it is the time when critics started to bring attention to this supposedly new form of cinematic storytelling.<sup>170</sup>

The significance of keeping the (star-)actors mostly separated on the narrative level highlights the importance of Tröhler's third category, the character mosaic where all the characters do not necessarily have to meet. This assessment also suggests a sharp contrast with approaches that mainly emphasise the importance of connections between the lead characters. Bordwell finds that:

Any film's narration, in coaxing us to build the story world in a particular way, must expose the relationships among the characters. In a network tale [i.e. the multi-protagonist film], the narration must do this with an elaborateness seldom seen in the more ordinary movie. The narration must *reveal* connections, *anticipate* connections, and *conceal* connections.<sup>171</sup>

Bordwell's estimation is important for highlighting the artificial and self-reflexive character of the multi-protagonist film, but given the contemporary multi-protagonist film's regular interest in the everyday and contingent, appears to overemphasise the character-connections as the main structuring principle of the form. Although Bordwell adds that: "Most evidently, the film's narration must show how characters are separated by a few links", he nonetheless appears to treat the multi-protagonist film as a riddle of a sort that attempts to "coax" viewers to see the

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<sup>169</sup> I thank Patrick Pilkington for bringing my attention to this aspect.

<sup>170</sup> Part of the reason why the multi-protagonist film was recognised around that time as a novel form, could be argued to be because of the general development of complex system studies, for instance, according to Patrick Jagoda "the interdisciplinary field of network science did not form a coherent research program until the 1990s", see Jagoda 2016: 11. The multi-protagonist films were likely widely recognised as corresponding to the changing understanding of global interconnectedness.

<sup>171</sup> Bordwell 2008: 207 (emphases in original).

lead characters as being separated, but where the right solution is nonetheless to identify all the possible connections between them.<sup>172</sup>

Even though understandings of a network can vary from rigid to rhizomic, and Bordwell readily recognises that “central to network narratives in any medium is the fundamental tension between realism (after all, we are all connected to each other) and artifice (order must be imposed on all the potential connections we can find)”, a strong focus on the structural order can nevertheless overlook the thematic specificity of such networks. *Disconnect* (Rubin, 2012) could be considered an evocative example of a contemporary multi-protagonist/network narrative film that, on the one hand, depicts a social network formed by the random encounters between its lead characters and their increasing interconnectedness through social media and the internet, while, at the same time, as the title suggest, the film concentrates on the lack of human connection between its lead characters [Figure 1–7]. In other words, while the formal play of revealing, concealing, and anticipating connections between the random lead characters is certainly present in *Disconnect*, it uses these formal characteristics to represent contemporary alienation that exists despite – and partially because of – the increasing connectedness that social media offers. Needless to add that *Disconnect*’s dark dystopian vison of a contemporary society differs completely from the sunny “love connects us all” message put forth by many of the abovementioned holyday rom-coms, suggesting the difficulty of separating thematic concerns from formal features. This clarification on the nature of connections between the lead characters not only suggests why the multi-protagonist film has been identified as different from the more traditional ensemble films, but also supports Azcona’s focus on the multi-protagonist film’s contemporary interests such as globalisation. The increasing connectedness, as many multi-protagonist films suggest, have not necessarily brought us closer together as a global community.

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<sup>172</sup> Bordwell 2008: 207.



Figure 1-7 *Disconnect* ponders if people are more connected in the Information Age.

Azcona begins with a brief historical overview of the development of film narrative and elaborates that as films became longer in early cinema a sole central character, which, as Azcona recognises, Sigmund Freud holds to be “the embodiment of the Ego”, increasingly became the main element with which films could counter the disruptive effects of montage.<sup>173</sup> Yet, Azcona notes, that not only have various film narrative formats, including the multi-protagonist film, existed since the birth of cinema, but that “contemporary narratives, no doubt affected by a rapidly changing cultural context and the evolution of human relations in our (globalised) world, have found in the multi-protagonist format an increasingly viable alternative to the single-hero pattern”.<sup>174</sup> From the authors discussed here, Azcona offers the clearest demonstration that the multi-protagonist film is recognised as corresponding to a quickly changing society. As such, Azcona sets out to explore the multi-protagonist film’s difference from the classical Hollywood narrative, as identified by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, relying on causality and a goal-oriented protagonist, and to offer explanations for the form’s rapid spread over the last couple of decades.<sup>175</sup>

One of the ways in which, according to Azcona, the multi-protagonist film, unlike the more traditional genres such as romantic comedy or romantic melodrama, captures the

<sup>173</sup> Azcona 2010: 3–5.

<sup>174</sup> Azcona 2010: 5.

<sup>175</sup> Azcona 2010: 6.

contemporary *lebenswelt* is by representing more adequately the significantly changing nature of “contemporary desire” – moving beyond the heteronormative nuclear family.<sup>176</sup> Other topics to which, Azcona argues, the multi-protagonist film does more justice to than its more traditional counterparts are “the complex social, economic, and political processes that have crystallised in concepts such as globalisation, transnationalism, deterritorialisation, and diaspora”.<sup>177</sup> While Bordwell, Tröhler, and Azcona, all sketch the long history and global reach of the multi-protagonist film, Azcona convincingly links the sudden increase of the examples of the form with its ability to explore rapid social transformation, best captured in the term “globalisation”. Azcona lays out the multi-protagonist film’s significant features, because of which the form has become a favoured choice in addressing social transformations: 1) it has multiple characters and storylines, 2) the storylines can be both related and independent, 3) the storylines can be ordered differently and do not have to be tied to a common locale, 4) the form favours characters over actions and contingency over causality, 5) synchronicity is often used to “accidentally” connect characters, suggesting global interconnectedness, 6) via parallelism between the lead characters’ lives and the emphasis on contingency, often next to nothing is happening in these films, and 7) the form often favours complex topics, to which no concrete solution can be offered, made evident by the different perspectives on the same issue.<sup>178</sup> These qualities, as my close readings of several multi-protagonist films will explore, allow the contemporary American multi-protagonist films to interrogate, with complexity equal to contemporary philosophy, several topics – such as the American Dream, economic crisis, and neoliberalisation of the economy – that have received only limited attention in the related literature.<sup>179</sup> Azcona states that: “In a globalised and increasingly shrinking world, the notions of chance and serendipity acquire a new relevance”.<sup>180</sup> This feature is very apparent in many multi-protagonist films, but, as my close readings will demonstrate, this interest in contingency is not just an adequate reflection of our changing understandings about society, but also a tool via which the multi-protagonist film can be seen to be actively questioning the ideas that the films recognise as being most widely held.

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<sup>176</sup> Azcona 2010: 7.

<sup>177</sup> Azcona 2010: 7.

<sup>178</sup> Azcona 2010: 37–38.

<sup>179</sup> Ciafone 2014: 2680–2704; McGowan 2008: 401–418.

<sup>180</sup> Azcona 2010: 7.

## **2 CHAPTER TWO – Explorations of contingency and equality in *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing***

The 2001 low-budget independent film *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing*, directed by Jill Sprecher, might be relatively unknown to a wider audience, but it is no stranger to authors who have discussed the multi-protagonist film in more detail.<sup>181</sup> However, even the current scholarship on the film, which mainly uses *Thirteen Conversations* as a way of contextualising the importance of contingency within the multi-protagonist film, could be seen as overlooking the specifics of the film and how it actually makes use of contingency.<sup>182</sup> As I will show, when *Thirteen Conversations* is explored together with the thinking of Jacques Rancière – in which, I will argue, interest in contingency plays a significant role – the joint relationship between the two offers not only a new way of understanding *Thirteen Conversations*, but exemplifies the complexity with which contingency can be explored in the multi-protagonist film more generally.

### **2.1 Beyond either/or: what is contingency in the multi-protagonist film?**

One of the main aims of this thesis is to provide a new understanding of a central tension of the multi-protagonist film, which is recognised to exist between the form's rigid structure and its deep interest in exploring contingency. This problematic is noted by most of the scholars who have written on the multi-protagonist film. Allan Cameron describes it as “a fraught relationship between contingency and narrative order”.<sup>183</sup> Vivian Silvey considers the multi-protagonist film to struggle with the question of “how to relay the postmodern promise of endless complexity, without subordinating difference to a simplified reduction of totality”.<sup>184</sup> Bordwell claims that “unlike coincidences in real life, movie coincidences create “small

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<sup>181</sup> There are several reasons why *Thirteen Conversations* had a smaller public impact than it deserves. It is an independently financed film that put its creators into significant debt, and it could therefore not compete in terms of distribution or publicity budget with the better-known multi-protagonist films, it had a high number of producers with very different approaches on how to promote the film, and it premiered internationally shortly before 9/11 that likely shifted public preference away from existentialist stories about socially alienated New Yorkers, see also Sprecher 2007 (qtd. in Holm) and Sprecher 2001 (qtd. in Kaufman).

<sup>182</sup> Although *Thirteen Conversations* is not unknown to Film Studies, it is usually mentioned only briefly as a way of offering a broader contextualisation, see Cameron 2006: 65–66, 74; Bordwell 2006: 102, 123; Bordwell 2008: 213, 245; Silvey 2009: n.p.; and Azcona 2010: 2, 29, 31–36. Interestingly, given the context of the thesis, one the most detailed reading of the film is offered not by a film scholar, but by a philosopher, see Okapal 2011.

<sup>183</sup> Cameron 2006: 65.

<sup>184</sup> Silvey 2009: n.p.

“worlds” in which characters will intersect again and again, especially if the duration and locale of the action are well circumscribed”.<sup>185</sup> Whereas these authors mostly recognise that the form’s central conflict is challenging the credibility of the worlds depicted, Azcona instead argues that the friction between chance and order is exactly the reason why the form is “a template perfectly equipped to deal with a tension of this sort”.<sup>186</sup> Azcona understands a similar conflict to also exist outside cinema as people are both captivated by the unexpected and obscure, while they find comfort in routine and benefit from rationality.<sup>187</sup> Azcona supports her argument with Mary Ann Doane’s findings, according to which contingency played an important role in the early cinema, because it helped the audiences to adjust to the increasing rationalisation of society.<sup>188</sup> Tröhler, offering perhaps one of the most complex understandings of the central tension, analyses how the form’s conflicting intentions place the spectators in a push-pull relationship regarding the multi-protagonist film.<sup>189</sup> According to Tröhler:

the narrative construction of an audience position shuttles between proximity and distance: on the one hand, the proximity of the chronicle-like presentation of a fictional everyday world in which the characters appear to represent themselves through their body images; on the other, a distance established by the reflexiveness of actor performance, the process of montage, and general filmic expressivity betrays the intrusion and control of an omnipresent enunciative authority.<sup>190</sup>

In this case, the central tension of the multi-protagonist film is identified to exist between the form’s focus on the representations of the everyday life – where contingent occurrences help to create a contemporary impression of realism – and the form’s preference to exhibit self-reflexivity, revealing artistic control over the representations.<sup>191</sup>

While the specific focus of these authors varies, they all appear to recognise a binary relation at play in the multi-protagonist film. I have shown Simons to be critical of what he finds to be a common tendency in the humanities to reduce the complex narrative’s manifold representations of contingency to neat binaries.<sup>192</sup> Such a trend is exemplified, for instance, by Silvey who claims that: “Thematically, network films [i.e. the multi-protagonist film]

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<sup>185</sup> Bordwell 2006: 98.

<sup>186</sup> Azcona 2010: 55.

<sup>187</sup> Azcona 2010: 55.

<sup>188</sup> Doane 2002.

<sup>189</sup> Tröhler 2010: 470.

<sup>190</sup> Tröhler 2010: 470.

<sup>191</sup> On Tröhler’s view on the multi-protagonist film’s realism see Tröhler 2010.

<sup>192</sup> Simons 2008: 114.

concentrate on tensions between chaos and order".<sup>193</sup> Drawing from Ilya Prigogine, Simons concedes that dualism between determinism and contingency "has haunted Western thought ever since Epicurus".<sup>194</sup> A similar kind of thinking in opposites can also be noted regarding the current understanding of the multi-protagonist film's interest in contingency. Although, as noted, not all the authors find these tensions problematic, they do mostly recognise the multi-protagonist film's formal features to be at odds with its thematic interests. I will go on to question, via Rancière's thinking on the relationship between equality and contingency, whether this is necessarily always the case. Could it not be that the multi-protagonist film's structure – which provides *equal* attention to all of its lead characters, despite their social standing, race, sex, or age – actually stands very close to the film form's interest in contingency? Considering that Rancière, as I will show, holds equality to be capable of revealing the contingent nature of all social orders, the multi-protagonist film can be seen to be greatly invested in exploring the relationship between these two notions. Furthermore, could it be that the different conflicts that various authors have identified to be present in the multi-protagonist film, partially arise from the different ways of making and understanding art, which Rancière refers to as the aesthetic regimes of art? Perhaps, as I will go on to explore, the multi-protagonist film, because of the high number of lead characters that allows the form to represent conflicting viewpoints at the same time, is a film form ideally fit to render apparent the impure nature of cinema as such.

Given this general trend to oppose the multi-protagonist film's expansive thematic interests with the limitations arising from its restricted formal features, I find that before a rethinking of the central tension of the multi-protagonist film can be undertaken, it is first necessary to ask: what is contingency in the multi-protagonist film? Via close textual analyses the current and following chapters begin to propose some answers to this question. By highlighting the similarities and differences between the understanding of contingency in these thought-provoking films and in the thinking of Rancière and Žižek, the chosen multi-protagonist films can be argued to offer a significantly more complex understanding of contingency than commonly recognised. This in turn suggests that the multi-protagonist film encompasses a potential avenue for nuanced thinking currently left largely unexplored.

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<sup>193</sup> Silvey 2012: 15.

<sup>194</sup> Simons 2008: 114.

## 2.2 Are films with several lead characters necessarily proposing a single idea?

*Thirteen Conversations* is a multi-protagonist film about several socially alienated New Yorkers and their search for happiness. Walker (John Turturro) is a professor of physics, who organises his life according to the laws that he teaches and who struggles with a midlife crisis after being violently robbed; Troy (Matthew McConaughey) is an overconfident prosecutor from a wealthy background, whose luck is about to change when he accidentally runs over a pedestrian; Gene (Alan Arkin) is a solitary midlevel manager in an insurance company with an estranged son and an ex-wife, who begins to wonder whether his dedication to his career has actually paid off; and finally Beatrice (Clea DuVall), an angelic housemaid and a devoted Christian, whose faith and positive outlook on life is tested when she becomes a victim of a hit and run – caused by Troy, as the viewer later finds out. The little journalistic attention that *Thirteen Conversations* received consistently understood the film as if it was expecting an answer to the “one thing” mentioned in its title, to which the critics then unanimously replied – identifying the one thing as happiness. For example, the first sentence of Roger Ebert’s review on the film is simply: “Happiness is the subject of *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing*”, while Bert Cardullo recognises happiness as the core concern of *Thirteen Conversations* in the article’s second paragraph.<sup>195</sup> The aim here is not to debunk journalistic film criticism from an academic position, but to begin illustrating a dominant trend in the discussion surrounding the multi-protagonist film, which attempts to reduce the film form’s complexity to a central idea and/or a (political)position.

The critics’ common emphasis on happiness can be seen as a rather logical conclusion considering that not only does the film’s first segment end with Walker’s explicit reflexion on happiness, but the subtitle of the second segment is “Show me a happy man!”, after which the film seemingly goes on to do just that. We are presented with Troy, a young man who is glowing with happiness because he has just won a big court trial, and who shortly after also confirms his happiness verbally. In addition, as I will explore in more detail below, the scene also takes place in a bar during happy hour, with Troy buying drinks and dedicating songs from the jukebox to strangers. Already, the film’s investment in the subject of happiness is made rather obvious. However, as I will show, *Thirteen Conversations* is very much aware that happiness means considerably different things for different people. It could be argued that rather than simply suggesting that the pursuit of happiness is a universal that unites us all, the film could

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<sup>195</sup> Ebert 2002: n.p. Cardullo 2003: 148. See also Bradshaw 2005; Kemp 2005: 76; and Okapal 2011: n.p.

be seen as highlighting that not only does the object of our desire differ, but that such a pursuit is in itself time and space specific – in other words, contingent.

Within the field of Film Studies *Thirteen Conversations* has been recognised as a good example of the multi-protagonist film that highlights one of the form's most central traits – the frequent use of accidental encounters as a way through which the multi-protagonist film connects its characters. Some widely known examples of such films are *Do the Right Thing* (Lee, 1989), *Slacker*, *Short Cuts*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Happenstance [Le battement d'ailes du papillon* (Firode, 2000)], *Traffic*, *25 Grams*, *Love Actually*, *Syriana*, *The Edge of Heaven*, and *Crazy, Stupid, Love*. While thematically these films have little in common, all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, depict lead characters who did not previously know each other and who come across one another accidentally. Although the earnest political thriller *Syriana* and the playful holiday rom-com *Love Actually* are clearly two very different films, they both repeatedly connect, albeit for different ends, their characters via accidental encounters. In many cases noting the chance encounters between the different lead characters is as far as the exploration of contingency in the multi-protagonist film related discourse goes. I will now briefly illustrate how the characteristic of accidental connections is so central to the multi-protagonist film that it could be seen as one of the main qualities through which the form differs from the ensemble film. While I do not aim to challenge the importance of accidental connections between the lead characters as a way for the multi-protagonist film to express its interest in contingency, I will later question, via close textual analyses of the complex forms that contingency takes in the multi-protagonist film, the understanding that simply stressing the contingent nature of reality is where the film form's interest stands.

Azcona has rightly argued that separating ensemble films, which is to say films with a pre-formed group of characters – such as a family [*Hannah and Her Sisters* (Allen, 1986), *Parenthood* (Howard, 1989)], a group of friends [*The Big Chill*, *St. Elmo's Fire*], or a band of brothers [*The Great Escape*, *The Wild Bunch*] – from the multi-protagonist films, where the characters meet only accidentally or not at all, is a difficult task as there are examples that seem to move from one category to another.<sup>196</sup> For instance, many of the strangers we meet in *Magnolia* or *11:14* eventually turn out to be family members, suggesting a necessary connection between the characters rather than a contingent one. Azcona uses similar examples of pre-formed groups where the viewer might not initially be aware of the true connections between the characters to challenge Tröhler's understanding of group characters (i.e. ensemble films)

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<sup>196</sup> Azcona 2010: 19–24.

and to propose instead a more inclusive understanding of the multi-protagonist film.<sup>197</sup> I would argue that the only possible conclusion is not necessarily that all films with many characters are multi-protagonist films, as if the ensemble film (i.e. Tröhler's group character) would not exist as a separate category. As I have already suggested, Azcona's emphasis on understanding genre as a discursive label circulating in the related debate appears to confirm that the contemporary multi-protagonist film has since its major surge from the early 1990s been immediately recognised as being different from the more classical ensemble films. Films such as *Magnolia* or *11:14* are not recognised as ensemble films with a pre-formed group precisely because of the way these films hold back information about the characters' relations, which makes these relations appear as contingent [Figure 2–1]. Because these connections are perceived by viewers to be contingent at first, even if the film eventually reveals that the characters have always known each other, such films are generally understood to be multi-protagonist films and not ensemble films (which is not that interested in withholding information from the viewers regarding characters' relations). In addition to the above discussed egalitarian principle of providing roughly the same amount of screen time to all its main characters, it is the contemporary multi-protagonist film's tendency toward playing out contingent encounters between its lead characters that sets it apart from the ensemble film.



Figure 2-1 Related after all – *Magnolia* withholding information about character-relations.

While some authors argue that such contingent connections between the characters mostly serve a kind of a formal play where guessing all the connections is the main allure of these films, others relate it to the multi-protagonist film's interest in representing the increasing interconnectedness of people in a globalised world.<sup>198</sup> Celestino Deleyto perhaps offers a

<sup>197</sup> Azcona 2010: 23, see also Tröhler 2010: 462.

<sup>198</sup> Bordwell 2008: 207. Azcona 2010: 27.

clearest example of the perceived connection between multi-protagonist film and the contemporary *zeitgeist*, when he says that the form has: “become a “royal genre” for the beginning of the twenty-first century, encapsulating in a powerful way the concerns, anxieties, and hopes of a generation shaped by global forces beyond individual control and often beyond understanding”.<sup>199</sup> In addition to the emphases on formal play and *zeitgeist*, other authors have drawn attention to the ethical dimension of these connections. As I have shown, Tröhler advocates this approach, claiming “that the transcultural and transmedia nature of such films and their specific realism attests to an attention of the everyday, challenging vernacular practice to negotiate an encounter with the social and/or cultural Other”.<sup>200</sup> All these strands are clearly presented in *Thirteen Conversations*.

Perhaps most apparent in *Thirteen Conversations* is the impression of the “small world” that Bordwell has discussed. This is something that Bordwell recognises already in one of the early examples of the multi-protagonist film such as *Grand Hotel*, which according to him established the form’s basic qualities: “In one locale, a star-packed cast portrays characters linked by contingency”.<sup>201</sup> Although, as argued, the geographical location can be much larger in contemporary multi-protagonist films – in *Babel*, for instance, it is several continents of the globe, Bordwell is right in arguing that the true complexity of contingency is limited in these films by the constraints of time, space, and action.<sup>202</sup> *Thirteen Conversations* presents a lead character Troy who randomly engages in a debate with a stranger in a bar, and that stranger later turns out to be another lead character Gene. Troy leaves the bar, where he had a few drinks, and accidentally runs over a pedestrian with his car – the victim, as we later learn, is another lead character Beatrice. Devastated by his actions and attempting to rid himself of the evidences of the crime, Troy decides to sell his car to a complete stranger – a lead character – Walker, the one with whom the film began. Because of the seemingly omniscient perspective that we as spectators enjoy, it seems that multi-protagonist films try as they might to do justice to the complexities of contingency and its effects on human lives, inevitably end up fitting contingency into their own stiff moulds. Nonetheless, it is important to note that an assessment, according to which the multi-protagonist film reduces the complexity of contingency via the “small world” impression, is correct only if the connections between the different lead characters are understood to be the sole way in which the multi-protagonist film represents

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<sup>199</sup> Deleyto 2012: 231.

<sup>200</sup> Tröhler 2010: 465–466.

<sup>201</sup> Bordwell 2006: 94.

<sup>202</sup> Bordwell 2008: 203.

contingency. I will go on to illustrate that the multi-protagonist film is capable of exploring a much broader understanding of contingency, where the latter is not merely a synonym for accidentality, but means instead that most things widely taken for granted could very well be different. Furthermore, differentiating between diegetic and extradiegetic elements and the narrative-level and the spectator's viewpoint, as I will argue particularly in the next chapter, has not always received substantial attention in the multi-protagonist film. Just because we as spectators are able to identify both parties of, say, Troy selling his car to Walker, does not mean that the multi-protagonist structure would necessarily rob this contingent connection between the two strangers of its randomness on the narrative-level.

The ethical interest that Tröhler recognises – and which is definitely important in *Thirteen Conversations* as all the characters are significantly impacted by their encounters with the “social other” – might provide some justification of the artifice in the multi-protagonist film. Yet, it seems that the form is bound to be less successful in doing justice to the hopes and worries of the contemporary *zeitgeist*, that Deleyto emphasises, and potentially reduces, as Silvey warns, “the postmodern promise of endless complexity”. Although *Thirteen Conversations* is meticulous about when it reveals information to the spectator and therefore justifies these concerns to an extent, I suggest that there is a way out of the deadlock in which the constant connections end up undermining the contingency that the film is exploring. A good place from which to start thinking this relationship anew is the philosophy of Rancière, as it closely relates an ethical interest in equality with contingency – which could also be recognised as the central concerns of *Thirteen Conversations* – while, importantly, not opposing the two.

### 2.3 In the beginning there was equality

Before discussing the specifics of Rancière’s understanding of cinema, let me first clarify his broader position regarding film and the importance that topics such as equality and contingency have in his thinking.<sup>203</sup> Rancière declares with certain pride that he has “never taught film, film theory or aesthetics” and that his relationship with cinema began as “that of *cinéphilie*, or the love of cinema”, where passion triumphs over theory.<sup>204</sup> It is thus important to understand that Rancière speaks deliberately from a position of an amateur, which for him is:

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<sup>203</sup> Regarding Rancière’s thinking on aesthetics and contingency, see also Oliver Davis 2013: 155–168.

<sup>204</sup> Rancière 2014: 2.

A theoretical and political position, one that sidelines the authority of specialists by re-examining the way the frontiers of their domain are drawn at the points where experience and knowledge intersect. Amateur politics asserts that cinema belongs to all those who travelled, in one way or another, through the system of gaps and distances contained in its name, and that everyone has the right to trace, between any two points in that topography, an individual route that adds to cinema treated as a world, and adds to our understanding of it.<sup>205</sup>

Although defined by Rancière as both a theoretical and a political position, it is important to stress that Rancière’s “method” of equality decidedly moves away from the more conventional theoretical and political approaches to cinema. Particularly the ones that were especially popular in the 1970s and 80s and that either applied theory to prove an argument about film or that judged cinema’s political value in relation to its resemblance to party politics – the latter understood as concerned with governing. This is also the reason why I maintain quotation marks around the word “method” when referring to Rancière’s thinking, because although the tendency to question established dividing lines between disciplines (and more broadly those separating the excluded from the included in various forms) runs throughout Rancière’s *oeuvre*, he would likely argue against having any unified methodology.

Understanding pedagogical methods that are concerned with explaining to be the root of inequality, Rancière’s approach to cinema contrasts especially with the 1970s and 80s Althusserian-Lacanian inspired strand of Film Studies. Although as one of the more dominant trends of approaching cinema back then, the array of methods combined under the title “Althusserian-Lacanian” was certainly manifold and complex, it could be claimed that the central understanding of such approaches was that theory is needed to comprehend the hidden content of a film. An indicative example of such an approach is a classical article from the period by *Cahiers du Cinema*’s critics Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Paul Narboni titled *Cinema/Ideology/Criticism*, in which the authors provide a classification of cinema based on how different films comply or subvert the dominant capitalistic ideology.<sup>206</sup> From these film types a group labelled E offers the clearest example of how theory’s educational and political value was largely perceived by the Althusserian-Lacanian inspired scholarship. Comolli and Narboni argue that the group E consists of films which seemingly comply with the dominant

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<sup>205</sup> Rancière 2014: 7.

<sup>206</sup> Comolli, Narboni 1971: 27–38.

ideology, but that on closer inspection actually turn out to subvert it.<sup>207</sup> *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) could be argued to belong to this group, because on the one hand it is depicting a crime fighting Vietnam War veteran Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) attempting to save an adolescent prostitute Iris (Jodie Foster), but on the other hand, among many other possible concerns, the film could be seen as being highly critical of the effects that the war has had on veterans such as Travis (who is mentally unstable), the prevalence of firearms in American society, and the commonplace of aggressive masculinity in its culture. While a critic has an important function of revealing the workings of ideology in relation to all of these groups, it is the type E that provides to a critic the most significant task of bringing to light a meaning that is quite opposite to a film's explicit content. Although approaches such as Comolli and Narboni's were important for highlighting the political significance of all films and not just the explicitly political ones, such politically oriented methods assigned to film criticism and Film Studies a rather singular purpose – a mission to reveal above all cinema's ideological nature.

Because of such theoretical positions' tendency to highlight primarily the political importance of film, while overlooking cinema's many other interests, there were many who came to question whether exploring film's political dimension should be seen as the sole or even the main focus of Film Studies. One of the most illustrative and more significant criticisms of the Althusserian-Lacanian inspired strand of film theory was put forth in the mid-1990s by Bordwell and Noël Carroll who edited a collection of articles under the title *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*.<sup>208</sup> As already the title makes evident, the authors, although representing different approaches to film, shared a similar belief that not only is it time to move beyond the "Grand Theory" that is in debt to the thinking of Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan, but also that Film Studies is in such a worrying state in which it requires nothing short of a total overhaul. In order to keep the Althusserian-Lacanian politically minded theory's greatest flaw – its allegedly overambitious (political) goals – in focus at all times, such theory is referred to throughout the collection with an uppercase.<sup>209</sup> In contrast to the political focus and universalising intent of the 1970s and 80s Althusserian-Lacanian film scholarship, Bordwell and Carroll call for more piecemeal and non-political approaches to film.<sup>210</sup> Although the authors further suggest that the new approaches in Film Studies could make use of the full plurality of available theories and not just of politically oriented psychoanalysis, several

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<sup>207</sup> Comolli, Narboni 1971: 27–38.

<sup>208</sup> Bordwell, Carroll (eds.) 1996.

<sup>209</sup> Bordwell, Carroll 1996: xiii–xvii.

<sup>210</sup> Bordwell, Carroll 1996: xiii–xvii.

authors' sympathy is for the cognitive and neo-formalistic approaches.<sup>211</sup> While assigning the cause for the eventual demise of the Althusserian-Lacanian inspired film theory to a single collection would be an overstatement, there is little doubt that *Post-Theory*'s explicit call for a reconstruction of Film Studies as a-political and as putting forth smaller scale arguments than previously in fashion had a significant impact for changing an understanding of a need for a unified field of politically informed film theory.<sup>212</sup> Even though there are few who would today think that it is vital to return to a more unified understanding of politics in cinema, the prevalence of a-political piecemeal approaches that could be argued to be the norm today, does raise the question: how should one engage with films that put forth, as I will demonstrate, not only explicitly universalising political messages, but that are moreover still wholly invested in psychoanalysis? While it is clear that Film Studies has mostly moved beyond such "fads of the past" as the Althusserian-Lacanian inspired theory, what do we do with films that appear not to have? By contrasting and comparing the thinking of Rancière and Žižek – the "descendants" of Althusser and Lacan's thinking respectively – with the close textual analyses of films, which, as I will exemplify, can be seen to be putting forth universalising socio-political concerns, I will begin to highlight the importance of these questions. As Žižek – whose approach makes significant use of Lacan's thinking and who has done a lot to associate the latter with cinema – openly engages in a debate with the authors of *Post-Theory*, I will analyse this exchange in more detail in the next chapter where I will discuss Žižek's thinking. Here though, I want to show how Rancière's thinking could be seen as both a continuation and a significant departure from the Althusserian strand of 1970s and 80s Althusserian-Lacanian inspired film theory.

Similarly to the Althusserian-Lacanian inspired film theory of the 1970s and 80s, and unlike Bordwell and Carrolls' call for an a-political film theory, Rancière's amateurism is also a politically concerned theory. Yet, it is important to understand that Rancière uses the word "political" to designate *equality*, or more specifically, as I will show below, it marks the rare occurrence when the most basic premise of any politics – people's inherent equality – is brought to fore.<sup>213</sup> Therefore, as Rancière has also stressed, his approach is commonly misrepresented by slogans about "the return to politics" of the arts.<sup>214</sup> What sets Rancière's thinking clearly apart from the Althusserian-Lacanian strand of political film theory, is the aim of dismantling any hierarchical consequences within (film) theory. Although the unintentional hierarchy

<sup>211</sup> Bordwell, Carroll 1996: xiii–xvii.

<sup>212</sup> For instance, D.N. Rodowick in his *Elegy for Theory* (2014) assigns a similarly important role to Bordwell and Carroll's collection in the rejection of 1970s "Grand Theory", see Rodowick 2014: 91–92.

<sup>213</sup> Rancière 1999: ix–xiii.

<sup>214</sup> Rancière 2015: n.p.

between the educated who could truly grasp the workings of ideology and the ignorant who could not, common to the 1970s and 80s theory, often resulted from the best intentions, it is Rancière's criticism of such assumptions, including his former co-author Althusser as one of the representatives of such a trend in the 2011 *Althusser's Lesson* [*La leçon d'Althusser* 1974], that marks the beginning of Rancière's unique reasoning. In *Althusser's Lesson* Rancière suggests that Althusser's claim for the necessity of scientific Marxism in order to properly understand ideology – a position to which Rancière among others had contributed by co-authoring *Reading Capital* (*Lire le Capital*, 1965) – ends up eventually re-establishing the power-hierarchy it sets out to overcome by presupposing that the subordinated lack a proper understanding of dominance.<sup>215</sup>

Such a circular deadlock is in no way specific to Althusser's thinking, because as Kristin Ross explains in the foreword of Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* [*Le maître ignorant: Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle* 1987 (1991)], Rancière later makes this criticism of many other French intellectuals, including Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>216</sup> Ross neatly sums up such logic where the subordinated are recognised as missing a proper understanding of their situation and the means to change it, as “they [the subordinated] are excluded because they do not know why they are excluded; and they do not know why they are excluded because they are excluded”.<sup>217</sup> Consequently, an educated theorist recognises him-/herself as the only means of escape for the underprivileged. According to Rancière, this is precisely the way in which the teacher always remains one step removed from the pupil, for only he/she knows what is needed to know, and the teacher's main justification for being arises from setting up this divide.<sup>218</sup> In contrast to Althusser's understanding of the important role of science in overthrowing inequality, Rancière considers it first necessary to rethink pedagogy. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Rancière sets out to do just that and suggests – by tracing the teachings of Joseph Jacotot, a 19th century French teacher and a pedagogical philosopher – that a way to undo the hierarchical relationship between a knowledgeable teacher and an ignorant pupil is to recognise the equal intelligence of all people.<sup>219</sup> In other words, people differ in their desire to learn, not in their ability to do so. It is important to stress that this position of equating intelligences is not downplaying knowledge – something that is becoming a popular practice in a contemporary political arena where politicians' reliance on “alternative

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<sup>215</sup> Althusser et. al. 2015. Rancière 2011.

<sup>216</sup> Ross 1991: xi.

<sup>217</sup> Ross 1991: xi.

<sup>218</sup> Rancière 1991.

<sup>219</sup> Rancière 1991.

facts” has sparked widespread discussion over the role of scientific facts in the supposedly post-truth era – rather Rancière emphasises people’s equal ability to learn and questions the need for others to interfere in order for one to do so.<sup>220</sup>

Rancière’s emphasis on equality is useful for understanding the multi-protagonist film because the form also treats all of its lead characters equally, despite their social position, race, sex, or age, by providing them with roughly the same amount of film time and attention. Like Rancière’s understanding of politics proper, this equality in the multi-protagonist film is not a matter of preference, but structural, because if the equality between the lead characters were to be removed, we would no longer be dealing with the multi-protagonist film. Rancière claims similarly that equality should not be considered as an end goal of politics, but seen instead as a point of departure of any politics worthy of the title.<sup>221</sup> For Rancière politics in the traditional sense of the word (concerned with assigning people to their proper places in a society and which Rancière therefore calls “the police”) is always hiding its basic premise – that people are equal to begin with.<sup>222</sup> The truly *political* stands in bringing this fact to the fore.<sup>223</sup> As Ian James summarises it, equality is not a more preferable political ideal, but instead it is “structural insofar as it is seen to be the necessary precondition of any contingent unequal order or hierarchy”.<sup>224</sup> Highlighting contingency therefore has a crucial role in Rancière’s understanding of politics, as equality is recognised as a logical precondition of all *contingent* social structures.

For Rancière there appears to be a fundamental impossibility at play in the 1970s and 80s theoretical claims that aimed to fix a specific political meaning to a given cinematic image. An inevitable gap seems to always remain between theory and image. This is clear when Rancière recalls his puzzlement between his experience and knowledge as a spectator regarding Irene’s (Ingrid Bergman) transition from one social position to another in *Europe 51*’ [Europa 51’ (Rossellini, 1952)], expressed by her ascending stairs. As Rancière states: “No combination of classical Marxist theory and classical thought on cinema enabled me to decide whether the

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<sup>220</sup> That being said, in my view there is a potential problem here in Rancière’s reasoning, especially when such understanding of egalitarianism is carried over to political cinema and media. I recognise the validity of Rancière’s concerns that the more traditional political cinema, and we could add here alternative news sites, such as *Democracy Now!*, are political for revealing the horrors of the world, but in doing so they re-establish a power hierarchy between an active artist and a passive spectator, while also eventually robbing from these horrors their ability to affect us, see Rancière 2009: 45. Yet, it could be argued, that an unbiased and pluralistic media coverage is particularly problematic issue in our information age, and, as such, disclosing information that the more mainstream media fails to cover is vital, as one cannot resist what one does not know.

<sup>221</sup> Rancière 1999: 35.

<sup>222</sup> Rancière 1999: 29.

<sup>223</sup> Rancière 1999: 35.

<sup>224</sup> James 2012: 112 (emphasis removed).

ascent or descent of a staircase was idealist or materialist, progressive or reactionary".<sup>225</sup> In other words, while it might be intellectually clear what the film is suggesting and how it guides one's attention, Rancière finds that this aim clashes with "the intelligence of the machine that wants nothing, [and] that does not construct any stories".<sup>226</sup> As Rancière states: "At the origin of the cinema, there is a "scrupulously honest" artist that does not cheat, that cannot cheat, because all it does is record".<sup>227</sup> Sudeep Dasgupta rightly warns that "the fields of intervention and the details of the arguments Rancière develops within philosophy and art criticism are distinct, and cannot be collapsed on to each other", but he does add that the fields are still "integrally linked".<sup>228</sup> The same integral linkage also unites Rancière's thinking on pedagogy, politics, and film, allowing a parallel to be drawn between the necessary equality on which all contingent social hierarchies are established, and the "scrupulously honest" filmic image that all narratives to an extent attempt to bend to their will. This is not a simple binary between image and narrative, but, as I will illustrate, a whole "system of gaps and distances" that, according to Rancière, can only be captured in the name of cinema.

## 2.4 Personal happiness and the equality of all

It is necessary to return to the notion of happiness that most film critics recognised as the dominant idea of *Thirteen Conversations*. This exploration is important not only because the film highlights the fact that happiness means different things to different people, but also because it shows the complicated relationship that one has with universal values such as the freedom to pursue happiness. This, as I will illustrate, becomes very apparent when compared to Rancière's thinking on the matter. Moreover, *Thirteen Conversations'* exploration of how individual goals relate with the social – such as the question how does one's pursuit for happiness affects others – is important in understanding the multi-protagonist film more generally. Although *Thirteen Conversations'* interest in happiness is clear already from the first couple of scenes, concentrating solely on the "one thing" mentioned in the title gives a rather one-sided account of the film even as far as the title goes – overlooking its other components, "thirteen" and "conversations". The title is a reference to Wallace Stevens' 1917 poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, which through its thirteen verses collapses various dividing

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<sup>225</sup> Rancière 2014: 5.

<sup>226</sup> Rancière 2001: 2.

<sup>227</sup> Rancière 2001: 2.

<sup>228</sup> Dasgupta 2009: 347 (emphasis in original).

lines between the observer and the observed.<sup>229</sup> That these elements are also essential to the film is evident from the fact that *Thirteen Conversations* is divided into thirteen segments and the numerous conversations between the characters play a significant role in the way the film represents its interests – often to do with how the different characters perceive the same situation differently. Perhaps the true complexity of the film emerges from the fact that these conversations are not meant to be taken at face value and what is shown can often challenge what is being told.

Already the very first segment highlights a significant mismatch between what is said and done, and how people can understand the same situation very differently. Although happiness is something that Walker claims to want above all else by the end of the first conversation with his wife Patricia (Amy Irving), happiness is nowhere to be found in their household. The cold pastel tonality of their home and the fact that the couple is almost always depicted in different shots suggest a lack of happiness in Walker's and Patricia's relationship. The first scene, in which these characters are introduced, begins with an ominous sound of thunder and as soon as Walker arrives home from work, we realise that he has nothing but emotional coldness and complaints to offer to his wife. Without even saying a word of welcome first, Walker, like a grown-up child, starts blaming Patricia for the fact that his umbrella was not in his briefcase. To this Patricia apathetically replies that the umbrella is by the front door. While the full significance of this exchange becomes apparent only retrospectively – when the viewer finds out that Patricia has been aware of Walker's infidelity for some time and thus we can assume that Patricia has likely recently reduced her care for Walker such as always packing the umbrella for him – there is plenty to take away from the scene even upon first viewing.

It could be argued that via the umbrella *Thirteen Conversations* suggests not only Walker's ignorance, but also the spectator's – taking a first step of many to bring the characters and viewers on a more equal level. The umbrella is shown at first to be hanging right next to Walker as he enters his home. Then when Walker walks away from it to the left side of the screen, the door closing behind him again accentuates the umbrella. After Walker has moved away from the door and the umbrella, we are left with a perfectly balanced composition where Walker is standing on the left-hand side and the umbrella is on the right. Because the umbrella is black it creates a sharp contrast with the light pastel background. Through the contrast the umbrella becomes much more pronounced than Walker who merges with the dark pieces of furniture behind him. It is only once Patricia starts to set the table that she blocks our view at

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<sup>229</sup> See, Stevens 1954: n.p.

the umbrella and the film cuts to a medium shot of Walker. With the cut to the medium shot the umbrella becomes no longer visible. The entire introduction of the umbrella is shot in one continuous take. Despite all this special attention paid to the umbrella, we are likely to notice it only after Patricia points it out in dialogue and the film cuts back to a long shot allowing us to once more see the umbrella. But now we only get a brief look at the umbrella as Patricia soon rises to an upright position once more blocking our view at it. The attention paid to the umbrella seems to be pointing to the fact that while the umbrella was constantly in our line of sight it likely remained “invisible” to us. Walker is also giving the umbrella only a quick peek as if it would not be worthy of his full attention, turning towards the camera instead and allowing us to see the surprised look on his face [Figure 2–2].



*Figure 2-2 Looking, but not seeing.*

The limitations of Walker's comprehension are also suggested by the fact that when he arrives home, he immediately takes off his glasses and starts cleaning them as the change in temperature has made them foggy. On the one hand, the significance of this gesture is to reveal his black eye. As we soon find out, when Patricia is suggesting at the dinner table that Walker should undergo counselling, he has recently been violently mugged. On the other hand, this gesture could be read both as disrespectful, as if Walker does not need to see Patricia, and as pointing towards his utter ignorance regarding Patricia's role in his life – the scene showing that Walker is literally blind about Patricia's care. From their exchange concerning the umbrella we can assume that Patricia has been recently scaling back on some of the things she does for Walker and which he takes for granted. In addition to the dialogue, this could be seen as being accentuated by Walker's astonishment. Firstly, to the fact that Patricia is talking back at him,

and, secondly, because the umbrella is indeed by the front door, making it impossible to miss for anyone leaving the apartment. Although there is a special knob there for the umbrella, indicating that this is where the umbrella has always been when Patricia has not packed it into Walker's briefcase, this comes as a total surprise to him. This is accentuated by Walker's stunned facial expression, emphasised by the length of the shot, which is not accompanied by any musical score or dialogue. Walker's ignorance regarding the umbrella, as long as it was always there when he needed it, can be seen as suggesting that he shares a similar attitude towards Patricia. Rather than realising the extent to which he relies on Patricia, Walker goes on to treat Patricia as one of his students, querying whether she has been secretly smoking again. That this is clearly a rhetorical question is highlighted by the moment of silence preceding it and Walker performatively sniffing the air in the room before staging his question.

Although Walker's egoism and lack of compassion become increasingly apparent as the film progresses, it is important to recognise how the film sets up the question about personal happiness and its effect on others. After the debate about the umbrella, we see Walker and Patricia having dinner. When Patricia suggests that Walker considers psychiatric help for his odd behaviour after the mugging, Walker replies that he is fine and has "decided to look at the positive side of the whole episode". Walker reasons, to his wife's great surprise, that as the robbery shook him out of his usual routine, the incident could be viewed as a positive change. Walker's realisation is followed by seemingly the most Rancièrean aspect of the film, as Walker starts justifying the robber by comparing himself to the criminal. Walker explains that they were almost the same age and that the mugger likely also has a wife and bills to pay, which means that if their lives would have been different the robber could have very well been Walker. Walker's monologue shares a striking similarity with Rancière's understanding of absolute equality, which "is simply the equality of anyone at all with anyone else: in other words, in the final analysis, the absence of *archê*, the sheer contingency of any social order".<sup>230</sup> The Ancient Greek word *archê* (*ἀρχή*) literally means „beginning“ or „origin“, highlighting that for Rancière all contingent social formations that create hierarchical relations and legitimise themselves via an origin story, hide the only true necessity for their being – the equality of all.<sup>231</sup> According to Samuel Chambers, this is not a call for anarchy as some have taken it, but rather points towards the impossibility of entirely separating the police, by which Rancière designates all hierarchical

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<sup>230</sup> Rancière 1999: 15.

<sup>231</sup> It could be asked whether Rancière's insistence on the equality of all does not serve in itself as an *archê*, to this it could be replied that for Rancière equality is a structural necessity or a logical precondition to all contingent social formations, meaning that it belongs to a different register than an origin story.

social arrangements, from equality.<sup>232</sup> Davide Panagia claims that Rancière's politics "is the practice of asserting one's position that ruptures the logic of *archê*; that is, politics is an event initiated by individuals or groups who insist that the ordered configuration of a political arrangement [what he (Rancière) calls "the police"] is *wrong*".<sup>233</sup> Absolute equality, as *Thirteen Conversations* exemplifies via Walker's revelation, is a maddening precondition of the social, because while we might understand it to be true, as Walker does, any thought of a permanent state of equality seems impossible even as a thought. This reveals the ordering of the police, because, as Rancière says: "Politics is the art of suppressing the political".<sup>234</sup> Politics in the traditional sense, the police, concerned not only with governing, as May clarifies, but with "the idea of a proper social order", is constantly applying ways, both physical and mental, that hide and restrain the truly political – the equality of all.<sup>235</sup> *Thirteen Conversations* develops a similar understanding of the impasse between the political and the police, by showing Walker finding no principal difference between himself and a complete stranger, while, at the same time, having no trouble being completely inconsiderate towards his own wife.<sup>236</sup> Walker's status as a man and a college professor appears to render this inequality completely invisible for him. *Thirteen Conversations*, thus, visualises with ease something that is almost impossible to express in written philosophy – providing a thesis and an antithesis in one, as Walker is simultaneously both aware and ignorant of equality. Thomas E. Wartenberg has argued thought experiments to be one of the ways in which philosophy through film is imaginable.<sup>237</sup> Thought experiments, widespread in philosophy, are clearly much more than specific stories decorating an argument, rather they are a form of argumentation that uses a narration of a specific (fictional) situation, in order to propose an argument of universal nature. Not only do I take the above described scene to be such a thought experiment, but, moreover, I am drawing attention to the way in which film can present an argument, in the form of thought experiment, that is simply not imaginable in written philosophy.

Walker's desire to change his habitual way of life – as we soon learn, via an affair and by moving out from home – is not only different from Patricia's wish for stability and a happy

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<sup>232</sup> May 2008. Chambers 2011: 19.

<sup>233</sup> Panagia 2001: n.p., (emphasis in original).

<sup>234</sup> Rancière 1995: 11.

<sup>235</sup> May 2008: 42.

<sup>236</sup> Although I am not arguing that Patricia, a middle class New Yorker, is what Rancière designates as the *sans-part* – the part of no-part in a society, such as irregular migrants – I do consider, following Rancière, similar mechanisms of exclusion to work within an entire social sphere. As Rancière says: "There is a worse and a better police", while adding a little later: "This does not change the nature of police [...] Whether the police is sweet and kind does not make it any less the opposite of politics", Rancière 1999: 30–31.

<sup>237</sup> Wartenberg 2007, 24, 56–65.

marriage, but entirely incompatible with it. Patricia's sense of grief over the situation is exemplified by her walking away from the dinner table without finishing her meal and getting ready to light a cigarette in front of Walker, challenging his conception of her as an obedient housewife. When Patricia, as a last attempt to understand the state of their relationship, asks, what does Walker want, Walker answers by equating himself to everybody else, claiming that like all people, he wants "to wake up enthused, [and] to be happy". Despite this grand universalisation, Walker, with a smirk on his face, overlooks the lack of enthusiasm that Patricia's demeanour indicates. While it might seem that *Thirteen Conversations* is proposing a Levinasian ethical claim *par excellence*, where the role of the Other is so significant that one should almost sacrifice his/her happiness for the sake of others, I would argue, that *Thirteen Conversations'* questioning of the pursuit of happiness, while most certainly ethical in nature, is much more in line with Rancière's epistemological emphases, than the Levinasian ontological imperative. Even in this early stage the film's philosophical interest in exploring the extent to which our comprehension affects our ability to act ethically is hinted by the suggestion that Walker had consistently walked by an umbrella that he had never noticed and by foregrounding his inability to notice Patricia's unhappiness. Via such attention to detail *Thirteen Conversations* goes on to stress the difficulty of accepting values we share – such as the pursuit of happiness – as self-evident virtues that are beyond the need for a proper investigation.

## 2.5 Happiness will tear us apart

With the second segment *Thirteen Conversations* further questions the notion of happiness. The film shows that not only is an egoistic pursuit for happiness problematic as different people desire different things and thus such pursuits can easily clash, but that happiness can also be the source of hubris and generate inequality even once attained. While Walker is clearly unhappy and as such claims to want happiness above all else, the central focus of the second segment, Troy, appears to have it all. He is an intelligent and handsome young man from a wealthy background, who loves his job as a public prosecutor. With a constant smile on his face, Troy swirls around the bar as if he was walking on air, selecting songs from the jukebox and buying drinks not only to all his friends, but also for complete strangers such as Gene. Without a doubt, Troy appears to be the happy man that the subtitle, which opens this segment – "Show me a happy man" – promised. Yet, once again *Thirteen Conversations* can

be seen as reminding to the viewer not to be satisfied with the easy answers that it seems to be offering, calling instead to actively interrogate the many contrasts the film stages.

When Troy approaches the counter to order another round of drinks for himself and his friends, his active and upright posture creates a sharp contrast with the motionless Gene on the foreground, slouching on the bar as if sleeping. Troy, wearing a fancy suit that is unbuttoned and casually leaning on the corner of the counter, occupying the area entirely, appears to feel as comfortable as if he was in his own home. The confidence with which he adapts to new settings is expressed by him calling the bartender by his first name and speaking loudly about his thoughts and emotions. Gene, on the other hand, is a silent balding old man, wearing a well-worn jacket and drinking in solitude on a weeknight. With his closed bearing, hands wrapped around one another in front of him, Gene blends right in with the rest of the middle-aged men hunched over the counter. Troy, in comparison, immediately recognises his being different from the rest, as he briefly looks around the bar and states that one can hardly tell it is happy hour considering all the sad people. As a reply the bartender tellingly looks at Gene, suggesting that he is the worst of them all. Troy is not bothered by the misfortune of others, as he cheerfully contrasts his mood with the rest of the bar. Troy is overjoyed for he has just won a big court case, which he understands to be directly benefitting society by ridding it of criminals. Troy's contentment and his firm belief in his own words is expressed by him tapping his fist on the counter as he speaks and by ending his sentence with a little nod to himself. Not only does the tapping on the counter leave an impression as if Troy was imaging himself a judge of his own words, using his hand as a judge's hammer to bring an end to the topic, but the nod illustrates that Troy lacks any doubt regarding the validity of his position. His joy, however, is short-lived, because as suggested by Gene and Troy's contrasting appearances, the two have very different worldviews and Gene immediately begins to challenge Troy's understanding of happiness.

Right after Troy states his happiness, Gene, without even looking at Troy, bitterly replies: "Show me a happy man, [and] I will show you a disaster waiting to happen". As Gene's words partially repeat the segment's subtitle, they highlight that the title was not meant to be taken as a simple declaration about Troy's happiness. Instead, in its entirety the sentence sounds more like a warning. The same method is used with all of the other subtitles, preceding each segment, as the subtitles, by repeating a line of dialogue, show how words can change their meaning based on the specific context in which they are said. For instance, the next subtitle is "You look so serious" – words to which the film cuts from a close-up showing Troy with a devastated impression as he revisits the site where he accidentally ran over a pedestrian; however, the words are actually said to Walker in the following segment. Similarly, the subtitle

after this one is “Ignorance is bliss”, which seems to apply to Beatrice, who is first introduced in this segment and who is happy even when doing the most menial of tasks. But the film tellingly cuts to the subtitle form Walker, who despite having moved out from his apartment in order to break his daily routine, is oblivious to the fact that he has not really changed his habitual behaviour. To further highlight that the subtitle concerns not only Beatrice, but also Walker, the film shows both characters to be similarly making up a bed in consecutive shots, despite being separated by time and space. Such comparisons and contrasts between the lead characters, as suggested before, is one of the main ways in which the multi-protagonist film offers possibilities for the viewers to be engaged in nuanced thinking.

The confident Troy, who as a prosecutor is used to being challenged, takes his time to lean down to the same level as Gene in order to see him eye-to-eye and to offer his counterargument. Although Troy begins the discussion by asking what makes Gene “an authority on the subject” and as such appears to be genuinely interested in what Gene has to say, it soon becomes clear that Troy’s style of questioning is rhetorical. He is after all a professional debater whose job is to slide over the arguments of others. When Gene replies that he knew a happy man, whose happiness turned into a curse, Troy rhetorically suggests, by referring to Gene in third person, that Gene is talking about himself. Even though Gene immediately shakes his head and goes on to tell a lengthy tale about his colleague who ended up bankrupt after winning on a lottery, Troy soon reveals, when returning to his friends, that he still believes Gene was talking about himself. The lack of impact that Gene’s words have on Troy – although Gene’s uninterrupted monologue lasts over a minute and a half, making it by far the longest in the film – cannot be ignored in a film that openly claims to be about conversations. Like the disharmony between Walker and Patricia, *Thirteen Conversations* stages another situation of inequality supported by the police order, where seemingly one look at the scruffy Gene gives Troy enough reason to dismiss anything that Gene says as the ramblings of a “barstool preacher”, as he later describes Gene to his friends. Given Troy’s profession as an attorney who has to treat everybody equally before the law, it could be argued that *Thirteen Conversations* proposes a complex exploration of social class via Troy and Gene’s exchange. Troy is very self-assured and reluctant to see things otherwise because as he will soon explicitly state he sees himself as having made the right choices in life, and as such it could be understood that he recognises Gene as having made the wrong choices and thus ending up as a failure. Troy is not interested in what Gene has to say not because it is obvious from the way Gene looks that he represents a lower class compared to Troy, but rather Troy recognises

Gene's belonging to a lower class because of the wrong choices he has made and thus suggesting that he has little interesting to say.

The antipathy is mutual – Gene soon lets Troy know that he considers Troy to be spoiled by the privileges of his apparent wealth. The exchange between Gene and Troy closely resembles a deadlock that Rancière calls *dis-agreement*. Rancière describes disagreement as follows: “We should take disagreement to mean a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying”.<sup>238</sup> While Gene and Troy obviously understand one another as they share the same first language and have a good sense of what happiness means, they, under the guise of understanding, are almost incapable of actually communicating. Their resistance towards the other’s position is so dominant that they appear to be hardly exchanging any information. Their argument has less to do with its explicit content, their different understanding of happiness, and more to do with the disagreement proper, that is, the question of “what it means to be a being that uses words to argue”.<sup>239</sup> It is therefore not a miscommunication on the level of language, but concerns recognising the other as an equal speaking being.<sup>240</sup> Neither Troy nor Gene find that the other has the right to talk on the issue of happiness – as one perceives the other as a useless slob, while the other can only see a spoiled brat in front of him.

Accordingly, Troy does not agree with Gene’s story, claiming that while Gene’s “friend” attempted to take a shortcut in life by seeing the lottery as an easy means for upward social mobility, he has earned his position due to his dedication to his career. Happiness for Troy is a logical outcome of hard work. Gene, in contrast, associates happiness with good fortune, by saying: “Maybe you just got lucky, this once”. Troy connects luck with laziness, seeing it as something that people use to explain their impoverishment – when saying this, Troy points his finger at the elderly Gene, suggesting that Gene could see himself as an example of such a lazy excuse. Gene opposes Troy’s logic, by mentioning preparatory schools, yacht clubs, and trips to Europe – privileges that Troy has likely considered natural since childhood. Gene attempts to bring Troy’s attention to his inability to recognise luck because of the fortunate social circumstances that have always surrounded him. Troy, on the other hand, decides to cut the conversation short because of this, for he has surely heard accusations about his privileges before, as he jokingly replies: “Lots of silver spoons”. Even though by this Troy attempts to ridicule Gene’s reasoning that it is his wealthy upbringing that has provided him with a good

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<sup>238</sup> Rancière, 1999: x.

<sup>239</sup> Rancière, 1999: xii.

<sup>240</sup> See also Rancière, 1999: x–xii.

position in life, and likely sees Gene's words as another excuse that lazy people use to scorn others' success, the film cuts back to Troy when he is holding his large wallet, implying that Gene is not so far from truth. To emphasise his superiority Troy calls Gene his "friend" and orders him a drink, while letting Gene know that he will now return to his actual friends to continue celebrating [Figure 2–3]. Troy's gestures clearly have little to do with true friendship as he turns his back towards Gene to terminate the conversation, and are much more an indicator of Troy's dominance and of him winning the argument in his own eyes. With Gene waving his hands to signal his rejection of the free drink and a big smile returning on Troy's face and him casually calling the bartender, recalling the situation from the beginning of the sequence before Gene had told his story, *Thirteen Conversations* stresses that neither of them has learned anything from this conversation. Via the smiling arrogance of Troy, who soon again draws Gene's attention by ironically dedicating a Charles Strouse's and Lee Adams' song *Put on a Happy Face* to him from a jukebox, *Thirteen Conversations* shows that happiness can be a source of inequality not only when one blindly pursues it as Walker does, but also when happiness does not consider, or even permit, the misery of others. Given this emphasis on the difference between Troy and Gene, it is all the more surprising that *Thirteen Conversations* later suggests that the two are actually alike in more ways than they realise.



Figure 2-3 Agreeing to disagree.

## 2.6 I knew a happy man once

Considering the differences between Troy and Gene that *Thirteen Conversations* highlights, their incompatible views on happiness should not come as too much of a surprise. Nevertheless, *Thirteen Conversations* goes on to make a much more profound claim about the role that happiness plays in the American Imaginary. By contrasting Gene's emphasis on the importance of fortuitous social factors and chance in determining the quality of one's life, with Troy's unshakeable belief in one's own ability to establish happiness by improving one's social position, *Thirteen Conversations* continues to show that the question of personal happiness is never just personal. Even though Walker sets up the question of happiness as a universal, the self-evident manner in which he talks about everybody's desire to "experience life" and pursue happiness creates a strong parallel with Thomas Jefferson's famous words in the United States Declaration of Independence. According to the Declaration's preamble, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are fundamental rights that all governments should protect.<sup>241</sup>

That *Thirteen Conversations* is concerned with a specifically American understanding of happiness becomes even more apparent considering Troy's insistence that happiness is something that can be earned through hard work. According to Timothy J. Shannon, happiness in Jefferson's time had exactly such a materialistic meaning and could in today's terms be compared to a belief in "a stable, middle-class society, where people who work hard can reasonably expect freedom and prosperity for themselves and their children".<sup>242</sup> This materialistic aspect of the American happiness is exemplified also by James Truslow Adams' interpretation of the idea, known as the American Dream, and which he defines as "a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognised by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position".<sup>243</sup> It is important to note that the materialistic emphasis of these claims is concerned with structural expectations that cherish, as Alexis de Tocqueville famously puts it, "the charm of anticipated success" and motivate people to move "onwards in the active professions they have embraced".<sup>244</sup> These ideas are therefore not materialistic in the narrow consumeristic sense of the word, because, as Adams stresses, the

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<sup>241</sup> Preamble to the Declaration of Independence reads: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness", see Jefferson et. al. 1776: n.p.

<sup>242</sup> Shannon 2016: n.p.

<sup>243</sup> Adams 1932: 404.

<sup>244</sup> Tocqueville n.d (1835/1840): n.p.

American Dream “is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely”.<sup>245</sup> These understandings of happiness also appear to have little to do with a personal emotional state with which happiness is widely associated today, and are much more concerned with concrete material expectations, according to which a government should provide equal opportunities for economic prosperity to all. While such structural-materialistic basis for happiness is generally regarded as leading to personal-emotional happiness, it is important to recognise how the latter can also be used to excuse shortcomings in the former. *Thirteen Conversations* goes on to exemplify that Gene is not a pessimistic person purely because of his nature, but also because, among other things, the excessive financial risk taking of his young superiors has recently cost him his lifelong career. With other similar examples, as I will show in more detail below, *Thirteen Conversations* could be seen as exploring the extent to which happiness relies on a social imaginary, for it was Gene’s belief in the American Dream, a dream that he would become a vice-president of the insurance company because of his loyalty and hard work for the firm, as he proudly claims to his ex-wife in a later scene, that made him choose a career over family life.

I would like to emphasise how *Thirteen Conversations*, similarly to the authors discussed above, implies that the American Dream was founded on the belief in everybody’s equal right to pursue happiness and was designed to be a radical socio-political measure, aimed at countering and minimising the negative effects that contingency – such as the conditions to which one is born into – can have on life. The idea that a governing body must establish and maintain freedom for everybody to pursue happiness is radical in its historical context and as far as understandings of social contracts are concerned, it is not radical when compared to Rancière’s understanding of politics, which does not rely on a future goal, but insists on an egalitarian present, and which May therefore calls “active equality” because it does not consider it necessary for people to delegate their ability to act politically, that is to stand up for equality, in the first place.<sup>246</sup> As this brief overview of the American Imaginary highlights and *Thirteen Conversations* suggests by having its lead characters explicitly explore a noticeably American understanding of happiness already at the beginning of the film – our understanding of happiness is contingent in both spatial and temporal terms. Given the contingent nature of notions such as the right to pursue happiness, *Thirteen Conversations* suggest, by coming to question all of its lead characters’ firmly held beliefs, that there is no reason why these values could not be rethought if they are beginning to fail people in their current form. *Thirteen*

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<sup>245</sup> Adams 1932: 404.

<sup>246</sup> May 2008: 38.

*Conversations* could be seen as hinting that the American Dream that once acted as a radical measure designed to lead to a better future for all, has become the main cause of inequality; as both Walker and Troy exemplify by belittling people around them. The film also comes to show via the abovementioned misfortune of Gene, that the American Dream has begun hindering the success of some and thwarting their ability to pursue happiness.

That Troy expresses the essence of the above described understanding of the American Dream, downplaying the importance of birth and favouring everybody's equal right to climb the social ladder through hard work, becomes even more apparent in the latter half of the second segment. In this part, we see Troy driving home from the bar and explaining to his junior colleague the benefits of their occupation. As soon as Troy leaves the bar we get a sense of how little his active engagement in pursuing happiness has in common with Walker's sterile theorising on the matter. While most of his colleagues are heading to another bar to continue celebrating, Troy decides to go home because he has an "early day tomorrow". Considering that all the men work for the same institution, it is suggested that Troy is demanding much more from himself than his peers. This is an especially important emphasis given the nature of their occupation, as one can show up in court being more or less prepared for the case. Because the question of commitment in this situation leads to a better or a worse defence or prosecution, it ultimately concerns the quality of justice and thus has a significant effect on the lives of others. It is therefore clear that Troy's dedication of pursuing happiness through hard work is, although individualistic, far removed from Walker's egoistic search for excitement. Although at this point in the film there appears to be a great difference between Troy and Walker's work ethics, professionalism, and a sense of responsibility to society, it soon becomes apparent that all the male lead characters have a certain emotional distance towards their work. Even though *Thirteen Conversations* shows Gene, Walker, and Troy spending a lot of time at work and to be fully dedicated to their occupation, they all also use their employment as a means to establish superiority over others, missing a fundamental aspect about their job – its aim to benefit others as well. Walker is shown to have no time for a student who is repeatedly concerned about his grades, Gene is depicted as an unfair superior towards his employees and understands his occupation primarily as means for personal success, and Troy, while strong in theory about how his occupation benefits a society, is actually unable to see the case-by-case human level of his job and appears to consider people guilty before their sentence. Similarly to Gene and Tory's explicit exchange, *Thirteen Conversations* stages the initial contrast between Walker and Troy's attitude towards happiness, only to bring these differences into question a little later.

Troy offers a detailed understanding of how he sees their occupation benefitting the society, when driving home and dropping off his co-worker Owen (David Connolly). It is important to note that Troy's thorough explanation is sparked by another disagreement, in the Rancièreian sense of the word. Inside the car, the film makes constant use of medium close-up shot-reverse-shots to allow the viewer to study the men's facial expression and to propose that Owen has a very different understanding of the trial than Troy has. The scene begins with a shot of Troy listening to Owen who recalls the cries of the defendant upon his arrest. To emphasise that the pleas of the defendant, repeatedly screaming "I cannot go back [to prison]!", had a profound effect on Owen, the film concentrates on the engaged manner in which Owen offers his explanation. Owen's emotional involvement in the recollection becomes apparent from the serious and animated tenor, with which he says that he "keeps thinking about what he [the defendant] said". During the explanation, Owen is also gesturing lively with his hands and repeatedly gazes in front of himself to recall the situation in detail. The reason why the case has had such an impact on Owen is likely because he has much less experience at the job than Troy. This is suggested by showing Owen, who is played by a young and baby-faced actor, just prior to getting into Troy's car, carry his legal documents around in an open dossier, while all the other attorneys have expensive briefcases. Owen is also holding his documents awkwardly, as if losing control over them at any minute, while the other attorneys express confidence with their assured postures.

Perhaps most importantly Owen's junior status is highlighted by him immediately giving up his original idea once Troy starts to talk. *Thirteen Conversations* shows in detail that for Owen the case was moving because he emphatically understood the horror that the defendant felt when being arrested, but that this emphasis is entirely missed by Troy. Whereas Owen constantly studies Troy's facial expressions as he explains his thoughts concerning the case, Troy, on the other hand, never looks directly at Owen. This has little to do with the fact that Troy is driving and must pay attention to the road. Rather the lack of openness towards the ideas of others and limited attention that Troy has for Owen emerges from his self-righteousness – something that became apparent already from his dialogue with Gene. This is stressed by showing Troy's gaze wander around freely and him beginning to talk even before Owen gets a chance to properly finish his sentence. Troy starts by repeating Owen's last words – "I cannot go back" – while Owen is still saying them, as if he had heard it all before over the course of his career. Troy's following monologue illustrates that not only did he understand the words differently than Owen did, but that he also acted upon this different premise. Instead of recognising the words as an emotional plea, potentially softening one's sentence as a sign of

sincere regret, Troy had identified the sentence as an apt opportunity to remind the jury that the defendant had “been in prison before” and thus use the plea as evidence against the defendant. That this is not what Owen had in mind is accentuated by the film cutting back to him and Owen having his mouth partially open as if he would like to add something to clarify his position. Owen however closes his mouth eventually as Troy forcefully explains his reasoning of bringing out the “priors” of the defendant and demonstrating that the defendant is a regular offender who “belongs in jail”. Much like the scene where Walker cannot recognise Patricia’s unhappiness, *Thirteen Conversations* once more exemplifies a film specific way of raising philosophical concerns by presenting several contrasting arguments simultaneously – a feat that, as stated, is much harder, if not impossible for written philosophy to accomplish. Because Troy, in accordance with the American Dream, understands his personal dedication to be directly benefitting the society, his partial ignorance regarding his job, stemming from his self-righteous attitude that literally limits his comprehension, could be seen as foreshadowing *Thirteen Conversations’* philosophical inquiry of the American Imaginary.

Troy continues his hard-line monologue by explaining the significance of their job, but as he is still not looking at Owen it seems that he is talking above all to himself. This impression is shortly after reiterated by having Troy’s speech carry over to the latter part of the scene where Owen has already left the car. Troy considers their job to be “damn beautiful”, because they prosecute the guilty and hold them responsible for their actions. Troy’s firm position makes clear that he does not hold the presumption of innocence in high regard and considers the defendants guilty even before their sentence. It could be argued that there is a specifically American element to Troy’s tough reasoning, given, for example, that handcuffing defendants during trial is a much more common practice in the U.S. when compared to Europe, where defendants can be physically detained only when there is a justified danger of violence or escape.<sup>247</sup> Troy appears to take his job to be a simple connection between crime and punishment, as if he is bringing to light for the judge and jury what is already necessarily there. Troy also believes that this is exactly what people want, because in his eyes strict law provides “concrete proof that there is some order in this world”. Troy’s universalisation that ignores the possibility of exceptions echoes not only Walker’s thoughts about happiness, but also the American Dream that is meant to benefit everybody and should ideally be applied internationally, because, as Martha Bayles puts it, the idea “has always been global”.<sup>248</sup> Although American Dream is concerned with social equality and not legal egalitarianism,

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<sup>247</sup> For comparison, see Anonymous B, n.d.: n.p.

<sup>248</sup> Bayles 2015: n.p.

*Thirteen Conversations* goes on to exemplify that it is the inequality in the former that often ends up thwarting equality in the latter. The difficulty of keeping legal rights apart from social rights and avoiding one's social standing affecting administration of justice is exemplified already by the classical words of Anatole France on the matter, according to which: "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich and the poor alike to sleep under bridges, beg in the streets, and to steal loaves of bread".<sup>249</sup> It could be argued that France's strategy is not an ignorant inconsistency between legal and moral rights, but a deliberate merger of the two. While he is explicitly talking about things that are prohibited for all citizens, the author, on another level, accentuates a great ethical injustice that designates some members of society to break the law by finding home under a bridge in the first place. Similar ethical nature also runs through Rancière's practise of questioning dividing lines between different areas of life and *Thirteen Conversations'* representation of contemporary America that brings socio-ethical concerns together with legal practises. This is suggested, for instance, via Troy, who while on the one hand understands everybody to be equal before the law despite their social class, at the same time cannot comprehend that his social prejudice – that was exemplified by Troy finding that neither Gene nor Owen have anything interesting to say due to their lower social standing – affects his ability to properly serve justice.

As a further accord with the American Dream, Troy understands that his personal dedication directly improves the society as a whole. Troy explicitly explains to Owen that he believes that "a system that can determine right from wrong" – to which they both contribute to – will help people build a better society. Troy's focus on order, which goes alongside the aim of the American Dream to limit life's "fortuitous circumstances", and his emphasis on how an individual contribution can benefit a society, also supports his earlier argument with Gene, highlighting how exactly Troy understands himself to have rightly earned the privileges that Gene accused him of having. It now becomes even more apparent that Troy thinks that he, unlike Gene, has done a lot to improve the world in which they live by constantly ridding the streets of "lowlifes", as he put it in the bar, and has therefore been awarded accordingly. Prosperity that results from one's dedication is a way for a society to show that it values the person's contribution. It could be argued that this is the real reason why Troy did not bother to reply to Gene after he had blamed Troy of enjoying certain benefits from childhood – because Troy likely understands that his hardworking parents have also rightly earned the benefits that

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<sup>249</sup> France n.d.: n.p. (the precise wording varies depending on the translation).

their family has. In a true American fashion, Troy considers that wealth is not something to be ashamed of in a system that properly values one's contribution.

This is also why Troy was not overly sympathetic to Gene's insistence on the importance of luck, because, in accordance with the American Dream as I have described it, Troy understands that a proper civil order should minimise the effects that contingency has on life. In Troy's eyes a reliance on luck is not necessary in a system that functions efficiently. Therefore, an event such as a lottery victory is, as Troy had put it in the bar, a "shortcut", because it exploits a society by avoiding the hard work that should go into success. It now becomes increasingly evident that in his emphasis on the universality of law and order, Troy is rather similar to Walker, who similarly believes that his occupation of teaching physics provides an all-encompassing system that can offer an answer to everything. The limitations of their worldviews become apparent, when Troy realises that his understanding of swift law does not cover accidentality, and when Walker finds out that his knowledge of physics is unable to help him with his personal problems. Troy's neat understanding of law and order is tested when he, right after finishing his monologue, runs over a pedestrian and cannot bring himself to justice. Encountering pure chance in life, of which his privileged social setting had always protected him from, Troy comes to embody Gene's words about him being an "accident waiting to happen". Before the limitations of Troy's comprehension become apparent to himself, they have been twice suggested to the viewer via disagreements.

## 2.7 May you get what you want and want what you get

Using a car crash, as *Thirteen Conversations* does, to connect two or more of the film's lead characters, in this case criss-crossing Troy's storyline with Beatrice's, is a very common approach in the multi-protagonist film. Car accident is so regularly employed in the multi-protagonist film to suggest the importance of contingency and happenstance in life that Bordwell has come to conclude that:

The most common chance-based convergence, as conventional as a Main Street shootout in a Western, is the traffic accident. It seems that a network movie [i.e. a multi-protagonist film] cannot do without a traffic jam, smashup, fender-bender, felled pedestrian, or break-squealing near-miss.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Bordwell 2008: 204–205.

*Thirteen Conversations* appears to follow Bordwell's summarisation rather precisely, as in this case we are indeed dealing with a "felled pedestrian". Bordwell is not alone in recognising the frequent use of car accidents in the multi-protagonist film as most authors who have written on the form have paid attention to this aspect.<sup>251</sup> Although comparing the multi-protagonist film's interest in contingency with "a Main Street shootout in a Western" is highly effective, as the comparison to one of the most recognised generic tropes of cinema makes for a neat generalisation of the centrality of contingency in the multi-protagonist film, it, at the same time, says surprisingly little about how accidents are actually used in specific films. I would argue that simply noting the commonness of the Main Street shootouts in Westerns likewise reveals next to nothing about them.

To briefly make the point. On the one hand, Main Street shootouts are very standardised situations – to a far greater extent than car crashes in the multi-protagonist films – that are most often located in the privileged position of a film's culmination, accentuating their importance, and mark the final confrontation between the protagonist and the antagonist. At the same time, it could be claimed that some of the most noticeable examples of the Main Street shootouts are the ones that toy with the viewers' expectations by departing from the established generic norms. This is true in examples from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford, 1962) – playing out the Main Street shootout early in the film just to leave the viewer with a false impression, until the film finally revisits the scene from another viewpoint to reveal the identity of the true killer of the town's nemesis – to *The Wild Bunch*, which pushes the Main Street shootout to an extreme by pretty much killing off everybody in the film. This is also the case in the more recent examples such as *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Dominik, 2007) where the "shootout" consists of a cowardly shot in the back by the anti-hero's own companion. The question whether Film Studies should concentrate on "the lowest common denominator" examples or rather on "the great classical movies" and which of the two contribute more to our understanding of cinema has been raised before regarding Bordwell's approach.<sup>252</sup> This is not my argument here. Rather, I make a more egalitarian claim that all films that make use of generic tropes – which can be identified across several films such as a shootout or a car accident – do so in their own theme-specific context and that the latter is not without influence on the former. While generalisations made based on several examples are good for drawing out the central traits that a group of films share with each other, close textual analysis allows fleshing out these findings by showing how these common qualities manifest themselves

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<sup>251</sup> Azcona 2010: 34; Tröhler 2010: 472.

<sup>252</sup> Britton 2009: 440 and 467.

in specific films. Bordwell and Carroll's original intent in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* was to highlight "that there are more approaches to film research than the one film/one article format", which nobody would doubt today, but it seems that in contemporary Film Studies it is rather the detailed analysis provided by "the one film/one article format" that is seriously waning.<sup>253</sup> The two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but should instead be recognised as mutually beneficial, because close textual analysis provides detail to universalisations and allows to address the noticeable differences to the rule.

The complexity with which *Thirteen Conversations* constructs the car crash that Troy causes is an indicative example of the need to further develop arguments that primarily find that car accidents are above all an efficient method for the multi-protagonist film to unite its different characters and story strands. After Troy has dropped off Owen his dialogue about strict justice still carries on becoming out of sync with what is depicted and brings his words closer to the upcoming accident. This desynchronisation is intended to create a stronger impression of how Troy ends up breaking the firm principles he had just valued. After Troy has finished his speech, there is a long take accompanied only by the musical leitmotif concentrating on his face. The scene calls our attention to what Troy has just said and how he takes himself as a model of these words. In order to do justice to the complexity of such scenes it is important to separate insight gained retrospectively via multiple viewings from the information that one can gather immediately upon first viewing – especially as this is how many times most people will normally see a film. It is necessary to note that the crash is set up so that the viewer can see Troy looking forward and paying attention to the traffic. Then suddenly something white quickly flashes over the screen interrupting both the spectator's view of Troy, as well as his view of the road [Figure 2–4]. Calling the viewer to identify with Troy could hardly be made any clearer as the crash comes as an equal surprise to both the character and the viewer. Because the crash immediately follows the moment that disrupted Troy's view of the road, it becomes evident that even a sober person with a faster reaction speed would have likely not been able to avoid the situation.

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<sup>253</sup> Bordwell, Carroll 1996: xvii.



Figure 2-4 What just happened? An accident that comes as surprise also for the viewer.

That the event was an accident is supported in a later scene when the situation is repeated, but now represented from Beatrice's perspective – a character that we learn is the anonymous pedestrian that Troy hits. In this later scene, Beatrice is not only shown to be absent minded as she is in love and walking on the car's path, but she is also heading straight into the main road despite the stop sign prohibiting doing so without pausing, and therefore she emerges suddenly from a blind corner. But, most importantly, the accident is caused by the fact that a white shirt is blown out from her hands – the shirt that momentarily catches her attention and blinds Troy – indicating that they both had very little control over the situation. Despite the complexity with which the accident is represented, I argue that *Thirteen Conversations*' interest is not solely in the car crash as an example of contingency in life, but as I will show also in the greater contingency that often becomes apparent only due to such accidental occurrences.

When Troy exits the car he at first keeps looking down in front of it, only then realising that he has hurt himself by touching the wound on his forehead and looking at the blood on his fingers. Troy moves around as if he was circling someone and it is only once he kneels down that the viewer realises that he has hit a person. The film is withholding this information for a significant time to emphasise the shock that Troy experiences over the accident. By leaving the victim totally anonymous in this segment, *Thirteen Conversations* keeps the viewer's attention firmly on Troy and the suggested changes that he is going through. Although technically the accident serves as a typical example of a connection between the lead characters that scholars have regularly noted to be generic in the multi-protagonist film, thematically the accident hardly appears as a connection because information about Beatrice's identity is entirely withheld in

this segment from the viewer. In a similar fashion, in the later scene the viewer does not see Troy, keeping the viewer's attention firmly on how Beatrice experienced the crash and allowing the viewer to make a seemingly unmediated comparison between the two different perspectives. Moreover, Troy and Beatrice will never again come into contact nor do they learn about one-another's identity. Closer attention paid to the thematic level of the multi-protagonist film thus often suggests that actual face-to-face connections between the lead characters are not as dominant in the form as it is generally assumed. Rather, connections between the lead characters are most frequently drawn by the viewers through various allusions and parallels that the films provide.

Instead of emphasising the connection between Troy and Beatrice, *Thirteen Conversations* illustrates with the car crash how Troy's thorough knowledge of law does not make him a better person as he had thought. Quite the opposite, it makes him more equipped to avoid the proper implementation of law. After Troy has kneeled all the way down to Beatrice's level, he starts to control her condition, which could be considered an instinctive course of action in such a situation. But as Troy's fingers, covered with blood from the wound on his forehead, are about to touch Beatrice's face, he realises what this act would cause – leave behind evidence of his blood. Troy therefore quickly pulls his hand away. While the legally correct course of action in this situation would be to call the police and ambulance, Troy, as a public prosecutor, knows very well what will happen to him if he does so. Troy would be charged for driving under the influence and be later prosecuted for a vehicular homicide – as Troy believes that he has killed Beatrice. Troy's departure from the American Dream that he proudly declared earlier could be recognised as being particularly accentuated, because these offences would mark the end of his career. At this point his occupation does not serve to better the society as Troy had always thought, but on the contrary it is Troy's fear over losing his job that partially motivates him to leave Beatrice unattended and flee the scene of the crime.

While the situation is clearly an accident, the facts are against Troy, meaning that he has encountered a grey area in the juridical system that he thought of consisting of only black and white tones. According to the logic that Troy expressed before – resembling a Kantian imperative of always acting so that one's actions could serve as the law – it could be argued that Troy needs to be prosecuted even if his driving under the influence was likely not the actual cause of the accident. Troy must be prosecuted as an example of right and wrong. Firstly, because driving under the influence is against the law and, secondly, because causing an accident while breaking the law makes the situation even more serious – for it highlights precisely the necessity of the law. Moreover, it is Troy's occupation as a public prosecutor that

adds another layer of irony and sense of duty to the situation, because a public servant should serve as a primary example of right and wrong to the rest of a society. Troy finds that making such a swift and just decision is much harder when the judgement concerns himself. It could be argued that the decision to turn himself in is particularly difficult for Troy because he feels that his drinking had nothing to do with the accident and that it was totally out of his control to avoid it. This is something that becomes obvious the next day when Troy defends his drinking to Owen. Nonetheless, arguing for contingent factors to be the real reason behind an accident that is recognised as a crime by the law, is exactly how a criminal that Troy will come to prosecute justifies his actions. As nearly two minutes of Troy's silence and stunned expressions after the accident verify, he realises that the complexity of this situation cannot be fully covered by the law.

When Troy is rising up, his initial shock is becoming increasingly replaced by a more pragmatic calculation. In addition to the acting, this is suggested by the extradiegetic music giving way to only the diegetic sounds. The hammering of justice in Troy's mind is represented by the persistent peeping that his open car door makes. Something that is repeated later, when Troy returns to the accident site on foot and church bells can be heard similarly ringing in the background. Slowly looking over his shoulder to the main street Troy realises that there are no witnesses and that it is still possible to leave the scene of the accident unpunished. In this case it really is a lucky coincidence for Troy that in the crowded New York City there was nobody nearby to see the crash. This is further emphasised at various later points in the film, when Troy revisits the accident site and there are always people going by him. Instead of following his belief in right and wrong that Troy had just promoted when he was still in a position where such values supported his superiority, it now becomes clear, as suggested, that it is partially his training as an attorney that makes him judge the situation from a legal point of view and finally use the opportunity to escape.

A relatively long take on Troy's stunned face before he drives away, while goo is dropping from his nose and mouth, distancing the viewer from him, illustrates the significant mental change that goes through his head and that such a decision does not come easily to him. The repercussion that follows is therefore not a legal one, as Troy comes away "clean" from the situation, but a mental one, for Troy ends up almost dead because of the weight of his guilty conscience. Troy, coming upon a true misfortune, finally recognises, much like Gene had accused him of, that he has forever been blind to the fortune that surrounds him. The depiction of car crashes could be claimed to be the most characteristic way in which the multi-protagonist film explores contingency, but the film form's interest in the notion goes far beyond such a

narrow understanding of contingency that simply equates it with accidentality. *Thirteen Conversations*' deep interest in contingency becomes particularly evident via a close textual analysis of the car crash scene, not only because it is represented purely as an accident, but because of the significant impact it has on all the involved parties – revealing to them contingency on a much larger scale.

## 2.8 My eyes have been opened, I can never go back

Before exploring what is the greater contingency that *Thirteen Conversations* draws our attention to, it is useful to highlight what it is not. I have been suggesting that accidental events such as car crashes are not used by the multi-protagonist film solely to connect all of its characters or even to simply propose that accidentality has a greater role in life than we realise. There are certainly multi-protagonist films such as *Snatch* and *11:14* that use a car accident to momentarily connect most or even all of its main characters, but such a gimmicky use of a car crash is not all that common in the multi-protagonist film. Similarly, while there are examples such as *The Sweet Hereafter* (Egoyan, 1997), *Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*, and *Bluebird* (Edmands, 2013) that are primarily interested in how people cope with a trauma caused by a car accident, suggesting the significant effect that accidentality can have in life, multi-protagonist films that make this their central interest comprise only a small proportion of the whole. On the other hand, there are many examples – among others, *Slacker*, *Short Cuts*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Go*, *Magnolia*, *Bug* (Hay and Manfredi, 2002), *Any Way the Wind Blows* (Barman, 2003), and *Crash* – that depict a car crash, but which treat it as just one of the many accidental things that can happen in life. There are also countless multi-protagonist films that are highly interested in human interconnectedness and contingency (often expressed already in the title), but that do not depict any car accidents. A random sample pool of the latter would include films such as *Grand Canyon* (Kasdan, 1991), *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, *Smoke* (Wang and Auster, 1995), *Happiness*, *Beautiful People* (Dizdar, 1999), *Happenstance*, *Code Unknown*, *Dog Days*, *Sunshine State* (Sayles, 2002), *Dirty Pretty Things* (Frears, 2002), *Chromophobia* (Fiennes, 2005), *Look Both Ways* (Watt, 2005), *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (July, 2005), *Babel*, *Fast Food Nation*, *The Edge of Heaven*, *Adrift in Manhattan* (de Villa, 2007), and *360* (Meirelles, 2011). This suggests that while car crashes are rather common in the multi-protagonist film, they are by no means a necessary feature of the form for connecting the lead characters, nor is accidentality a dominant interest of the form. *Thirteen*

*Conversations* likewise serves as a demonstration of that because neither does the car crash connect all of the main characters, nor does the crash itself form the film's main interest.

So, what is the greater contingency that an accident such as a car crash can draw one's attention to? Before this question can be answered in relation to *Thirteen Conversations* it is vital to illustrate just how central the topic of contingency is in the film. As I will briefly show, all the main characters will come to understand the contingent nature of their preferred social imaginary. In the interest of brevity, I will follow more closely Troy's actions after the accident. Perhaps the most socially critical aspect of Troy's fallout after the accident is the fact that he comes away "clean" from the accident – meaning that no social or legal repercussions follow his action. Although I have shown Troy's escape to be possible only because of a coincidence, the film suggests that the privileged can often conveniently conceal their wrongdoings, while the less fortunate have to face the consequences of their actions. This can be noticed in the garage scene, following the one where Troy drives away from the accident site, where he can be seen covering his fancy BMW with a white sheet of clothing as if nothing had ever happened. On the other hand, Troy later prosecutes an unemployed Hispanic defendant (Fernando López) who also claims that his crime was largely caused by contingent circumstances. Even though they both think that they have killed a person, Troy remains firmly on the other side of the bulletproof glass when he visits the defendant in prison. Troy's seeming innocence is the eyes of the law is later contrasted with the devoted Christian and goodhearted Beatrice's actual innocence, who can be seen, similarly to Troy when he was covering his BMW, throwing a white bedsheet right towards the camera [Figure 2–5].



Figure 2-5 Parallels make the connections.

It soon becomes clear that Troy has great difficulties of erasing the moral impact of his actions, despite having bombastically declared in the bar “fuck guilt!” to indicate that the moral aspect of his work has little value in comparison to the benefits it provides to a society. After the accident Troy can be seen moping in his apartment and in the following day the courts of justice in which he works are shown to rise majestically towards the sky, reminding to him the burden of the values he must uphold. Troy’s inability to look past of what has happened is represented by a white piece of notepaper in front of him becoming stained by the blood dripping from his forehead. When Owen wonders if Troy, who is feeling sick from the accident, is hanged over from last night, Troy fiercely defends himself as if he were on trial, saying that he hardly drank anything at all in the bar. However, such reasoning does little to alter Troy’s changed perspective from a prosecutor to that of a potential criminal. Later that day Troy studies newspapers with great care to see if there is any mention of the accident and when being summoned to see the bureau chief at the district attorney’s department the next day, Troy cannot hold back his worry by querying what the meeting will concern. As an ironical coincidence, it turns out that the chief has recommended Troy for a promotion and wants him to prosecute a petty thief who accidentally turned into a murderer when the victim fatally hit his head on the ground during the robbery.

The film returns to Troy in a later segment titled “Fuck guilt” – again highlighting how a line of dialogue changes its meaning depending on the context. At this point the resolute Troy has given up on driving altogether and is selling his car to Walker who carries out the most stereotypical steps to counter his unacknowledged midlife crisis – having an affair and owning a sports car. When the two take the car for a test drive, the viewer finds out that Gene was likely right about Troy’s wealthy upbringing as the BMW is a gift from Troy’s parents. When Walker hears that Troy is a prosecutor, he tells Troy that he was recently a victim of a robbery. After a long pause Troy asks if they ever caught the person responsible for the crime – a question that now appears less to do with Troy’s righteous attitude and more to do with an egoistic worry over if he will ever be caught. The bombastic Troy from the bar with a constant upright figure who did not recognise Gene as an equal speaking being, is now being replaced with a crouched and serious looking young man who listens to Walker carefully and resembles an insecure teenager by repeatedly avoiding the gaze of others. Such changes in one’s perspective and self-perception are a constant interest of *Thirteen Conversations*. I have shown how they are at first often presented as disagreements of which the characters remain unaware, but eventually via unexpected occurrences will also become obvious to the characters themselves.

*Thirteen Conversations*' interest is very similar to an idea in the later thinking of Rancière that he calls "the distribution/partition of the sensible" [*le partage du sensible*]. This idea can be seen as the main point where Rancière's thinking on politics and aesthetics come together. Rancière offers a rethinking of aesthetics where it is not seen as equivalent of art theory, but is rather concerned with "a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, the corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships (which presupposes a certain idea of thought's effectivity)".<sup>254</sup> Rancière is interested in what could be described as the "primary aesthetics" and which encompasses "the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution".<sup>255</sup> The understanding of primary aesthetics echoes the exchange discussed above between Bordwell and Branigan, where the first saw film as following common comprehension, but the other took the discussion to a more philosophical direction by asking what affects our comprehension. Rancière takes such questioning even further by not only arguing for a level of aesthetics that comes before the rules of art, but by claiming that the arts are inherently political because of their ability to question and affect this primary level of understanding.<sup>256</sup> Art, just as party politics, can play a significant role in the distribution of the sensible, which determines what can be seen and said and what appears as natural in a society. Rancière explains a similar relationship between politics and philosophy as such: "Philosophy does not become "political" because politics is so crucial it simply must intervene. It becomes political because regulating the rationality situation of politics is a condition for defining what belongs to philosophy".<sup>257</sup> While in the last chapter I will demonstrate how Rancière's thinking on the different ways of understanding art can provide film with the means to be(come) political, here I will continue exploring how *Thirteen Conversations* can be seen as proposing an understanding of equality that is very similar to Rancière's thinking and which reveals the workings of the distribution/partition (*partage*) of the sensible to all the film's main characters.

It is important to note how, similarly to Rancière's thinking, *Thirteen Conversations* explores the change in one's comprehension on the very level of cognition. Walker offers the clearest example of that via his inability to recognise his own defining qualities and the positions of others. The latter is not limited to Patricia, with whom he has fallen out of love, but also carries over to his new love interest Helen (Barbara Sukowa). Although Walker claims that

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<sup>254</sup> Rancière 2004: 10.

<sup>255</sup> Rancière 2004: 12.

<sup>256</sup> Rancière 2004: 13.

<sup>257</sup> Rancière 1999: xii.

his life has changed significantly since he met Helen, his infantile attitude remains. For instance, Walker has not even noticed that he is still living out of the single suitcase with which he had moved out. When Helen brings up the issue, Walker can be seen looking at the suitcase next to him in surprise. The scene echoes Walker's earlier ignorance of the umbrella. Even though Walker immediately begins to brag how he will "start over" by buying new things instead of collecting the rest of his belongings from his old apartment, the film undercuts Walker's boasting about his ability to change by having him explain a light effect on a wall in his traditional manner – via physics as a "simple light refraction through a converging lens". Rather than recognising, for instance, a rainbow or an abstract combination of colours, *Thirteen Conversations* shows Walker to primarily structure his world via physics. That this is not the only possible framework of understanding is suggested by the fact that the light effect is projected to the wall by Walker's own glasses. The film's understanding of a plurality of theoretical positions available to people is also suggested by having Helen, an English professor, explain her husband's mental state by quoting John Milton's *Paradise Lost* [1667/1674 (2003)]. To further highlight the contrast between Walker and Helen the film cuts from Walker's explanation to Helen who smiles at him gently as one would to an innocent child who is taking something insignificant far too seriously.

That Walker literally comprehends his surroundings largely through physics is further accentuated when he buys Troy's car and quickly calculates how fast it could accelerate to a speed of 60 miles per hour. Walker claims to be "different now" and been "set free" by Helen from a "life of predictability [and the] dullness of routine", but the film questions his ability to change by showing him say these words as he mechanically makes a bed and sets their next meeting on exactly the same timeslot. The limitations of Walker's worldview start to become obvious to him only later in the film when Helen has decided to stay with her husband and is no longer answering Walker's calls. *Thirteen Conversations* shows that while for Helen it was an insignificant affair and Patricia has long ago left behind the apartment in which they lived and the life to which Walker thinks he can return at any moment, Walker ends up sitting alone, with his suitcase still neatly packed, in the same spot as in the earlier scene with Helen. The "simple light refraction" on the wall is now a green smudge, indicating Walker's changed emotional state. The limitations of Walker's worldview become plainly obvious to him in the following scene where Walker learns that a student of his who he had treated unfairly has committed suicide by jumping off a building. Walker's realisation of his restricted perspective is further accentuated by his star student (Avery Glymp), who, instead of showing compassion,

resembles Walker by treating the tragedy as just another assignment in physics and quickly calculates the angle of the fall.

It is important to clarify that *Thirteen Conversations* is not suggesting that Troy's understanding of law or Walker's view of physics is in itself incorrect. This becomes most evident in the film's treatment of religion, explored via Beatrice who sings at a church choir and keeps a head of doll as a keepsake from childhood on her cupboard to remind her that God had saved her life as a child when she nearly drowned. Rather than implying that Beatrice is ignorant for being religious – something that at first sight might seem to be suggested by the “Ignorance is bliss” subtitle that introduces her – the film instead through all the characters highlights the limitations of one’s perspective on life. *Thirteen Conversations* is also hinting at viewer’s inability to judge such grand topics as the absolute law or the existence of a divine entity with any certainty. The limitations of Beatrice’s worldview become evident when she offers to fix a shirt to an architect (Malcolm Gets) to whom she works, despite the fact that she is only a cleaner, indicating that she is secretly in love with him. It is the same shirt that later blows out of Beatrice’s hands and gets her almost killed. However, after Beatrice has spent a considerable time recovering from the accident and finally feels well enough to return the shirt, the architect falsely accuses her of stealing.

The architect is not simply depicted as an unfair rich white man who scolds a working-class woman. That the architect’s criticism is partially justified is hinted earlier when Beatrice’s co-worker Dorrie (Tia Texada) visits her at the hospital. When Beatrice asks about work, Dorrie complains that one of the customers has written another complaint about her stealing. The film suggests that these complaints might not be entirely baseless, because the spectator has repeatedly witnessed Dorrie slacking at work – something that Beatrice is too kind-hearted to notice. When Dorrie says that the architect has stopped the service because he does not want other cleaners around beside Beatrice and we see Beatrice being flattered and smiling, there is another logical explanation for this – the architect has cancelled the contract because Dorrie stole from him. After all, Dorrie has been constantly complaining how unjustly rich the architect is compared to her. While *Thirteen Conversations* avoids a simplified binary where spoiled rich people are contrasted with hardworking lower-class people, the film, at the same time, leads the viewers’ sympathy quite clearly. As such, we see Beatrice walking in the pouring rain without an umbrella following the architect’s unjust accusations. It is necessary to note just how similarly to Rancière’s thinking the film represents the issue, as the architect, largely because of his different social status, had never even recognised Beatrice to be on the same level with him. This is evident from the way he rarely pays any attention to Beatrice even when she is

talking to him, how he entirely misses the significance of her fixing his shirt, and how it comes as a total surprise to him when it turns out that Beatrice has not stolen from him.

Because of the emotional blow and the accident that Beatrice suffers from, she eventually appears to give up her faith in God. At one point, this is illustrated by Beatrice explaining the accident not in her usual manner, as a sign of divine intervention, but rather, as Walker would, emotionlessly claiming that the accident happened simply because she was in the way of the car – just two bodies colliding in space. That this is not *Thirteen Conversations*' value judgement on faith, is evident from the fact that in different scenes both Beatrice's mother and Owen confirm that her chances of surviving the car crash are considered by doctors to be almost miraculous. The baselessness of Beatrice abandoning religion is suggested once more by the end of the film when she is about to commit suicide, but a man across the street smiles at her restoring her faith in humanity. This demonstrates that *Thirteen Conversations* is not interested in debunking law, science, or religion, via Troy, Walker, and Beatrice, but rather explores how these frameworks can lead to social injustice. While Beatrice, who in one scene listens to a lecture in church about how Christians must endure, suffers injustice without complaining (both from Dorrie's slacking at work, the accident, and the architect's insults), the other characters invoke injustice, often without even realising it, because of the social imaginary they value. Troy had made clear to Owen that he considers them better than the rest of the society, accentuated by the way he kept emphasising what "we" as attorneys can provide to "them" the people. The way Walker constantly talks down to people as he does to his students also suggests that his bias is supported by his status as a professor and by his knowledge of physics. Gene is likewise shown to be an unprofessional and dominant superior to his co-workers, who, much like Troy, does not even look at people most of the time when talking to them. This indicates a flaw in the American Dream, according to which people's professional pursuit and social upward mobility will lead to a more unified and content society. It also indicates that the idea of everybody's equal right to pursue happiness does not connect all the characters in the film, as critics have claimed, but rather divides them.

I have shown in detail how different Troy and Gene appear in the beginning of the film, but it soon turns out that Gene, similarly to Troy, is a hardworking professional who regards his job very highly. In one scene Gene can be seen scolding an illegal cigarette salesman for not having a real job as he does. Interestingly, Gene criticises the man just after he has picked up a newspaper from a trash pin. While the viewers understand Gene's action because they have seen a neighbour stealing his newspaper, the film illustrates that for other people Gene appears to be a drifter, much like the illegal cigarette salesman. The film accentuates how unjust Gene's

accusations are, because he is not really aware of what has led the man to sell cigarettes on the street. Gene's occupation can therefore be recognised as not only bettering the society, but as also leading to his superiority. However, in his mind Gene is probably bettering the society, much like Troy, by attempting to rid the streets of "lowlifes".

The superiority that Gene's job grants him becomes obvious not only from the argument with the illegal cigarette salesman, but also with Gene looking down on his co-workers and him bragging to his ex-wife that he is about to be made vice-president. It turns out that Gene is let go instead. Because the story and plot order are greatly mixed up, the sacking of Gene is chronologically followed with the scene that the film begins with, the one where we see him sulking in the bar. As by the end of the film it returns to the bar scene, *Thirteen Conversations* provides a clear understanding that Gene and Troy are simply in the opposite ends of their career and thus in relation to the American Dream. For Troy, as I have shown, the American Dream justifies his superiority as he recognises his benefits to be rightly earned, for Gene, on the other hand, his dedication to the idea has led him nowhere. Gene is fired because of his young colleagues' extensive financial risk-taking and he ends up sitting in the bar thinking whether the career was worth sacrificing his wife and son for. That Troy ends up in a similar lonely situation, is suggested by Owen being surprised when Troy had chosen him to fulfil his testament, suggesting that Owen did not consider himself that close of a friend to Troy. It is therefore the sudden downfall of both Troy and Gene that highlights their similarity by revealing to them the "sheer contingency of any social order" and the equality of all – and the fact that it is the American Dream that has blinded them from this truth. This is the reason why *Thirteen Conversations* is sceptical of uniting its characters via their shared pursuit of happiness, because the distribution/partition of the sensible unites people while also dividing them to their assigned places within society. This double meaning of the French *partage* is hard to convey in English, but this ambivalence is of utmost importance – because the values that unite us, according to Rancière, also divide us.<sup>258</sup>

Rancière explains a similar problematic via Aristotle's political thinking in society of Ancient Athens in the following way: "The mass of men without qualities identify with the community in the name of the wrong that is constantly being done to them by those whose position or qualities have the natural effect of propelling them into the nonexistence of those who have "no part in anything"". <sup>259</sup> The problematic that Rancière highlights in Ancient Greek

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<sup>258</sup> See, for example, Rancière 1999: 75, where he explains Aristotle's reasoning for excluding demos from political subjectification based on their lack of time and money to self-govern.

<sup>259</sup> Rancière 1999: 9.

society, is that by identifying with the common values that constitute a community, people place themselves into a system of inequality. *Thirteen Conversations* shows the American Imaginary, which grants to everybody an equal right to pursue happiness, to be such a widely shared value. This is a double-edged sword whereby regular people such as Troy and Walker both cause inequality to others, while at the same time being the target of inequality inflicted upon them. Rancière claims that the free people of Athens, who even if they do not hold any other positive qualities over the slaves – they are not particularly wealthier or more educated – still have their freedom that they share with the ones who are richer and more powerful than them. By recognising themselves as part of the community through the notion of freedom, the free people of Athens differentiate themselves from the slaves, while actually allowing the rich and powerful to have authority over them. Although the rich and powerful could potentially cast the free people to slavery, Rancière points out that “once enslavement for debt was abolished”, freedom, although becoming the positive property for uniting the people, was largely an empty signifier.<sup>260</sup> Rancière does not so much emphasise the actual physical or legal power that the rich could potentially use to discipline those that they see fit, but rather the power of a largely imaginary quality through which the people not only give up their actual freedom, but also hold the non-part forever at bay by seeing them as the real threat to their way of life. As I have demonstrated, *Thirteen Conversations* can be seen as offering a detailed exploration of how such unacknowledged policing encompasses the most various areas of a society.

It is not that after the accident Troy became aware of the contingent nature of law, as if he, a trained professional, would have previously been unaware of the fact that law differs in time and space. A similar line of reasoning appears to inform some of the criticism that Rancière’s thinking has received. Jodi Dean notes that: “The claim that the situation could have been different fails to provide leverage towards making the situation different”.<sup>261</sup> This is certainly a valid claim, and one that Rancière is fully aware, realising the contingent nature of inequality does not automatically lead to the abandonment of inequality.<sup>262</sup> *Thirteen Conversations*, rather than proposing that the U.S. juridical system or the American Dream should be different (yet alone abandoned), concentrates instead on exploring how social imaginaries such as the American Dream both divide and unite a society. Even though this does not invalidate Dean’s criticism of the lack of political potential of Rancière’s idea, the way in which *Thirteen Conversations*, similarly to Rancière’s thinking, exemplifies how the current

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<sup>260</sup> Rancière 1999: 7.

<sup>261</sup> Dean 2011: 88.

<sup>262</sup> Rancière 2009: 45.

distribution/partition of the sensible establishes inequality, often via ideas that are recognised as the most positive characteristics of a society, is not without a political significance. The relationship of equality that I have arranged here between *Thirteen Conversations* and Rancière's thinking, is not about philosophy allowing one to realise the full complexity of the film – after all I have shown that a film can often depict things that philosophy can only describe – rather both the film and philosophy are recognised as equally interested in exploring the complex ways in which the distribution of the sensible operates today.

*Thirteen Conversations*, via its staging of equality, does not only depict the workings of the distribution of the sensible, but by treating all its characters equally creates a space of equality. Despite the characters belonging to different social classes and their hostility towards one another, the film shows that they are, because of the multi-protagonist format, fundamentally equal before the narrative and that the *mise-en-scène* divides them to their different positions. Rancière's thinking that combines an understanding of equality with an understanding of contingency, allows for a significant advance in the understanding of the multi-protagonist film – a film form that fuses its inherently egalitarian structure with a profound interest in contingency. This interest in contingency, as I have demonstrated, reaches far beyond the depictions of car crashes.

*Thirteen Conversations* does not only aim for an equality between its different characters, but the film also displays a similar respect towards the spectator. While Troy was devastated by his actions and could not go on the way he lived before, Gene and Walker will likely manage, suggesting that what *Thirteen Conversations* offers is far from an adequate political program for change. As such, Dean is certainly right in arguing that realising the contingent nature of a given notion does not automatically lead to a certain political position towards it. However, it is equally clear why *Thirteen Conversations* and Rancière cannot take a step further from arguing for an equality that reveals the contingent nature of all social structures – such a step would be the first towards establishing an inequality between the knowledgeable and the ignorant, an attitude that both reject. The film is not judging any of its characters nor their chosen social imaginary, suggesting the same neutrality towards the audience that might hold views similar to some of the characters. The film not only highlights the characters' limited perspective, but also that of the viewers' by allowing at times the characters to know more than the spectators. Although the film cuts from Beatrice, who has regained her faith in life after a stranger smiled to her as she was about to commit suicide, to a character who is an eternal optimist, suggesting that he was the one that unintentionally saved Beatrice, only she will truly know who saved her life with a smile. Offering no political miracle,

*Thirteen Conversations* ends by showing Gene, the grouch, smile to a stranger, Patricia – hoping that such little acts of kindness will eventually start snowballing.

### **3 CHAPTER THREE – We are all just on our own: Embracing independence in *Killing Them Softly***

Andrew Dominik's 2012 crime film *Killing Them Softly* is quite different from *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing*. With a decade separating these films the hope of building a better society from little acts of kindness that *Thirteen Conversations* proposes, appears to have entirely disappeared in the context of the 2007–2008 financial and housing crisis that is the allegorical setting of *Killing Them Softly*. The film represents a brutal dog-eat-dog world, where there is no society to improve, because – as one of the lead characters of *Killing Them Softly*, Jackie Cogan (Brad Pitt), claims by the very end of the film – “America is not a country, it is just a business”. Jackie, a professional hitman, offers this explanation just prior to forcefully demanding a higher payment from his employer Driver (Richard Jenkins) – an accountant for the local mafia – for the murders that he has committed. *Thirteen Conversations* offers subtle hints that a neoliberal preference for economic deregulation can lead to increased financial risk-taking – for example, via Gene losing his lifelong job due to the unsuccessful business ventures of his young colleagues. *Killing Them Softly*, on the other hand, does not need to make such suggestions, because, as I will demonstrate, a neoliberal preference for business is taken as a fact of life.

In *Killing Them Softly*'s representation of America, as I will show, everybody is just trying to hold on to something firm, while the economy goes through another one of its ruptures. Yet, as Jackie's words suggest, some of the characters of *Killing Them Softly* do not see this economic reality as something to be saddened by, but instead as something that one must adjust to – not only in order to survive, but to potentially take advantage of crises. In the next chapter I will analyse the financial crisis film *The Big Short* (McKay, 2015), which demonstrates where such a successful adaption to the neoliberal capitalistic norm can lead. In comparison, *Killing Them Softly* offers a thorough exploration of the different ways in which a range of people attempt to cope with the contemporary economic normality. Unlike *Thirteen Conversations* that applies the multi-protagonist form to study characters from different social classes and with contrasting approaches to life, *Killing Them Softly*'s world of crime consists only of men, whom the film shows to be equally engaged in self-centred capitalist undertakings. Therefore, alongside the film's unfavourable depiction of America, it draws out something that could be considered a capitalist ethics. This egoistic drive for success is depicted in *Killing Them Softly*, rather differently from *Thirteen Conversations*' hopeful questioning of social structures, to be

galvanised by the freedom offered by social contingency – that which Rancière recognises as the democratic potential of the “sheer contingency of any social order”.

### 3.1 What to do with films that are inspired by Žižek?

It is difficult not to notice the tonal shift that takes place in the panel during the press conference for *Killing Them Softly* at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival – changing from the enthusiasm of introducing the film, to bafflement over the journalists’ questions that appear to run counter to the filmmakers’ visions. Although Pitt is interested in discussing America as an idea that needs to be constantly protected, and Dominik explains his understanding of the crime film as an analogue for capitalism and thus as the most truthful film genre when it comes to representing America, the journalists repeatedly seem to confuse Pitt for the character that he plays in the film and cannot look past the usage of archival political material and violence in *Killing Them Softly*.<sup>263</sup> One journalist even goes so far as to ask Pitt, how, as a father in real life, he is willing to play a killer on screen.<sup>264</sup> Because I understand the misunderstanding between the filmmakers and journalists to be an example of a wider trend today of experiencing difficulties of approaching politics in mainstream cinema, I am going to explore the press conference in detail. This analysis will serve to accentuate my own reading of the film, differing from the current writing on *Killing Them Softly*.

As the film’s action is set at the time of the 2008 United States presidential election and economic crisis, and it features speeches from then President George W. Bush and party nominees Barack Obama and John McCain as a thematic backdrop, Dominik has to explain with his very first answer that “the film is not about Obama, but about crises in economy and the people who have to clean it up”.<sup>265</sup> Soon after Dominik attempts to lead the discussion – remaining the dominant voice on the panel for the rest of the press conference – by admitting that he does not understand the critics’ “obsession with violence”.<sup>266</sup> Likely in hopes of allowing the debate to include other topics beside violence and politics, the director argues via Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) that similarly to Bettelheim’s understanding of the therapeutic value of violent fairy tales to counter a child’s fear of abandonment, *Killing Them Softly* offers “advice on how to survive in a world of fierce

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<sup>263</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

<sup>264</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

<sup>265</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

<sup>266</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

competitors".<sup>267</sup> As such the director makes clear that he considers both the political archival material and violence in *Killing Them Softly* to serve the film's interest in America, its economy, and how drastic downturns in the latter can affect people's lives.

As the audience appears to be confused by Dominik's psychoanalytically inspired reasoning, suggested by the lengthy silence that follows, the director continues by saying that he is "really into this guy Žižek" and goes on to explain Žižek's analysis of *Duck Soup* (McC Carey, 1933), offered in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (Fiennes, 2006).<sup>268</sup> Here Žižek argues that the three main Marx brothers in *Duck Soup* can be seen as representations of the central aspects of Sigmund Freud's understanding of the psyche.<sup>269</sup> Groucho Marx (as Rufus T. Firefly) because of his dominating nature and endless chatter can be recognised as the superego, the juvenile and violent Harpo Marx (as Pinky) as the id, and Chico Marx (as Chicolini), who attempts to mediate between the two brothers, as the ego.<sup>270</sup> Dominik then goes on to apply the same interpretative model to his own film, saying that the six lead characters of *Killing Them Softly* could be recognised as a pairs of personalities.<sup>271</sup> In Dominik's view the disciplined enforcer for the mafia, Jackie, who stands for one of the egos, fits well into today's capitalist environment, while the small-time criminal Frankie (Scoot McNairy), representing the other ego and who ends up dead for stealing from the mafia, does not.<sup>272</sup> This is so, Dominik argues, because Jackie manages to keep the other gang members who serve as the personifications of his superego and id under control – he forcefully demands a higher payment from the mafia's consiglieri (Richard Jenkins) who stands for the superego, and has the alcoholic and prostitute-loving hitman Mickey (James Gandolfini), a representation of the id, sent to prison.<sup>273</sup> Frankie, on the other hand, Dominik claims, is obedient to Johnny (Vincent Curatola) – a small-time "business man", standing for the superego, who sets up the heist of a mafia protected card game – and cannot control his drug abusing friend Russell (Ben Mendelsohn), who stands for the other id.<sup>274</sup> The director then suggests that the film proposes that a person has a good chance of succeeding in the contemporary "cutthroat capitalist environment" if they manage to control

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<sup>267</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012; Bettelheim 2010 (1976).

<sup>268</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012. It should be mentioned at this point that my choice for exploring *Killing Them Softly* via Žižek does not emerge from some auteurist influence or from the fact that Dominik mentions Žižek during the press conference, rather, as stated, I recognise that Žižek's understanding of the Real and its connection to ideology offers an important avenue from which to explore contingency in the multi-protagonist film.

<sup>269</sup> Žižek 2006.

<sup>270</sup> Žižek 2006.

<sup>271</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

<sup>272</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

<sup>273</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

<sup>274</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

their internal commanding agent and various urges [Figure 3–1].<sup>275</sup> The director uses the psychoanalytical interpretation to emphasise the film's exploration of America as the land of, supposedly, cutthroat capitalism: “where it is perfectly acceptable for all the characters to be motivated by the desire for money only”.<sup>276</sup> While it is clear that for Dominik psychoanalysis has a significant role in connecting one's personal fears and desires to the capitalistic ambition for money, the audience laughs at the director's ambitious psychoanalytical interpretation and the chair of the panel, with a noticeable irony in his voice, explicitly questions Dominik's reasoning by querying from the actors: “Was that the kind of discussion that you would have every day on the set?”.<sup>277</sup> The chances of having a more in-depth discussion about *Killing Them Softly* appear to have been lost after the burst of laughter offered relief from the complex ideas. As such questions about Will Smith slapping a male reporter who tried to kiss him and those concerning Pitt and Angelina Jolie's upcoming wedding soon follow.



Figure 3-1 Dominik offering a psychoanalytical interpretation of his latest film in the 2012 Cannes Film Festival.

Yet, even if it could be considered obvious that the press conference did not go quite the way Dominik had planned, made evident by the director's frequent interruptions of the other panellists in an effort to put his vision through, why concentrate in detail on one failed press conference? My interest is not with the press conference itself, but rather in the fact that it

<sup>275</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

<sup>276</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

<sup>277</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

allows us to ask: what part has the academic spearheading against politically and psychoanalytically inspired theories played in what seems to be a wider difficulty of addressing such concerns in cinema today? The confusion at the press conference can be seen as a pivotal example of a larger difficulty of approaching *Killing Them Softly*. As I will show, a similar style of argument that objects the directness of *Killing Them Softly*'s use of violence and politics is also present in a number of film reviews. This suggests that the Cannes press conference simply epitomised a larger problematic of accepting the film's critical representation of America. However, the difficulty of approaching *Killing Them Softly* and the two other films discussed here, expressed by the journalistic writing on the topic, could be seen as suggesting a wider problematic of engaging with politically oriented genre film. The reception of *Killing Them Softly* offers the clearest example of the three, because, as I will demonstrate, the criticism so frequently objects to the film's strong leaning towards the style of many 1970s socially critical Hollywood Renaissance films. Because the term "New Hollywood" that is commonly used to describe the period can include both films with clear arthouse pretension addressing a niche audience and blockbusters appealing to the largest possible audience, the term "Hollywood Renaissance" is often reserved for the former more "art cinema".<sup>278</sup> The conception of a drastic change taking place in Hollywood in the late 1960s to the early 80s has been popularised by authors such as Peter Biskind in his 1998 book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex Drugs and Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* and by Kenneth Brower's 2003 documentary of the same title based on it.<sup>279</sup> Many scholars such as Geoff King have convincingly countered such myth-making and offered instead a more nuanced and complicated understanding of the American filmmaking of the period.<sup>280</sup> Because *Killing Them Softly* can be seen as being nostalgic of the latter category, I will use the term Hollywood Renaissance throughout the chapter when referring to the similarities that many critics claim the film has with the different 1970s American films. The 1970s was also the zenith of psychoanalytically informed and politically influenced film theory, the type of thinking that Dominik's own interpretation of the film draws from, and as such *Killing Them Softly* can be seen as bringing out a certain general dislike for a return to the politico-philosophical ideas and the at times grim style of the cinema of the period.

While my aim, as stated before, is not to advocate some sort of return to the 1970 and 80s politically oriented psychoanalysis, the problematic that I am suggesting here leads to the

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<sup>278</sup> King 2007: 3.

<sup>279</sup> Biskind 1999 (1998).

<sup>280</sup> King 2007.

question: how should Film Studies approach contemporary films that are not necessarily interested in following the latest trends of the field?<sup>281</sup> I see this problematic as not only related to *Killing Them Softly*, but to be a question about scholarly impartiality and the responsibility of addressing the interests of even those films whose socio-political views one might not necessarily share. Therefore, if one were to take Dominik's reference to Žižek seriously, the film could be seen as offering a much more Žižekian interpretation than Dominik's own Freudian analysis suggests. Moreover, such a Žižekian reading, as I will demonstrate, highlights not only the provocative aspects, which I will show, are widely recognised, but suggests that *Killing Them Softly* is not simply offering provocations for provocations' sake, but the film could be seen as exploring a fundamental aspect of the widespread appeal of contemporary capitalism. Before the film's exploration of the neoliberal preference for the prioritisation of business logic can be compared to Žižek's thinking on the matter, I will first provide some insight into the latter.

### 3.2 Is the king of controversy naked?

Despite collaborating in several films – most famously in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* and *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (Fiennes, 2012) – being a subject of a documentary, authoring a number of books that focus heavily on cinema, and having a scholarly journal dedicated to exploring his thinking – including that on cinema – it is fair to say that Žižek is far from a popular figure in Film Studies.<sup>282</sup> While I am not claiming that Žižek's thinking is not used in the field, I do think that for a figure who is often considered to be one of the most recognisable philosophers today, there are several unexplored areas of how his thinking could be fruitfully applied to understanding film. For instance, to date there is only one monograph that is interested in analysing Žižek's contribution to the understanding of

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<sup>281</sup> As a potential indicator of Žižek's popularity Sienna Miller has discussed a film that she stars in, *High-Rise* (Wheatley, 2015), in accordance with Žižek's understanding of architecture in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) – which, Žižek finds, similarly to *Duck Soup*, can also be interpreted via Freud's understanding of the triad of personality, see Miller 2016.

<sup>282</sup> As a rough indicator of the films' popularity both have a score of over 7.5 out of 10 on IMDb.com, with nearly 5000 votes cast on each film as of June 2017 (see, imdb *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* and *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*). See, *Žižek!* (Taylor, 2005). See among others *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (1991), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan: But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (1992), *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (2000), and *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (2001). See, Various authors, n.d. ("International Journal of Žižek Studies").

cinema and this comes from a media and communication theorist.<sup>283</sup> The polarising reception that Žižek receives – being praised with an array of unfortunate epithets by the popular media, while being largely ignored by many parts of academia – is chiefly caused by his polemical argumentative style that often appears to be deliberately representing the values that run counter to the *status quo*.<sup>284</sup> Žižek could be thus seen as interrupting the habitual logic of both the political right as well as the predominantly left-liberal academia.

Most people from the political right likely have difficulty considering the opinions of a thinker who frequently quotes Mao Zedong and often appears on a Russian state funded television network RT (Russia Today), while many on the political left, for example, saw Žižek's take on the European refugee crisis as representing a conservative isolationist stance, with Žižek arguing against “too much integration”.<sup>285</sup> Although Žižek's opinions grow from a specific theoretical framework, he not only rarely takes the time to explain the background of his ideas, but being well versed in continental thought eclectically moves from one subject matter to another without pausing.<sup>286</sup> This is not to say that his audience might not be equally competent in continental thinking, but to bring attention to potential further obstacles to understanding Žižek's thinking – the fact that not only does Žižek constantly change back and forth between what many would consider different registers of argument, but that he also represents a very specific understanding of his most frequently quoted authors: Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, and Lacan. Still, most likely it is Žižek's disdain for political correctness, which he sees as obstructing resistance to injustice by rendering the latter more evasive, that makes it difficult for many to follow his arguments.<sup>287</sup> All this has led those critical of Žižek's thinking to question whether he is not simply saying whatever comes to mind.<sup>288</sup> I have given detailed attention to both Dominik and Žižek's thinking and the type of misunderstanding that both appear to cause, in order to emphasise a certain “family resemblance” between the two and to suggest that this highlights a contemporary dislike for thinking that is presented provocatively,

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<sup>283</sup> See, Matthew Flisfeder *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film* (2012) and *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader* [Flisfeder, Willis (eds.), 2014]. Ben Tyrer is currently working on a monograph combining Film Studies and film philosophy with the thinking of Žižek.

<sup>284</sup> Regarding some of the popular epithets see Bainbridge 2016: n.p.

<sup>285</sup> Regarding the state connection to RT, see Fisher 2013: n.p. Žižek 2016.

<sup>286</sup> For instance, his questioning of integration is likely in debt to Lacanian psychoanalysis, according to which one's understanding of him/herself as a subject is a distortion that needs to be interrogated if not abandoned altogether, yet alone does it offer a basis for a more fundamental conjoining of individuals from different cultures. Ian Parker has identified Žižek's questioning of subject(ivity) to be one of the main elements that marks his departure from his earlier sympathies for the Frankfurt school's understanding of subject(ivity) as something to be saved from the capitalist order, see Parker 2004: 59–60.

<sup>287</sup> See, Žižek 2015.

<sup>288</sup> This is, for instance, the suggestion that Bordwell puts forth with his 2005 essay *Slavoj Žižek: Say Anything*, see Bordwell 2005a: n.p.

forcefully, and that challenges political correctness. As all these features are also present in *Killing Them Softly*, it suggests that it is productive to bring the film together with Žižek's thinking. Before exploring this relation in more detail, I would like to draw out the contours of a particular debate that has made Žižek's thinking increasingly unpopular in films studies. After this overview it can be more fruitfully explored whether Žižek is a real-life naked king from a children's fairy tale that Bordwell recognises him to be, or does he actually have something to add to the current understanding of cinema.<sup>289</sup>

If Rancière, as a former collaborator of Althusser's, can only tentatively be associated with a later development of the 1970 and 80s Althusserian-Lacanian film theory, then Žižek could be claimed to situate more firmly in this current. Žižek is after all a self-described Lacanian and one of the few who has continued to argue for the relevance of Lacanian psychoanalysis in understanding cinema.<sup>290</sup> As such, Žižek has also directly taken issue with the *Post-Theory* collection, which puts forth substantial criticisms of the Althusserian-Lacanian inspired Film Studies.<sup>291</sup> I have already drawn out the collection's central preference for a problem-based mid-level approach that runs counter to the universalising ambitions of the supposedly Grand Theory, but there is much more to add in relation to this exchange. Unfortunately, the charges that both parties make are too numerous to be neatly recapped here in their entirety, thus I offer but one example that highlights the tone of the debate and shows that even a cursory look at the positions of Bordwell and Žižek suffices to demonstrate that the authors are worlds apart. I will also pay close attention to what could be considered the central divide between the two approaches.

Žižek claims at the very opening of his 2001 *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* that it is wrong for the authors of *Post-Theory* to unify an array of different theoretical approaches to cinema, ranging from cultural studies to feminism, under the title "Theory", and then to identify the latter as having "a common Lacanian element as central".<sup>292</sup> Žižek goes on to say that not only are there few Lacanian film theorists out there, but that it has to be recognised that many who are often described as

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<sup>289</sup> Bordwell 2005a: n.p.

<sup>290</sup> Although, as I will show below, Žižek has argued against belonging to such ancestry claiming that it is the *Post-Theory* collection that has made him responsible for the psychoanalytical work of others, it has to be noted that the *Post-Theory* collection does not directly take issue with him, but criticises Lacanian approaches to cinema more broadly. It is, thus, Žižek's own response to the authors of *Post-Theory* – namely Bordwell and Carroll as the authors of the collection's foreword that sets out the book's programme – that could be recognised as an indication of his representing the ideas that he accuses others of associating him with. Such Gordian Knots of miscommunication characterise the entire debate between Žižek and Bordwell.

<sup>291</sup> See, Žižek 2001.

<sup>292</sup> Žižek 2001: 1.

“Lacanians” are highly critical of Lacan’s thinking in several aspects.<sup>293</sup> Consequently, as a contemporary Lacanian, Žižek claims, he is in a way made responsible for the past work of others; or in his own words: “Being deprived of what I never possessed”.<sup>294</sup> Bordwell responds in a 2005 essay titled *Slavoj Žižek: Say Anything* – focusing solely on countering Žižek’s claims made in *The Fright of Real Tears* – by arguing that the term “Lacanians” does not occur at all in any of the essays of *Post-Theory* that are critical of “psychoanalytically inclined” theories, and that after all: “Žižek knows perfectly well that a great many film scholars have cited Lacan and used his work to bolster theoretical or interpretive claims”.<sup>295</sup> Not only is such an exchange indicative of Žižek and Bordwell’s different style of reasoning – where one prefers the use of playful hyperboles and the other favours close inspection of arguments and counterarguments – but perhaps more strikingly both authors could be considered correct in their assessments. This is the case if we accept that Bordwell refers to the heyday of Lacanian film theory in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the dominance of this theoretical approach hindered the development of many other methods of exploring cinema, whereas Žižek, on the other hand, likely has in mind the situation around the time of the publication of his book, the turn of the century, when Lacanian film theory was long out of fashion and *Post-Theory*’s criticism was seen as a charge against all the remaining politico-theoretical approaches to cinema. Given that the authors defend such drastically different interests, it is little wonder that they have difficulties of establishing a common ground in their understanding of the role of Film Studies and the significance of cinema.

From the academically rigorous position that Bordwell represents, it is easy for him to identify Žižek as “an associationist par excellence”.<sup>296</sup> I do not know if Bordwell’s use of psychoanalytical vocabulary is intentional or not (given that free association have such a significant role in the discipline), but if we were to continue with the psychoanalytical vocabulary that Bordwell’s judgement suggests, then it could be argued that even if Žižek is to be considered a “mere” associationist, it is important to remember that from a psychoanalytical perspective, free associations are anything but meaningless gibberish. I am not saying that Žižek’s ideas could not use further explication, but am simply pointing out that considering the elusiveness of Žižek’s general tenor, *The Fright of Real Tears* makes its aims rather clear. The book sets out to, firstly, reinterpret Lacanian Film Studies in a way that stays true to the larger

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<sup>293</sup> Žižek 2001: 2.

<sup>294</sup> Žižek 2001: 2.

<sup>295</sup> Bordwell has argued against Žižek’s thinking also in *Traces of Light*, see Bordwell 2005b: 260–264. Bordwell 2005a: n.p.

<sup>296</sup> Bordwell 2005a: n.p.

body of Lacan's thinking, and, secondly, to analyse the dispute between Theory and Post-Theory as "a particular case of the global battle for intellectual hegemony".<sup>297</sup> As these could be considered the main tenets of Žižek engagement with cinema more broadly, they deserve closer attention.

Bordwell's criticism is justified from the position that some of the propositions of psychoanalysis are difficult to prove empirically (or one could say that they are not accepted by our current understanding of science). This is especially true regarding Lacan's understanding of the Real and the importance that the latter has in Žižek's understanding of how ideology works. The Real in psychoanalysis stands for the fundamentally unsymbolisable, meaning not something that is currently empirically unexplored, but something that cuts through one's very perception and comprehension by being drastically alien to one's habitual understanding of reality.<sup>298</sup> As the Real has no positive value, it is difficult to bring an example of it, but an impression of being gazed at when there is nobody around or the thought of one's own death, which is simply incomprehensible, are some situations in which a sense of the Real can be argued to manifest itself.<sup>299</sup> As the Real is so central to Žižek's understanding of how ideology operates, it is understandable that if a reader such as Bordwell does not accept the idea that there can be something fundamentally alien to our senses present in the world, the rest of the argumentation has little value for him or her.<sup>300</sup> Nonetheless, it is perhaps easier to agree that capitalist ideology makes use of one's fears and desires.

The central problem between the so-called Grand Theory and some of the authors of the *Post-Theory* collection is that the 1970–80s psychoanalytically informed Film Studies identified films as constructing a universal subject-position. Cinema was seen as lulling viewers to recognise themselves as subjects, which, following Althusser, was considered to be an ideological construct securing the dominance of a hierarchical capitalist society.<sup>301</sup> Because recognising cinema as creating a subject-position could be argued to neglect the differences between actual spectators, the theoretical hubris of this type of thinking has been rightly

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<sup>297</sup> Žižek 2001: 2–3.

<sup>298</sup> See, for instance, Copjec 2015 (1994).

<sup>299</sup> Graig Saper says: "The *objet a* [Real in the visual register] marks a missed encounter, it does not illustrate or describe an abyss or any other positive phenomenon (it is neither an image of death looking at you, for example, nor an image of nothingness), but it re-presents literal discontinuity or lack in a structure, Saper 1991: 44.

<sup>300</sup> Despite the seemingly significant difference between Bordwell's and Žižek's positions on the role of science and its relation to reality, Mullarkey has argued that their methods are more alike than it might first seem, because they both insist that their theory relies upon a fundamental element that cannot be further deducted (reality and the Real accordingly), Mullarkey 2009: 32.

<sup>301</sup> This line of argument has received significant criticism from within psychoanalytically informed authors, see Copjec 2015, Žižek 2001, McGowan 2007.

challenged by the cognitively inclined theorists of the *Post-Theory* collection.<sup>302</sup> Because ideas such as cinematic interpellation are difficult to prove empirically, many have found that research relying on cognitive sciences offers “theories far more convincing than those of psychoanalytical [...] origin”.<sup>303</sup> Yet, despite the allure of natural sciences that could be perceived as offering a more verifiable basis for knowledge, often forgetting the limitations that this sets for a theory, one should not overlook what could be regarded as the principal goal of Film Studies – the study of films. Asbjørn Grønstad has argued that both Althusserian-Lacanian and cognitively aligned film theories have a tendency to neglect the importance of textual analysis in their preference for approaching film via philosophy and cognitive neuro-science accordingly.<sup>304</sup> Furthermore, it should not go without notice why those interested in cinema in the 1970s turned to Althusser, Lacan, and other thinkers in the first place. These scholars did so for the very same reason that Dominik cites Žižek in the 2012 Cannes Film Festival’s press conference, they perceived something amiss in the society and wondered how to best understand cinema’s role in this. An obvious objection to such reasoning is that Film Studies does not need Žižek to highlight how films operate in a society. It is certainly true that films and Film Studies are perfectly capable of exploring, for example, the effects of capitalism on the society and filmmaking without the interference of philosophy. However, I see no reason for not analysing the shared interests of film and philosophy (and for that matter law and finance and so on), especially when bringing those interests together clearly opens up novel features in both.

Ideology, following Žižek, could be understood as a mental supplement that helps one cope with an uneasy feeling emerging from the fact that no social role appears to capture completely what one understands oneself to be.<sup>305</sup> In this respect the thematic variation of ideologies, say, from a shampoo commercial to North Korean propaganda does not matter, because all forms of ideology function the same way, receiving their effectiveness from their ability to properly address one’s fears and desires. Clearly the intensity of emotion emerging from an ideology that constructs fear of being conquered by the U.S. and fosters one’s desire to feel safe and be protected, and that of a shampoo commercial, which alludes to one’s positive

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<sup>302</sup> From a contemporary psychoanalytical perspective, the 1970s subject position theory also overlooks the uniqueness of one’s desire. For instance, Stephen Prince claims that the Althusserian-Lacanian film theorists “have constructed spectators who exist in theory; they have taken almost no look at real viewers. We are now in the unenviable position of having constructed theories of spectatorship from which spectators are missing”, see Prince 1996: 83.

<sup>303</sup> Grønstad 2002: n.p.

<sup>304</sup> Grønstad 2002: n.p.

<sup>305</sup> Žižek 1989: 11.

self-perception, are vastly different, yet their underlying functioning can, nonetheless, be argued to be the same. As people's desires and fears differ, so do ideologies, but the basic premise remains the same – no matter how hard one tries, one never seems to be able to get all the things (be they material, intellectual, or emotional) that one truly desires. This is particularly the case because the things one does end up obtaining, do not appear as exciting as when one was still pursuing them. At the same time, ideology works to complement the fact that a similar problem exists within a society, as no field of knowledge or social structure can claim to be all-encompassing. According to Žižek, an attempt to offer an all-encompassing field of knowledge or social structure is futile not because of empirical factors, but because it is a structural impossibility.<sup>306</sup> *Thirteen Conversations* explores this aspect to a great extent by showing how none of the following worldviews offered the main characters complete emotional and intellectual fulfilment: Gene's belief in business and success makes him unhappy, Troy comes to realise that law is unable to adequately address accidental occurrences, Walker sees that his thorough understanding of physics is useless when applied to emotional life, and Beatrice faith in God is challenged in difficult times. Following Žižek, the incompleteness within a subject is brought together via ideology with a similar shortcoming within a society.<sup>307</sup> This incompleteness is both inspiring and frustrating, because it gives one the feeling of having a chance to make a difference, while at times also leading one to discover that no matter how hard they try, nothing seems to fully capture the determination motivating one's actions.

Žižek's understanding of ideology is important because it engages with a question: how does ideology relate to such intangible feelings? Matthew Sharpe summarises the idea as such:

Today's typical first world subjects, according to Žižek, are the dupes of what he calls "ideological cynicism". Drawing on the German political theorist [Peter] Sloterdijk, Žižek contends that the formula describing the operation of ideology today is not "they do not know it, but they are doing it", as it was for Marx. It is "they know it, but they are doing it anyway".<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Žižek 1989: 47.

<sup>307</sup> Žižek 1989: 178.

<sup>308</sup> Sharpe n.d.:n.p. I find Sharpe's use of the word "dupes" slightly problematic, because if one recognises ideology at work – even if they find justifications for why they nonetheless act according to the dominant ideology – one is precisely not duped into anything. This is an important emphasis, because it could be recognised as an integral part of Žižek's departure from ideology as "false consciousness", as perceived by Marx, and from Althusser's version, which, although it recognises ideology as a constructive power, nonetheless perceives people as misrecognising themselves as subjects and, thus, to an extent, similarly to Marx's understanding, still as duped. See also, Žižek 1989: 32.

Although we know perfectly well that excessive consumerism is wasteful, there is an impulse in us that justifies our own purchases. Whereas it is easy to consider that people are wasteful because they are largely just buying into various advertisements (they are duped by ideology in the Marxist sense), it is much more difficult to assess our own actions the same way. This “I know, but...” line of reasoning is an example of how Žižek understands ideology working today through our desires.<sup>309</sup> Whereas Althusser’s model of ideology perceives people as mistaking themselves for subjects, which is a predesignated position in social hierarchy, for Žižek, on the other hand, there really is no opportunity to place ourselves outside ideology, meaning that while people can differ in their degree of cynicism, none of us can occupy a fundamentally different position from which to address others and to claim to be representing some objective truth.<sup>310</sup> In his 2010 *Living in the End Times* Žižek sums this aspect up as such:

The truth that we are dealing with here is not “objective” truth, but the self-relating truth about one’s own subjective position; as such, it is an engaged truth, measured not by its factual accuracy but by the way it affects the subjective position of enunciation.<sup>311</sup>

This could be seen as the root of Žižek’s argument with the authors of *Post-Theory* and why he seemingly makes, as Bordwell notes, contradictory charges of accusing them of modesty and arrogance at the same time.<sup>312</sup> Because for Žižek reality is ideologically rendered via one’s fears and desires that ideology both exploits and provides for, it is in his view both modest and arrogant “to compare a theory with “real life””.<sup>313</sup> This is so because even if we claim to be engaged in a modest project of researching a small scale problem, we, nevertheless, envision to have access to a certain “the way things really are”. Ironically, from a Žižekian position this could be argued to be “Grand Theory” for it perceives itself as not affected by the subjective limitations of theorists caught in ideology. Although Bordwell claims that Žižek himself repeatedly compares theory to real life, he seems to miss the significance of the quotation marks around Žižek’s use of the term, meaning that when Žižek refers to “real life” he has in mind the ideological rendering one perceives, whereas, in Žižek’s view, some of the authors of *Post-*

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<sup>309</sup> Žižek 1989: 18; see also Žižek 2011: 248, for a specific example of how ideology operates today in the form of consumerism.

<sup>310</sup> Althusser 1970: n.p. It is precisely the question how can one as a subject ever be unduped that highlights the weakness of Althusser’s theory. Because Althusser’s all-encompassing understanding of ideology suggests that it is impossible to occupy a position outside ideology, it would make Althusser’s own role as a scholar explaining the workings of ideology, as if he was perceiving the situation from a distance granting him a degree of objectivity, unimaginable. The taint of theoretical hubris that is suggested by occupying such a position, is precisely the reason why Rancière has been critical of Althusser’s thinking.

<sup>311</sup> Žižek 2011 (2010): xiii.

<sup>312</sup> Bordwell 2005a: n.p. Žižek 2001: 15.

<sup>313</sup> Žižek 2001: 15; Žižek 2011: 244.

*Theory* treat cognitivism as if it were to offer an unmediated take on reality.<sup>314</sup> This does not change even if we support our claims by referring to the suprasubjective nature of science or by acknowledging that the claims are not absolute, but specific in time and space.<sup>315</sup> Because for Žižek ideology coats everything, he is not confusing epistemology for ontology when talking about Hegelian dialectics, of which Bordwell accuses him, but rather for Žižek theorising is ontological, because it can potentially interfere with the way ideology shapes our understanding of the world.<sup>316</sup> As Cilliers van der Berg explains, from a Žižekian perspective “theory should not be seen as a way to achieve objective truth, but rather as a historically situated attempt to make a difference in reality”.<sup>317</sup> As, according to Žižek, there is no reality cleansed from ideology, the aim of affecting how ideology operates by changing our thinking is not a question about how we understand things to be, but literally how they are for us.<sup>318</sup>

Tying this discussion back to cinema, while it is a common objection in Film Studies that Žižek uses films merely as illustrations, we are now in a better position to understand that he does not mean it in the narrow sense of the word, as a picture in a book could be considered “merely” an illustration and thus as supposedly inferior to the text.<sup>319</sup> Rather the way a film captures the spectators’ interest by addressing their fears and desires could be seen as an equivalent of one’s relationship with ideology. Van der Berg sums it up as such:

[Žižek’s] appeal for theory in general and film theory specifically, is to employ its analytical apparatus to think about and even effect changes in our socio-political domain. His film theory therefore evolves into a thinking *with* film rather than a thinking *about* film.<sup>320</sup>

Such a dialogical relationship between cinema and scholarship could be seen as a valid addition to the current approaches in Film Studies, especially as it does not treat film as if it would not have any effect on the chosen methodology and as if a spectator (even if the latter is an educated scholar) would not be affected by what they are seeing. This thinking proposes a certain equality between film and spectator, emerging from the fact that a spectator is not simply opening up

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<sup>314</sup> Bordwell 2005a: n.p.

<sup>315</sup> Bordwell 2005a: n.p.

<sup>316</sup> Bordwell 2005a: n.p. For a more detailed explanation of the Žižek and Bordwell’s different understandings of dialectics, see Flisfeder 2012: 35–39.

<sup>317</sup> Van der Berg 2017: 188.

<sup>318</sup> It has to be noted, that, according to Žižek, Lacan’s later thinking sees fantasy as offering a way outside social totality (the big Other), see Žižek 1989: 46.

<sup>319</sup> Bordwell makes a similar claim when he criticises Žižek’s reading of films to be hermeneutical, see Bordwell 2005a: n.p. This hierarchy has been questioned by Wartenberg, see Wartenberg 2007.

<sup>320</sup> Van der Berg 2017: 188 (emphases in original).

novel aspects in film, but that films also have a lasting effect on the lives of those interested in cinema.

This is also clear from the way Žižek expresses his ideas. For instance, Žižek presents his now infamous opinion about the European migrant crisis chiefly via “cinematic” means. Žižek claims that the tragic images we see on the news of misplaced people “saved in the last moment from drowning in the sea” present only half the truth, because these images fail to make the Hitchcockian connection to the way this situation relates to “the social totality”.<sup>321</sup> In other words, we are constantly offered only the close-ups of human faces and medium shots of overcrowded shabby rafts, but the camera does not pan away from the migrants to an extreme long aerial shot revealing the luxury villas, steaming factories, corrupt officials working with smugglers, and whatnot that would represent a more complete picture of the situation. It is important to note that Žižek does not consider capitalism’s expansive nature, its ever-present need for new markets and resources, affecting global politics, to be the sole cause for the humanitarian crisis, but considers people in developing nations to be also “active agents” playing a part in the situation.<sup>322</sup> Additionally, if we consider the similarity between the way Žižek constantly jumps from one topic to another and the usage of montage in some of the most famous examples of 1920s Soviet political cinema, starting with *Battleship Potemkin* [Броненосец Потёмкин (Eisenstein, 1925)] and *Man with a Movie Camera* [Человек с киноаппаратом (Vertov, 1929)], it could be seen as indicating rather clearly that Žižek is fundamentally a cinematic thinker. As Žižek puts it:

In order to understand today’s world, we need cinema, literally. It is only in cinema that we get that crucial dimension which we are not ready to confront in our reality. If you are looking for what is in reality more real than reality itself look into the cinematic fiction.<sup>323</sup>

While Žižek’s claims are certainly “grand” in their all-encompassing nature, we need to remember that arguments with a universalising intent are a norm within the Western philosophical tradition. As such, I would argue that the unpopularity of Žižek’s thinking in Film Studies has less to do with its supposed lack of coherence and more to do with the way his ideas run counter to the current trends in the field. Nevertheless, it is important to note that one aspect of Žižek’s thinking appears much more urgent today, than almost three decades ago when

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<sup>321</sup> Žižek 2016.

<sup>322</sup> Žižek 2016.

<sup>323</sup> Žižek 2006.

*Sublime Object of Ideology* was first published. The cynicism that Žižek talks about has become more prevalent than ever. As an example of this, one needs only to think about some of the top-level politicians that repeatedly and openly contradict their own words.<sup>324</sup> So perhaps the need to revisit some of Žižek's thoughts is more prevalent now than ever before. Cinema certainly offers a good venue from which to begin exploring the nature of contemporary ideology. Considering that, according to Žižek, there is no outside of ideologically affected reality, ideology in cinema is not something that only the educated theorist can recognise. This, as I showed in the last chapter, was central to Rancière's criticism of the type of thinking that unintentionally establishes a hierarchy between the educated and the ignorant, dominant in the 1970s and early 80s Film Studies. Rather, following Žižek, ideology in film is something that stares us straight in the face.

### 3.3 Blast from the past

That *Killing Them Softly* draws from the 1970s *zeitgeist* is evident not only from the fact that Dominik explains how he incorporated into the film elements of political-psychoanalysis – whose zenith was in the 1970s and which is now long out of fashion in Film Studies – but because the film, mainly due to its crude dialogue, dated cars, and gritty cinematography, was immediately recognised as belonging to the 1970s by the critics. However, what seems to have largely gone unnoticed in *Killing Them Softly*'s critical reception, is that the film's ability to shock by presenting a harsh socio-critical depiction of America, could also be considered as a reminiscence of the Hollywood Renaissance *époque*. The latter period in cinema is generally perceived, by authors such as Biskind, as being brought about by a new generation of young and often rebellious filmmakers who supposedly broke the generic moulds of the Classical Hollywood Cinema.<sup>325</sup> In the following, I will provide a brief overview of some of the criticism that *Killing Them Softly* received. Drawing out the general trend of *Killing Them Softly*'s criticism allows me to accentuate how my own interpretation, making use of Žižekian thought, proposes a considerably different understanding of the film's critical charge against the American Imaginary. My own readings of the three films offered here do not aim to be some sort of definitive alternative to the current writing on the matter – such an idea sits unwell with

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<sup>324</sup> See, for instance, *New York Times'* list of contradictions that president Donald Trump has expressed since taking the oath of office, Leonhardt; Thompson: 2017: n.p. For Žižek's thoughts on Trump as a "derogation of public debate" see Žižek 2017a.

<sup>325</sup> Biskind 1999 (1998).

both the multi-protagonist film, the films' interest in contingency, and with the thinking of the chosen philosophers – rather I aim to explore areas of the films currently left unstudied, but which I understand to be important parts of these films.

*Killing Them Softly* received mixed reviews from critics and mostly negative responses from the audience. As an illustration of the negative audience reception, the film scores a measly 44% on *Rotten Tomatoes* from the public (out of over 120 000 ratings) and is one of the few films to ever receive “F” on the *CinemaScore*’s audience survey.<sup>326</sup> Although critics, according to *Rotten Tomatoes*, have been kinder to the film as only a quarter of them have written negatively about it, the negative criticism likely not only matches the opinions of many viewers, but also highlights a common understanding about *Killing Them Softly* that needs further attention.<sup>327</sup> While this general conception of the film comes across also in the positive and mixed reviews, it is more clearly accentuated in the critical reviews. Analysing this unfavourable viewpoint is important not only as far as *Killing Them Softly* is concerned, but because it suggests, as I have been implying, a larger difficulty of approaching politically oriented genre film today.

Damon Wise’s review on *Killing Them Softly* for *Empire* illustrates well the film’s easily recognisable 1970s style. Although unacknowledged by most commentators, the latter stems in part from the fact that *Killing Them Softly* is based on *Cogan’s Trade*, a 1974 crime novel by George V. Higgins.<sup>328</sup> Wise finds that:

[The] latter-day gangster movie set in the shadow of the handover of America from President George W. Bush to Barack Obama in 2008 [...] bypasses the last 20 years of post-Tarantino gangster movies to recall David Mamet’s 1975 play *American Buffalo*, itself a meditation on recession-era crime and punishment.<sup>329</sup>

The connection to both the 1970s crime genre aesthetics, made by Wise via the reference to *American Buffalo*, and to the style of Quentin Tarantino’s films is made not only by the so-called trade press, but by various online media channels and the more academic journals alike.<sup>330</sup> For Wise, *Killing Them Softly*’s most telling resemblance to *American Buffalo* is “the

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<sup>326</sup> See “*Killing Them Softly*”. Finke 2012: n.p.

<sup>327</sup> See “*Killing Them Softly*”.

<sup>328</sup> Higgins 2011 (1974).

<sup>329</sup> Wise 2012: n.p.

<sup>330</sup> Concerning other connections to Tarantino, see, for example, Outlaw 2012: n.p.; Sharkey 2012: n.p.; Corliss 2012: n.p.; Ontiveros 2012: n.p. The examples are too numerous to be encompassed here in entirety, but already the named examples indicate how easily the similarity was noted. The comparison is especially prevalent in French criticism, see Payan 2012: n.p.; Blet 2013: n.p.; Schreurs 2012: n.p.; Chartrand 2012: n.p. On the 1970s associations, see Johnston 2014 (2012): n.p.

Mamet-like dialogue”, even if the author finds that the former is not quite up to the latter’s standard.<sup>331</sup> Although not stated explicitly, this similarity is likely the reason why *Killing Them Softly* is recognised by Wise as bypassing “20 years of post-Tarantino gangster movies”. Interestingly, another commentator argues that *Killing Them Softly* because of the large amount of “dialogue-driven scenes” is very Tarantino-esque.<sup>332</sup> Nonetheless, this critic also notes that the difference between *Killing Them Softly* and Tarantino’s films is that the “pulpy, pop-culture-laced dialogue” of the latter, is replaced in *Killing Them Softly* “with more earnest ruminations on life, people, criminality, politics (both personal or otherwise) and the like”.<sup>333</sup> This comparison could be seen as resonating with what Wise describes as “the Mamet-like dialogue” as *American Buffalo* is often recognised for its explicit dialogue that acts as a masculine cover for the characters’ humanity, suggesting the play’s sensitive socio-critical tenor.<sup>334</sup> Because the connection to Tarantino is made so often in the related reviews – most frequently in relation to the dialogue and regularly with a caveat that *Killing Them Softly* does not quite match the clever dialogue of the films by Tarantino – it could be extrapolated that Tarantino’s crime films that use dialogue as a post-modern wordplay where the “pulpy, pop-culture-laced dialogue” is largely the means to its own end are considered by many as the norm of the genre today, whereas *Killing Them Softly* is recognised as an anachronism for using the dialogue to make an earnest social commentary.

Another aspect because of which *Killing Them Softly* is identified by the critics to belong to a different decade is the film’s grainy colour palette and the use of dated muscle-cars. Wise argues that *Killing Them Softly* “seems rather grey and even ordinary” when compared to Dominik’s last film, the critically acclaimed 2007 *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*.<sup>335</sup> Trevor Johnston writing for *Sight & Sound* finds that *Killing Them Softly* is a “70s twilight” and says that while the film is set in 2008, the “gas-guzzling automobiles suggest the mid-1970s – as indeed does the camerawork’s tenebrous melancholy, very much in the school of Francis Coppola’s famed lensman Gordon ‘The Prince of Darkness’ Willis” [Figure 3–2].<sup>336</sup> This opinion is repeated in a slightly different wording by another commentator who notes that “Dominik’s effort may be set in 2008, but its vintage vehicles and Greig Fraser’s dark, melancholic camerawork amidst the American grime strongly recall

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<sup>331</sup> Wise 2012: n.p.

<sup>332</sup> Kofi Outlaw 2012: n.p.

<sup>333</sup> Kofi Outlaw 2012: n.p.

<sup>334</sup> Nightingale 1983: n.p.

<sup>335</sup> Wise 2012: n.p.

<sup>336</sup> Johnston 2014 (2012): n.p.

mannerisms of 70s cinema's most praised crime films".<sup>337</sup> *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972), shot by Willis, would be an obvious example of such a highly-acclaimed crime film of the 1970s with a dominant ochre tonality. However, it could be argued that *Killing Them Softly*'s hopeless emotional tenor, alongside the bleached colour code, resembles even more some of the other Hollywood Renaissance films such as *Bullitt* (Yates, 1968), *The French Connection* (Friedkin, 1971), and *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974).

The "American grime" is echoed by yet another critic, writing for *Slant*, who mentions the film's "muddy colour palette" and draws a parallel between the famous opening line of *Godfather* – "I believe in America" – and the Obama's speech in the beginning of *Killing Them Softly*, according to which Americans are free to "make of our [/their] own lives what we [/they] will".<sup>338</sup> Similarly to the rest of the comments, a film critic writing for *The New York Times* argues that *Killing Them Softly* engages in a "desperate, misguided attempt to drag the story toward some kind of contemporary relevance. Even though the cars, the attitudes and the overall griminess of the production design evoke a bygone era".<sup>339</sup> These examples suffice to illustrate the constant way in which *Killing Them Softly* was described, from the youthful *Slant* to the more academic *Sight & Sound*, and from niche blogs to newspapers with the widest readership, as belonging to the 1970s due to its dated vehicles and sombre tonality. The film's bleached colour palette creates a strong contrast with the flashy and colourful world of crime that one is familiar with from Tarantino's films. However, another potential difference between Tarantino's crime films and *Killing Them Softly* can be deducted from *The New York Time*'s review that criticises the latter's attempt to achieve "some kind of contemporary relevance", and that is that *Killing Them Softy*, unlike Tarantino's crime films, does not avoid open commentary of contemporary socio-political concerns.

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<sup>337</sup> Slater-Williams 2012: n.p.

<sup>338</sup> Semley 2013: n.p.

<sup>339</sup> Scott 2012: n.p.



Figure 3-2 The gritty social realism of *Killing Them Softly* that troubled many critics.

Recognising *Killing Them Softly* as making a direct comparison between its dark depiction of American crime and real-life political material, is the most common comment in the related literature; noted practically by every reviewer. While the positive and mixed reviews politely slide over the issue, usually mentioning in passing that the political archival material is not applied “entirely subtly”, the negative reviews largely make this aspect the root of their criticism.<sup>340</sup> Roger Ebert in his 2 out of 5 stars review – in which he repeatedly mixes up the film’s characters and plotline events – notes that a “particular distraction” of the film is the way it draws parallels between politics and crime.<sup>341</sup> Ebert’s review suggests that even if the film fails to fully capture one’s attention, its political side is difficult to overlook. Another author calls the audience to simply “look beyond the louder elements of the economic and political threading”.<sup>342</sup> While in the last account economy and politics are mentioned side-by-side while still kept apart, the majority of commentators who are negative about *Killing Them Softly* fail to keep these categories separate and seamlessly merge the two together. Nevertheless, by doing so these accounts could be understood as missing what could be recognised as one of the central concerns of the film – the eagerness of the politicians to interfere with the free market logic by bailing out major banks with taxpayers’ money during crises.

Peter Travers from *Rolling Stone* finds that the film hammers its commentary on the coldness of corporate America home “with diminishing returns”.<sup>343</sup> Calum Marsh, writing for

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<sup>340</sup> Bradshaw 2012: n.p.

<sup>341</sup> Ebert 2012: n.p.

<sup>342</sup> Slater-Williams 2012: n.p.

<sup>343</sup> Travers 2012: n.p.

*Slant*, notes in his negative review that “every remotely highbrow mob movie since *The Godfather*” has explored the idea that crime can be considered a valid capitalist undertaking, and that this source of inspiration has long since run dry.<sup>344</sup> Marsh goes on to say that *Killing Them Softly*’s political side “dictates” rather than informs the action and that the situation is made worse by the fact that “the political position it adopts is so embarrassingly simplistic and naïve”.<sup>345</sup> *Killing Them Softly*’s political position is recognised by Marsh to be the suggestion that the cruelty of crime in America emerges from the fact that the country is run as a “ruthless business”.<sup>346</sup> Marsh’s criticism of the supposedly simplistic politics of *Killing Them Softly* echoes Wise’s opinion, according to which “there should be more” to the film’s political message in order for it to truly correlate with the complexity of life and business in contemporary America.<sup>347</sup> It is necessary to clarify that although many of the politicians, whose speeches can be heard playing in the background in *Killing Them Softly*, talk of the necessity of coming to the aid of corporate America, none of the characters explicitly connect politics and business. For instance, while Driver at one point says that the mafia is run by a “total corporate mentality”, he is not critical of politics, but of the new business model interfering with the older way of organising crime. Furthermore, as I will show below, his criticism cannot be taken literally because he is himself very much part of such corporate mentality. Thus, it appears that many critics who accuse *Killing Them Softly* of crudely merging politics and business, overlook the fact that the film – for instance, via Jackie’s America is “just a business” argument – could be seen as openly making exactly the opposite argument. In the eyes of characters like Jackie America should be just a business, meaning that the country needs just one thing from politics – that it stays as far as possible from business.

Such criticism suggests that it is important to base assessments about *Killing Them Softly*’s position on the role of the state in citizens’ lives on close textual analysis, which provides a more solid foundation to findings than first impression. That being said, it is also necessary to recognise that such criticism is likely driven in part by an understanding that *Killing Them Softly*’s direct social criticism – that could end up distancing many viewers – works against the film’s aim of affecting its audience. This question is openly raised by Johnston, who, while stating that he welcomes political provocation in mainstream American narrative cinema, wonders: “How effective can the political message be, conveyed as it is

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<sup>344</sup> Marsh 2012: n.p.

<sup>345</sup> Marsh 2012: n.p.

<sup>346</sup> Marsh 2012: n.p.

<sup>347</sup> Wise 2012: n.p.

through an ever-present media barrage as the action unfolds, rather than blended within it?”. Johnston also finds that while films that have mastered their craft, such as *The Godfather* trilogy (Coppola, 1972; 1974; 1990) or *Casino* (Scorsese, 1995), tend to propose generalised arguments about “The American Way”, *Killing Them Softly*, on the other hand, makes a narrow and specific claim by “suggesting that the financial travails of 2008 and afterwards have opened up a fissure in the idea of community, revealing it to be a facade that masks a system run on pitiless self-interest and greed”.<sup>348</sup> My own analysis of *Killing Them Softly* contrasts particularly with such understanding of the film. Firstly, because I see the film as moving beyond the Marxist understanding of ideology as a delusion and thus I do not recognise “the idea of community” (American Imaginary) as masking some hidden truth about reality. Secondly, because I find that it is precisely because *Killing Them Softly* proposes a narrow claim that it partially avoids the hubris of 1970s theory. It is only via the honesty of highlighting the film’s own subjectivity that it can truly propose a universal resonance of its argument. And, thirdly, my analysis of the film will argue that keeping the political material separate from the action is a deliberate strategy of *Killing Them Softly* that is central to the film’s criticism.

Even if one does not necessarily consider Dominik a “nihilist” as some critics have claimed because of the negative social commentary put forth by *Killing Them Softly*, one could agree with another author who finds that the film is a “potently nasty provocation”.<sup>349</sup> A provocation that is largely recognised as unsuccessfully applying the real-life political material to its action to propose a generalisation about the United States. Nonetheless, with all the references to the 1970s, it is surprising that practically none of the commentators suggest that *Killing Them Softly* belongs to this bygone era because provocation and experimentation was a central characteristic of the Hollywood Renaissance. Still, it should not go without notice that the *Killing Them Softly*’s 1970s style provocations were likely the cause for a lot of criticism. The intensity of the film’s argument could be seen as leading to the same kind of intellectual arrogance and theoretical pitfalls that, as I have shown, many recognise were also caused by the 1970s theory. Following Rancière, the film’s strong social criticism could be recognised as unintentionally establishing a hierarchy between an active filmmaker and a passive spectator. Nevertheless, one should also not overlook why *Killing Them Softly* could be understood to be resorting to such drastic measures in the first place.

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<sup>348</sup> Johnston 2014 (2012): n.p.

<sup>349</sup> Leitch 2012: n.p. Travers 2012 n.p; see also Johnston 2014 (2012): n.p.

Considering today's oversaturated mediascape the filmmakers likely saw a need to present more pronounced provocations than those common to Hollywood Renaissance.<sup>350</sup> Although *Killing Them Softly* could be seen as presenting itself as a typical sombre example of the 1970s, with its colours all grey and gritty and its dysfunctional world inhabited by drug-abusers, prostitutes, and criminals – very much unlike what could be recognised as the witty and flashy world of Tarantino's crime films – we only need to remember that the 1970s cinema, often as a direct reaction to Vietnam War, Prague Spring, the opposition to African-American Civil-Rights and Black Power movements, suppression of the student and worker unrest in the United States, France, and elsewhere, was much more critical of society and thus politically direct. As such one could provocatively ask: has the world changed so significantly that cinema does not have to resort to the same critical measures any longer, or has injustice simply learned to function more efficiently via cynicism and by doing its killings softly?

### 3.4 Provocation from start to finish

*Killing Them Softly*'s action centres around a couple of small-time criminals who rob a mafia-protected card game and the enforcers responsible for tracking them down. Engaged in the latter, in addition to Jackie, is once a legendary hitman Mickey Fallon, who turns out to be well past his prime. The reason why petty criminals conceive the heist of a mafia game to be possible in the first place, is because the mobster who operates the illegal gambling joint, Markie Trattman (Ray Liotta), had once organised a robbery of his own card game and got away with it without any retaliation. Therefore an ex-convict Johnny "Squirrel" Amato, who now runs a legitimate dry-cleaning business, sets up the second heist, thinking that Markie will be automatically blamed if somebody was to rob the place again. Although the amateur bandits Frankie and Russell, whom Johnny recruits for the job, manage to pull off the robbery, Russell later brags about the heist to a minor thug Kenny Gill (Slaine). As the latter works for the mafia's enforcer Dillon (Sam Shepard), it soon leads Jackie to find out about the true identity of the perpetrators.

Dominik found Higgins' novel *Cogan's Trade*, on which the film is based on, to be an apt metaphor for the 2008 economic and financial crisis.<sup>351</sup> The latter can also be seen as kind

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<sup>350</sup> Be it the explicit use of drugs in *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969) or the shooting of a federal agent in *The French Connection*.

<sup>351</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

of an inside job, being largely brought about by abusing trust. In the Cannes Film Festival's press conference the director explains this aspect as such: "I realised that it was a story of an economic crisis [...] and the crisis as it occurred because of a failure in regulation. It just seemed [...] something that you could not ignore".<sup>352</sup> Drawing from this opinion, one of the central concerns of the film could be argued to be the fact that the mafia's troubles were brought about by the corporate mentality that Driver criticises and because of which Markie was not made responsible for his actions in the first place. Thus, the question how *Killing Them Softly* represents this shift of paradigm in the way of undertaking "business" needs further attention.

However, as the film both starts and ends with speeches by Obama – who upon the film's release was the President of the United States – it is understandable that the political aspect of the film was understood by many to dominate over the film's focus on the world of crime. While *Killing Them Softly*'s ending – where Jackie and Driver's debate over the nature of America, a discussion that is brought about by a broadcast of Obama's initiation ceremony – is frequently discussed in the related reviews, the beginning, and the fact that the two speeches framing the film appear to bring it to a full circle, has received less attention. Nonetheless, a closer inspection of the opening speech of *Killing Them Softly* could be seen as vital for offering an alternative understanding of the film to the ones currently available. These concerns of the film, one economic and the other political, and the question how are the two related will guide the following analysis. I will demonstrate how close reading of the film is vital for offering an alternative understanding of the overtly political material. Whereas, as I will show, most commentators took the political found footage to be the provocation that *Killing Them Softly* offers, I will draw attention to the fact that the political material is extradiegetic only during the opening credits and that for the rest of the film it remains firmly within the diegetic world. Via this distinction the film can be seen as calling the spectators to relate to the characters, as first the audience, but then throughout the film the characters are being repeatedly bombarded with the political material. It is also important to note that until the very end none of the characters pay any attention to the political material constantly running in the background. The film can be recognised as demonstrating that at first glance it might seem that politics is such a large part of everybody's lives these days, but that on closer inspection politics is actually desperately attempting to re-establish its role in the characters' lives – a mission that it ultimately fails in.

The opening scene of *Killing Them Softly* is highly disorienting and unwelcoming to viewers. The opening sequence consists of title-shots depicted on a pitch-black screen that are

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<sup>352</sup> Dominik et. al. 2012.

crosscut with point-of-view shots of an unknown character emerging from a dark tunnel [Figure 3-3]. Before the character becomes recognisable, one's attention is drawn by the drab debris flying all around. To make the situation even more confusing an unidentifiable and atonal sound plays off against a cheering of a crowd and later against Obama's nomination speech held at the 2008 Democratic National Convention. The contrast that the film's opening creates between potential pre-viewing expectations and the actual film is particularly pronounced when considered that *Killing Them Softly* was advertised as a regular crime film. Its trailer is full of elegant slow-motion action sequences and the film is shown featuring stars such as Pitt and some of the most well-known actors of the crime genre such as Liotta, Gandolfini, and Curatola. The semi-autonomous credit sequence with which *Killing Them Softly* begins, however, is anything but action oriented. What could be seen as intentional false advertising is likely the cause for a lot of criticism and the reason why people were reported to have left the cinema soon after the screening had begun.<sup>353</sup> With the nauseatingly flashing screen and the background audio that constantly switches from a crowd cheering for Obama to a monotonous and haunting noise, there is little doubt that *Killing Them Softly* presents itself from the onset, similarly to many of its 1970s counterparts, as a think-piece with arthouse pretensions aiming to dismay the mass audience.



Figure 3-3 A genre film or arthouse? The confusing credit sequence of *Killing Them Softly*.

<sup>353</sup> References to people walking out from the cinema can be found, for example, in the comment section of Marsh 2012: n.p.

The Obama speech that accompanies only the visual part is repeatedly cut apart as the film constantly returns to the dark screen and haunting noise scenes. Because of this initially it appears that the speech is simply reduced to a meaningless gibberish. The speech's incoherence and the fact that it has largely lost its power to communicate, can be seen as one of the reasons why many regarded the film as distorting America's political reality. The speech, as presented in *Killing Them Softly*, can be reconstructed as such: "America... I say to the people of America... This moment is our, chance to... come... Enough!... To make of our own lives what we will, it is... that pushes us forward... the American promise alive... is that promise that has always set this country apart... it is a promise that says each of us has the freedom to make of our own lives what we will".<sup>354</sup> While this transcript firmly highlights *Killing Them Softly*'s interest in the American Imaginary, it is hardly able to fully do justice to the detailed way in which the speech is presented in the film. Because the screen is at first constantly dark and then follows an unrecognisable person in a shadowy tunnel, and due to the fact that the accompanying sound of the scene is for the most part a horrifying noise, Obama's comforting voice offers relief in this general disarray. All this suggests that the speech and its relation to the rest of the film needs more detailed attention than it has currently received.

The negative response to *Killing Them Softly*'s depiction of the United States is in many ways understandable – the film from onset brings together American politics and extreme poverty. The film's bitter assembling of the two via the Obama's speech and the utterly drab environment likely led those critical of the film to see such a representation of the United States as almost a mockery of the world's most powerful economy and the idea of America as the land of plenty. The President's speech is constantly crosscut with a horrible noise and played over images of darkness, decay, and later those following a lowlife-character Frankie – who turns out to be the anonymous character from the tunnel and whose facial impressions indicate a great discomfort. Frankie looks shabby. He walks with his back hunched, hands deep in the pockets, eyes almost closed, and a burning cigarette seemingly forgotten between his lips. Frankie's grimaces highlight that he suffers from the cold outside and perhaps from coming out of a high or from having a bad hangover. His poor status is further indicated via his well-worn denim jacket that is long out of fashion and by his cheeks being unshaven for several days and his hair uncombed. Moreover, Frankie walks around in a completely rundown environment, offering unflattering views of wreckage and rubble and grey power stations.

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<sup>354</sup> For the entire speech, see Obama 2008: n.p.

It is of little doubt that in order to leave as agonising impression of America as possible, *Killing Them Softly* was shot in New Orleans after the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, although the novel is set in Boston and many characters in the film can be heard referring to this area.<sup>355</sup> Perhaps it is the anguish emerging from seeing one's country depicted in such a shameful manner that has led a critic from no less of an outlet than *The New York Times* to challenge Jackie's opinion about America being a business with a claim: "Fair enough. But it's still a free country".<sup>356</sup> As emotionally appealing as such patriotism might appear, this criticism can be argued to entirely miss the fact that it cannot serve as a strong counterargument to Jackie, because arguing that America is a free country could be recognised as precisely the point of Jackie's tirade. Yet, *Killing Them Softly* suggests this not only by having Jackie in the last scene openly reject the idea of America as shackled by communal responsibilities, but also via the way Obama's speech that opens the film is presented.

It is important to note that the President's speech becomes particularly fragmented when the film's title appears. As both the title and Obama's speech are presented similarly, one word at the time, it suggests an alliance between the two. The film's title – presented as: KILLING... THEM... SOFTLY – is intercut with Obama saying: "Chance to... come... Enough!" The final word is presented as a strict order, forcefully calling one to recognise that it is time to let go of the idea of coming together. *Killing Them Softly*'s scepticism towards the communal aspect of America is represented via the way the film suddenly cuts off the ending of the Obama's sentence about community and by following it up instead with Obama saying firmly: "Enough!". The film's presentation of the speech clearly contradicts its original intent of stressing the importance of community and Obama actually claiming that he has had enough of the last eight years of Republican-led austerity, that according to him has done a great disservice to the country. In this aspect *Killing Them Softly* can be seen as sharing an interest and perhaps a certain scepticism towards language and the way words can change their meaning depending on the context in which they are presented with *Thirteen Conversations* and the way it explores these concerns via its subtitles. Similarly to the beginning of *Killing Them Softly*, where an understanding of the role of a community in an individual's life is a central interest, the debate at the end of the film between Jackie and Driver is sparked by Obama's words about reclaiming the American Dream, according to which "out of many we are one". *E pluribus unum*, words that until the mid-1950s were considered to be a *de facto* motto of the United States, before they were officially replaced with a motto "In God We Trust". Jackie, who in the last scene is

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<sup>355</sup> It has also been noted that "the film was shot in Louisiana for tax-incentive purposes", see Chang 2012: n.p.

<sup>356</sup> Scott 2012: n.p.

arguing with Driver about a proper payment for his killings, considers Driver's attempt to cover up the mafia's stinginess with patriotic catchphrases a hypocritical gesture *par excellence*.

The way *Killing Them Softly* contrasts light with darkness at the beginning of the film adds another level of meaning to Obama's words. After the part of the speech where Obama appears to be scolding those who place their trust in community, Frankie immediately becomes recognisable as an individual as he finally makes it out from the dark tunnel and steps into the broad daylight. Because from this moment onwards the film starts to increasingly follow the rules of classical Hollywood storytelling, it could be seen as suggesting that Frankie (and the spectator) have begun to shift from ambiguity to coherence. From a Žižekian perspective, it could be claimed that both thematically and formally *Killing Them Softly* suggests a need to move away from the darkness of understanding ideology as a delusion, where one misrecognises an idea of a state or community as a reassuring parent of a sort, to the light of seeing ideology as offering the only support that it truly can – the recognition of one's fundamental freedom emerging from the total social contingency of our communal world.

Such contingency can be seen as being repeatedly stressed by *Killing Them Softly*. For instance, in the scene following the killing of Markie and the arrest of Russell, Frankie comes to visit Johnny – who is more interested in going through his dry-cleaning orders than listening to Frankie – to seek comfort and parental guidance. Upon realising that he will receive nothing from Johnny who dryly answers to his concerns that Russell "took his chances", Frankie begins to complain that "this world is just shit". After the emotional build-up in Johnny's office in which Frankie can be seen becoming increasingly anxious, the film suddenly slows down by cutting to a close-up shot of Frankie and offering a pause of silence, before Frankie says: "We're all just on our own". Frankie is shown to be in deep contemplation as if he realised for the first time that not only does he not have any friends as he had just put it, but that all people are alone in this world on a much more fundamental level. It could be argued that from a psychoanalytical perspective Frankie comprehended the Real in his life – that whatever object of his desire is only a reminiscence of a comfort that perhaps never was and that neither other people nor any ideological preference can do anything about this longing. This revelation is followed in *Killing Them Softly* by an ominous music recalling the film's confusing beginning.

Frankie's comparison of the world to excrement echoes Mickey's first discussion with Jackie, presented just prior to the killing of Markie. Once a legendary hitman, Mickey, instead of professionally talking "business", gets himself quickly tipsy and begins wallowing over how his wife did not leave him during all the years he spent in prison. As Mickey now finds himself again potentially ending up in the same situation, he reveals that he perceives no reason to

escape from the law, because, he suddenly ends his ramblings and quickly sobers up by saying: “None of this shit means anything anyways... It’s all bullshit.” After which *Killing Them Softly* gives the viewer a moment for the words to become truly effective, suggesting that Mickey literally means the social sphere as a whole. Such an understanding of a complete social contingency suggests a further similarity between *Killing Them Softly*’s opening and Žižek’s thinking. This could be recognised to arise from the fact that the film’s formal structure changes from experimentality to classical storytelling as the message of Obama’s speech can be seen shifting from coming together as a community to the importance of individual freedom. This change could be considered to be a cinematic equivalent of Žižek’s idea according to which theory is potentially capable of not only altering the social sphere, but as affecting our very perception of the world. I see the film as developing a sense of affective argumentation with the opening section, which the form of detailed audio-visual analysis that I am offering accentuates. Our fundamental freedom and the total social contingency that *Killing Them Softly* can be seen as emphasising from start, emerges from the fact that no ideology can constitute a perfectly complete social realm or fully care for our personal fears and desires. In other words, while ideology is necessary to cope with reality, no specific ideology is necessary as any of them can be replaced with another. The emphasis on such a structural freedom seems to be supported by Obama stressing the importance of recognising one’s choice: “To make of our own lives what we will”. Accompanying these words, the film for the first time, despite the unpleasant setting, begins to evoke positive connotations with the plastic debris making a gentle sound as if soft waves were washing ashore. These words by Obama are also said in particularly gentle and assuring manner. The way the claim about one’s freedom to make of their life what they want contrasts with the rest of the hostile cacophony and visual torment, and the fact that soon after this promise is repeated verbatim, accentuate it as a central idea of the opening sequence and offer a clear suggestion of how the film can be viewed.

I am not proposing an authoritative way of reading the film. The impossibility of the latter is suggested already by the softness of Obama’s tenor that can be seen as precisely beguiling one to recognise the state as a comforting parent. This could be perceived as a particularly problematic position when considering how the American ideal of leading one’s life as one pleases goes increasingly against the factual reality of the possibility of upward social mobility in the United States. *Thirteen Conversations*’ suggestion, made via Gene, that Troy is lucky due to the setting into which he was born, rather than having truly earned his position in

society through hard work, is supported by a number of recent academic studies.<sup>357</sup> Although Dominik also claims that his intent is to show America in a way that is unfamiliar to many Americans, the film could be seen as even more interested in exploring how the idea of America as offering fundamental freedom to its citizens operates in individuals' lives.<sup>358</sup> Therefore, I will draw out a specific way in which the film has not yet been considered, despite the fact that the film makes a number of suggestive hints in this direction.

Even if one does not accept an interpretation of the confusion in the beginning of *Killing Them Softly* as a symbolic representation of the shock of the Real, as Žižek might read it, one could point out that no specific meaning can be assigned to either the black screen or the unidentifiable noise.<sup>359</sup> Although I am not pursuing some auteurist agenda here, it is interesting to note that in one of the interviews given at the Cannes Film Festival Dominik strongly suggests a psychoanalytical understanding of *Killing Them Softly* by saying with the film in mind: "Cinema is not a way of telling stories, but rather a way of better accepting our traumas".<sup>360</sup> From a psychoanalytical perspective the Real, as a phantasmatic remainder from an early childhood of a perceived unity with one's mother and the ultimate end to such a relationship, is of course *the trauma of one's life*.<sup>361</sup> Taking a step back from the universalised notion of the Real and by simplifying the matter, the latter can be replaced with any kind of indication of one's fears and desires. Concerning ideology it is important to recognise how such worries and yearnings are comforted by ideas such as community, state, family, and money. This is not to say, for instance, that a community exists predominantly as an idea or that an actual group of people is unable to offer genuine support and comfort to an individual, but rather that the film could be seen as calling our attention to the imaginary aspect of these notions. The imaginary side of a number of everyday notions, as I will show *Killing Them Softly* suggesting, becomes very apparent when one pays close attention to how a social construct such as money structures one's personal life and the society more broadly.

Before *Killing Them Softly* begins exploring its profound interest in money – an interest that according to Dominik the crime genre is the most capable of analysing – the film can be

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<sup>357</sup> See Gilens and Page 2014: 564–581; Dorling 2017: n.p.; W.Z. 2017: n.p.

<sup>358</sup> Dominik has explained that in his view many films depict Americans "as they would like to be seen," while adding that: "The only genre to show them [Americans] as they really are is the crime film, as it is the only one in which it is acceptable for all the characters to think of nothing but money", Dominik 2012: 3.

<sup>359</sup> From a psychoanalytical perspective it should be noted that because the Real is so alien to a subject, that it cuts through one's customary reliance on the Symbolic (everything to do with language and the social order), supported by the Imaginary (providing an illusion of completeness of ourselves and the world), a film such as *Enter the Void* (Noé, 2009) that attempts to depict the foundational trauma by tracing it all the way back to childbirth is no less Symbolic in its representation of the Real.

<sup>360</sup> Dominik 2012: 14.

<sup>361</sup> See Fink 1995: 60.

seen as suggesting that no matter how soothing Obama's rhetoric is, it cannot truly account for one's fears and desires. This is so because a fundamental divide will always remain between an individual and ideology, which, according to Žižek, is the "structural impossibility" of closing the gap of the Real.<sup>362</sup> In more mundane terms, no speech by no matter how talented and likeable public figure can erase one's darkest fears or permanently fulfil one's deepest desires (hence the common disappointment in politicians following elections). Such impossibility is suggested in *Killing Them Softly* via the way the film – until the title appears – keeps the horrifying noise and dark screens firmly separate from Obama's speech and the ecstatically cheering crowd. It is only once the disturbing noise begins to die down that it briefly merges with Obama's now very gentle and comforting words. The contrast between Obama's gentle words and the audio-visual torment that came before can be seen as suggesting that ideology achieves its power only because of one's hidden fears and desires. However, to indicate how little this purely political discourse is able to fulfil the needs of someone such as Frankie, the character is emphatically shown leaving Obama and McCain's billboards behind [Figure 3–4].



Figure 3-4 Politics shown to be literally beyond Frankie's horizon of interest.

After Frankie makes it out from the tunnel the film cuts from a medium close-up profile shot of him to a slightly low angle 3/4 frontal shot, allowing one to see some out-of-focus election billboards of Obama and McCain in the background. The plastic bags flying all around Frankie now appear as an endless mass of chattered political promises. The scene continues with Frankie walking out of the frame and the camera slowly focusing in on the posters, while

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<sup>362</sup> Žižek 1997: 76.

the extradiegetic cheering from the film's opening shots begins to disappear. The shift of focus from Frankie to the background and with him leaving the frame altogether while the camera remains firmly in place, suggest that the two sides – Frankie and politics – are worlds apart. It should not go without notice that this is the only time in *Killing Them Softly* that a politician's speech is extradiegetic, further highlighting the deliberate separation between the film's action and its presentation of politics. From this aspect where politics is shown to have so little effect on one's life, the film's constant bombardment with the real-life political material that many commentators viewed negatively can be seen as a representation of the oversaturation of politics during an election period. On a more interpretative level, it can be viewed as a desperate attempt by various politico-technicians and campaign managers to re-establish the significance of politics in people's lives. That this is largely a futile attempt is suggested by the fact that none of the characters, except Driver and Jackie at the very end, pay any attention to the political material that constantly surrounds them from various media channels.

Although critics are right in claiming that it is *Killing Them Softly* that brings politics together with a drab depiction of America, the way in which the two are presented should not be overlooked. By keeping the political material so markedly separate from the action – beginning with the opening scene and joining the two briefly together only by the very end of the film, and even then having Jackie immediately dismiss Obama's words – *Killing Them Softly* could be seen as suggesting that for a large number of Americans politics has ceased to function as an ideological master-narrative. That this has not always been the case, I will show, is highlighted by the way the film draws upon a certain nostalgia for America's past. By representing politics – once the most significant social formation in organising a state – as entirely dated and impotent ideology, *Killing Them Softly* could be seen to be taking the notion of complete social contingency, which *Thirteen Conversations* concludes with, as its point of departure.

### **3.5 Politics, business, and the deadlock of contemporary thought**

After the disorienting opening scene, Frankie is shown meeting Russell on a bleak street corner to go and visit Johnny who is interested in offering them a job. Frankie and Russell are from the start shown to be two very different people. Frankie, with an unappealing nasal timbre, immediately begins to complain that Russell is several hours late, suggesting that he is worried about the negative impression that this will leave on Johnny. Russell, on the other hand, is

depicted as a carefree type, having all the time in the world. The impression that Russell is largely unbothered by social rules and that he is particularly disrespectful towards authority is supported by a sound-bridge, in which we hear Johnny criticising him even before the film cuts to the next scene. Once in Johnny's office, it is clear that Johnny has trouble getting the respect he sees himself deserving from Russell, despite being the one to offer the two a proper "job". Although, Frankie attempts to reason with Russell by suggesting that Johnny is "trying to do us a favour", Russell argues instead that it is rather he and Frankie that are doing Johnny a favour, because the latter is too much of a coward to do the job himself. This leads Johnny to abruptly dismiss Russell as he angrily suggests that Frankie finds someone else to help him out. Whereas Frankie's disappointed facial impression indicates that he feels bad about the way the meeting turned out, Russell simply laughs at Johnny's theatrics. Frankie then desperately tries to plead with Johnny to tell him about the job as he badly needs the money, but Johnny who is the type of person that puts business rationality before emotions remains unconvinced. The emphasis on the men's differences that the setup establishes becomes especially important as the film progresses.

The next scene depicting Russell casually walking down a completely shattered street, with decaying houses all around and a loud industrial noise sounding in the background, while eating an ice-cream, smoking a cigarette, and walking a little English Toy Terrier, re-establishes his carefree nature. Amidst the utter chaos Russell is making the best of the dire situation by enjoying life. Frankie also soon reaffirms his whiney and submissive character, as he attempts to plead with Russell to come to another meeting with Johnny. Before the two meet, however, a freight-train or a cargo ship can be heard sounding its horn in the background reminding one of the sound of a factory horn – which in a form of an image of an horn blowing is a typical stand-in for the working class in the 1920s Soviet cinema. An impression of the miserable conditions that the contemporary working class has to accept in order to maintain their employment is soon repeated when Frankie complains to Johnny that he was only offered a position on the so-called graveyard shift, which would make it impossible for him to get to work and back with public transport (the only means of transport that he can afford). The rundown housing and sounds of nearby heavy industry shot in a brownish colour palette also recall the socially critical tone of working-class life from the 1970s cinema, depicted in films such as *Blue Collar* (Schrader, 1978), *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978), and *Killer of Sheep* (Burnett, 1978). Frankie with his denim jacket can also be seen as recalling the image of Bruce Springsteen to an extent, which creates an additional connotation with the social criticism put forth by songs such as *Born in the U.S.A.* At the same time, because of the multi-protagonist

form of *Killing Them Softly* and the fact that practically all the characters represent the working-class, the film could be seen as suggesting the disappearing middle class of the United States. With the missing middle class the film appears to suggest that somewhere, unrecognisable to commoners, there are the superrich who cause drastic economic downturns, but other than that, everybody on the streets are equally poor. The foghorn also serves as a warning sign of the troubles ahead. The impression of some unknown danger coming about is also suggested by the fact that, from a random car passing by, Bush can be heard promising on the radio that he will lead the economy into a new direction. The scene is set in a time period slightly prior the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers that set global equity markets on a steep downward spiral. In retrospect, the President could be seen as acting at the time as the captain of a sinking ship, attempting to evoke an impression of safety and stability despite people's justified fear over the uncertain economic situation. This is the first of many diegetic uses of real-life political material of which many commentators were critical.

As Russell begins to explain that he is not all that interested in what Johnny has to offer, the film moves from an establishing shot to a shot-reverse shot sequence, revealing another out-of-focus Obama billboard standing in the distance behind Russell. *Killing Them Softly* seems to propose that similarly to Frankie, American politics has little value in Russell's life. This is perhaps even more the case with him as he is an Australian expat. Before going further, it is important to draw attention to how unfavourably Russell is represented. Even though Gene's son, Ronald James "Ronnie" English (Alex Burns), in *Thirteen Conversations*, is also addicted to heroin, he is largely depicted as a victim of a capitalist society. As Ronnie gets high in a lonely alley, after having just mugged a woman on a street, gentle music plays in the background as a medium shot lingers on the pretty looking young man, allowing the viewer to study his pleased facial expression as the drug begins to have an effect on him. White pieces of paper, similar to the plastic bags from the beginning of *Killing Them Softly*, gently fly around him. The film cuts to a rooftop-shot looking down at Ronnie and the spectator can see him being dwarfed and alone in the vast space, while the confetti-like pieces of white paper continue to fall from the sky. With the soft music accompanying the scene and the fact that earlier in the film the angelic Beatrice had blown flower petals out from a window that looked very similar to the white pieces of paper, Ronnie's innocence is clearly accentuated. Ronnie appears to be a lost child with an uncaring father, who with the help of drugs gets to briefly revisit his childhood dreams. This impression is further suggested by the fact that from above Ronnie looks like a tiny figurine inside of a snow globe. With the top-down shot at Ronnie *Thirteen Conversations* can be seen as suggesting that it is still possible to create distance from the depicted to achieve

a degree of objectivity. *Killing Them Softly* looks Russell straight in to the face, proposing a much more Žižekian stand according to which we are all inside the capitalist ideology that the film is exploring. It offers no romantic view of ruined youth, but a down-and-dirty view of Russell, who is old and unpleasant. In contrast to the baby-faced Ronnie, the wrinkled Russell is constantly sweaty because of his addiction, has greasy grown-out hair and dirty well-worn clothes [Figure 3–5]. Russell also explains enthusiastically to Frankie that he is stealing purebred dogs to sell them in Florida, until he can afford an ounce of heroin in order to become a drug dealer. It becomes clear that Russell is no martyr to capitalism, but rather an aspiring entrepreneur. The ironic way in which *Killing Them Softly* shows Russell explaining his business plan practically under an Obama election billboard, bitterly echoing the American promise of personal (economic) freedom, should not distract one from noticing how invested the film is in exploring such a forward-looking capitalistic spirit.



Figure 3-5 These days everybody is an entrepreneur.

In the next scene Johnny clarifies that the job he is proposing is not like robbing a bank, where the staff practically expect theft from time to time and where they do not really care about it as it is not their money. In this business, Johnny continues, people feel liable and will take action if they realise that the robbers are not entirely certain of what they are doing. This in turn, Johnny explains, leads to killing, and there is no need for that as nobody is going to get paid extra for it. It should be noted how pragmatically Johnny explains the situation. The point that Johnny is making is not moral, that murder is unacceptable, but an economically sound practicality – killing is an unnecessary inconvenience in this case, because it cannot be converted to more money. The same pragmatism has led Johnny to consider the robbery in the

first place, because, as he put it the last time he met with Frankie, his dry-cleaning business “is not doing what it should be”. Johnny’s business could be lagging due to the years that he spent in prison for a previous heist, but also likely because of the tired economic environment of 2008. Because Johnny expresses a firm expectation regarding how his business should be doing, the depressed economic situation has likely caused the American ideal of freedom for private enterprise that will lead one to upward social mobility seem like a hollow promise to him. It is likely because of the economic situation that Johnny cannot work himself up as quickly and easily as he had envisioned. Thus, in his view, he is almost made to take his capitalist ambitions to the next level via illegal means. However, being well aware of the consequences of failure in such an economic pursuit, as higher returns often involve higher risks, Johnny attempts to manage his risks well by carefully considering the right people for the job.

Frankie is in even more of an economic pit than Johnny as his parole officer has found him a job that requires a car, something for which he does not have the money (hence, in his own words, his need for the job in the first place). The reason why Russell, on the other hand, is not too eager to take up Johnny’s offer is also financial, because he sees himself as already engaged in a profitable enterprise. Johnny’s scepticism of Russell’s business venture also emerges from a financial logic as he sees Russell taking on too much risk for a lacklustre return. It later turns out that Johnny rightly predicts that Russell is going to get “nabbed” for dealing drugs. In both Frankie and Johnny’s case, however, *Killing Them Softly* can be seen as suggesting that it is the failure of the state to properly organise one’s freedom to make of their lives what they will that leads Johnny and Frankie to consider the illegal alternative. That being said, the role of a state is a complex one because people desire very different things. The potential solutions to Frankie’s and Johnny’s desires would not only be contrastingly different, but almost certainly mutually exclusive. It is safe to assume that the hapless Frankie, who constantly seeks parental guidance from the different characters that he comes across, would prefer a more European social-democratic style welfare state, whereas Johnny, who is interested in getting his business rolling, would most probably wish for a more neoliberal system where, at least in theory, the state interferes with the free market logic as little as possible. *Killing Them Softly*’s multi-protagonist form and the fact that the film highlights sharp contrasts between its characters from early on, appear to make it much harder to determine the film’s political intent, even if many commentators have given it little credit and accused the film of naïveté.

What is perhaps even more important to recognise is that in the case of all three men, politics and the state are recognised as entirely separate spheres from business. Although Frankie might wish for a more caring state, while Johnny likely desires that the state would

provide small business with equal opportunities to those of conglomerates that have the means to lobby politicians, together with Russell they all recognise the state as a totally inept entity in comparison to business. It is interesting to note that in Žižek's view this problematic is not specific to the United States as he considers the “principal contradiction” of the idea of the New World Order to be that a political equivalent to global capitalism is much harder to find.<sup>363</sup> The way the film shows Frankie and Russell leaving the political billboards behind, suggests that political promises and wishes are considered by the characters to be a fantasy of a sort, while business is seen as having a real effect on one's life. As Johnny later proposes, regarding the fallout caused by their dangerous “business” venture, they are all living in a world where one simply has to take one's chances. With such a view of the social survival of the fittest, an idea that *Killing Them Softly* goes on to develop much further, the film can be seen to represent a paradigm shift taking place in the understanding of the American Dream in the post-millennial period, which is obvious in comparison to *Thirteen Conversations*. Whereas *Thirteen Conversations* still explores the possibility that personal effort is tied to social mobility and the film is at pains to emphasise the social aspect of one's dedication to work, noting that while such pursuit is individualistic, it should not be understood as a purely egoistic quest, *Killing Them Softly*, on the other hand, deliberately cuts out the emphasis on the communal aspect of Obama's speech and goes on to show, in numerous ways, the separation of the state and business. The business side of things, in *Killing Them Softly*'s view, is not desirable because it contributes to a society while also benefitting the pursuer of financial well-being, but simply because its only necessary outcome – money – is something far more reliable than anything that the state can offer.

As Johnny is of a higher social standing than Frankie and Russell he could be recognised as being less alienated from, and as having a more complex relationship with, the state. In a later scene where Frankie is afraid that somebody is going to find out about their responsibility for the heist and he comes to see Johnny to find comfort, something that the latter from his pragmatic perspective is not ready to offer, one may notice a photo of a group of soldiers on their tour of duty on the wall in Johnny's dry-cleaning business [Figure 3–6]. As the photo is shot in a desert environment and considering Johnny's age it is safe to assume that it is not a picture of Johnny's own tour, but that at least one of the troopers on the picture might be Johnny's child. Johnny did complain earlier that his kids have largely grown up without him around. While it cannot be concluded with complete certainty that Johnny is a patriot for leading

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<sup>363</sup> Žižek 2011: 168.

his children to serve the state via military service, the picture does speak for his patriotism for being on the wall in the first place. As such it is somewhat surprising that he does not feel the same obligation to the state concerning his own business ventures. Even more the photo being placed right next to the counter, making it visible to all the customers who place an order for or come to collect their dry-cleaning, suggests that Johnny is trying to create a shared pretence of patriotism via the picture of the troopers and please patriotically minded customers. As such there appears to be commercial logic behind Johnny's choice for decoration. The fact that Johnny does not feel obligated to create a similar sense of patriotism via his business ethics, showing himself as a self-made entrepreneur climbing the social latter and contributing to the society, also suggests a change in business expectations. While the idea of a positive social impact emerging from one's economic pursuit does not resonate with Johnny, which is a dominant feature of the older version of the American Dream that *Thirteen Conversations* studies, the neoliberal idea of a need to protect the free market, with force if necessary, makes perfect sense to him as he attempts to interpellate customers with the patriotic photo. What *Killing Them Softly* suggests is that it does not matter how different the men are in their personalities or how alienated they might be from the idea of an active citizenship as a contributing part of the state, they are all committed to a belief in business.



Figure 3-6 Patriotism has nothing to do with business, or has it? A photo of American troopers in Johnny's business.

The film's depiction of the situation suggests a certain impossibility of thinking beyond capitalism. A number of philosophers have likewise suggested that contemporary thought cannot even imagine an alternative to capitalism and that it is far easier today to think about the

end of the world, than it is about a different economic model.<sup>364</sup> In Astra Taylor's 2005 documentary *Žižek!*, Žižek phrases the idea as such:

Think about the strangeness of today's situation. Thirty, forty years ago, we were still debating about what the future will be: communist, fascist, capitalist, whatever. Today, nobody even debates these issues. We all silently accept global capitalism is here to stay. On the other hand, we are obsessed with cosmic catastrophes: the whole life on earth disintegrating, because of some virus, because of an asteroid hitting the earth, and so on. So the paradox is, that it's much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism.<sup>365</sup>

With the sound of an ominous foghorn repeatedly ringing in the background of *Killing Them Softly*, and Bush, Obama, and McCain being presented as capitalist straw men during the time of the severest economic downfalls since the Great Depression, themes to which the film will return to time and again, Žižek's view on society's preference for a morbid fantasy rather than thinking about potential future directions of leading a society appears readily confirmed by *Killing Them Softly*. Moreover, what could be recognised as a touch of nostalgia in Žižek's words is similarly evoked by the film. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this problematic is not only that Johnny, Frankie, and Russell are accepting, each in their own way, a capitalist model of success without any questioning, or even that free market capitalism has, according to the film, proved to be a far more resilient ideology than statehood, but that an alternative to a capitalist organisation of economy appears to be the most suggestive manifestation of the Real today, offering an idea that appears to be simply inconceivable.

### 3.6 Why is it that we do the things that we do?

Even before *Killing Them Softly* begins exploring its interest in money, the film can be seen as setting up the question: from where does money draw its power in the first place? Besides Russell's business venture, the other reason why he is not interested in coming along

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<sup>364</sup> The idea is most commonly ascribed to Fredric Jameson, but it originates actually from H. Bruce Franklin's 1979 essay on J. G. Ballard. In the essay Franklin suggests that Ballard mistakes the end of capitalism with the end of the world. Jameson later recalls having come across such an idea, but does not mention the correct source, after which Žižek uses it without directly referring to Jameson. Finally, Mark Fisher uses the idea, saying that it is commonly ascribed to both Jameson and Žižek. The connection between Jameson and Franklin was originally drawn by Olipoth 2009: n.p. See Franklin 1979: n.p. Jameson 1996 and 2003; Žižek 2005; Fisher 2009.

<sup>365</sup> Žižek 2005.

to Johnny's new meeting is that he, to put it politely, already has a date for the night. Russell himself explains it in more unpolished terms, with phrases such as: "Well yeah, these girls, you see 'em, you probably wouldn't want to rape them, but all the plumbing works just fine". This clarification is followed by a short pause to allow the viewer to absorb Frankie's repulsion, after which the film appears to top it off by having Russell burp loudly. Such scenes serve not only to reaffirm an unpleasant impression of Russell – and are not solely an indication of the kind of social-realist dialogue that many commentators noted – but also highlight the way in which women are treated in (and by) the film. Although many commentators mention the lack of women in the film they do not really elaborate on it.<sup>366</sup>

While the lack of gender diversity can be seen as simply suggesting a male centred world of business (with or without quotation marks), the fact that women are so pronouncedly missing from the film appears to also suggest how the idea of a woman operates in a hetero-male fantasy. Whereas almost all the characters can be heard fantasising about women at great length, there is only one female character in *Killing Them Softly* who has a more substantial role and even she is identified in the end credits simply by her profession as a "hooker" (Linara Washington). Depriving the only female character of a proper name and describing her instead via her occupation, which is sexual occupation and thus the most stereotypically objectifying job, suggests that *Killing Them Softly*, similarly to Žižek, is more interested in the economic side of inequality than in purely gender politics.<sup>367</sup> *Killing Them Softly* could be seen as first narrowing down its narrative world through depicting only the mafia and then again via gender, in order to end up with a world where in order to survive one has to rob oneself from all emotions and intimacies. Jackie's success is shown to emerge partially from the fact that he is not willing to engage with women while working – Jackie resolutely rejects the prostitute's request to zip up her dress. On the other hand, Mickey ends up in prison, set up by Jackie, because of his inability to give up women while being engaged in "business" – instead of preparing for the murders that he is paid for, he spends his time boozing and sleeping around with prostitutes. Mickey calls the latter his "hobby", which suggests that he is aware of a strict difference between business and pleasure, but that in his weakened state he is simply unable to follow the rules of contemporary capitalism. Women are therefore treated by the film's characters as a distraction from work and equated with alcohol and hard drugs, which are shown to be the downfall of characters.

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<sup>366</sup> Corliss 2012; n.p.; Slater-Williams 2012; n.p.

<sup>367</sup> Regarding Žižek's position on the LGBT movement, see Žižek 2017b.

Although the film's own role in supporting such a patriarchal fantasy should not go without notice, the film can be understood to be setting up the contrast between the lack of female characters and the male characters' constant obsessing about women, in order to propose a psychoanalytical understanding of the nature of desire.<sup>368</sup> According to which, crudely put, an object of desire operates as a fetish, needing a certain distance in order to be truly desirable.<sup>369</sup> Žižek goes so far as to claim that an understanding of how fantasy and desire are related is the central idea of psychoanalysis, saying: "If there is a point in psychoanalysis, it is that people do not really want or desire happiness".<sup>370</sup> Žižek goes on to explain how an affair can operate only because one is already in a relationship and how scientists are often willing to risk their very lives in the name of their intellectual pursuits – examples that he understands to suggest a more general indication of the nature of one's desire.<sup>371</sup> Therefore Russell's crude dialogue is not only a marker of his uneducated manners, but one could argue that in order for him to really desire the woman that he is meeting later, he has to first create a certain distance from her via his appealing use of language about her.

However, the situation is more complex than this, because Russell's dialogue specifically describes the woman as undesirable, by emphasising only her sexual "functionality". As such there appears to be a close parallel between how Russell and Mickey objectify women by identifying them via a single function and as objects that can be brought and collected. What the film can be seen as suggesting is that contemporary desire has gone through a transformation by implementing business logic. Whereas according to psychoanalysis sexual relationship does not exist in the sense that, without fully acknowledging it, people use their partner in a sexual affair as a prop to an extent, mentally desiring something or someone else, then *Killing Them Softly*, on the other hand, shows this aspect of intimacy to be obvious to some of the characters, who openly treat people as mere props for their desire.<sup>372</sup> This in turn suggests – made evident by Mickey repeatedly obsessing about the loyalty of his wife and the sexiness of his ex-girlfriend, while sleeping with prostitutes – that whereas according to a stereotypical psychoanalytical scenario one is sleeping with one's partner while desiring someone else, then in *Killing Them Softly*'s masculine world of business, one goes straight to the "lover", available in exchange for money, because in this world a faithful wife or a kind

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<sup>368</sup> Bruce Fink offers a good overview of Lacan's understanding of "There is no such thing as a sexual relationship" 1991: 59–85.

<sup>369</sup> Žižek 2011: 303.

<sup>370</sup> Žižek 2013.

<sup>371</sup> Žižek 2013.

<sup>372</sup> Žižek 2013.

girlfriend, or any emotionally meaningful relationship for that matter, has become the true missing object of desire.

Even if unacknowledged by *Killing Them Softly*, the film, with its focus on the masculine world of crime and pronounced omission of female characters, can be seen as highlighting the limitations of the psychoanalytical framework, in which it can be recognised to be operating. By depicting a world in which women are commodified as objects of male desire – an understanding of male desire that could be argued to correspond to the Lacanian model – the film can be seen to be stressing the shortcomings of such a world. Although a detailed criticism of Lacan's ideas from a feminist position is beyond the scope here, I would like to briefly highlight the similarity between how the film depicts the male characters' attitude towards women and Luce Irigaray's understanding of the commodification of women. *Killing Them Softly* appears to correspond very accurately to what Irigaray terms hom(m)o-sexuality, signifying both the order of the same (*homo*) and that of men (*homme*) – ignoring differences between women and treating them as the means for men to form alliances with one another.<sup>373</sup> Irigaray claims: “The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men [...]. The work force is thus always assumed to be masculine, and “products” are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone”.<sup>374</sup> Not only does this idea correlate with the way, as I have identified, women are recognised by the main characters as a distraction from the masculine work, but the prostitute is not only used by Mickey for his personal enjoyment, but also abused, as by the end of their transaction he threatens to kill her – a sudden cut to Jackie as his face turns serious, indicates the severity of Mickey's threat given the men's profession. Following Irigaray's logic a bit further, according to which “heterosexuality has been up to now just an alibi for the smooth workings of man's relations with himself, of relations among men”, suggests that Mickey needs to demonstrate his masculinity to Jackie, because the latter has been suggesting that Mickey is unable to perform masculinely by doing the work that is expected from him.<sup>375</sup> Jackie not only makes this point again as soon as the prostitute leaves, but he is also depicted throughout as the most masculine character of the film. This is largely so, following Irigaray, because of Jackie's ability to work at all times and in the most various conditions. *Killing Them Softly* can therefore be seen to be suggesting that as long as the work force remains being rendered masculine by the society, the latter will act as a stimulus for capitalist production.

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<sup>373</sup> Irigaray 1985: 170–172.

<sup>374</sup> Irigaray 1985: 171.

<sup>375</sup> Irigaray 1985: 172.

A liaison between fantasy and desire that can be potentially dangerous not only to the object of desire, but also to the subject of desire, can be seen operating also in the flashback scene through which Johnny explains to Frankie how Markie robbed the very card game that he himself is responsible for. While it might have been Markie's desire for the easy money that he saw exchanging hands in his gambling place that originally drove him to organise the robbery, as Johnny explains, his impulse to later reveal that it was him that robbed the place is much harder to understand. Although Markie's sudden urge to confess is more strongly motivated on the narrative level than on the character level, for it is a necessary event that makes the following actions possible, it can be interpreted as being caused by Markie's playful nature additionally lubricated by alcohol. However, Markie's irrational urge to make known that he was the one behind the robbery, something that could easily cost him his life, appears to be adequately explainable via the complicated nature of desire. Having obtained the money from the heist and after realising how easily he got away with it, the stolen money likely quickly lost its appeal for Markie. From this it can be concluded that Markie was potentially more drawn by the desire to see if he can get away with the heist all along, than the actual fruits of his labour. After Markie had successfully achieved the seeming goal of his desire, the only thing that could still arouse him was to see if he can also get away with revealing that it was him who robbed the place – an initiative that intellectually makes very little sense.

A similar suggestion is even more strongly proposed via Russell revealing to Kenny, who works for the mafia's enforcer Dillon, that he was the one behind a robbery of a mafia protected card game. The fact that the film returns to the topic of irrational confessions indicates that this is not an insignificant element of the film, but that it rather expresses its deep interest in desire. This is particularly so when considered that the spectator finds out about Russell's unintelligent confession in a scene where he and Frankie get high and where soft light and gentle sounds, indicating their enjoyment, merge with the sound of children playing. Because the film's point of view constantly switches between Russell's mental images and reality, it is impossible to say whether the sounds are coming from outside or if they emerge from his thoughts. Either way the film can be seen as making a strong suggestion that one's desires are rooted in early childhood.

In Russell's case there are several excuses for his unnecessary confession that leads Jackie to attempt to track him down, along with Frankie and Johnny. Russell is shown to be a foreigner not only by his strong Australian accent, but also via the fact that when Johnny was asking around about him, nobody knew Russell. This can indicate that he was simply unaware of the workings of the local mafia. In addition, Russell was also bragging to Kenny, because he

was attempting to hire Kenny as a dealer and wanted to show himself in a more serious light than his criminal actions would really suggest. Nonetheless, while finding out from Frankie that Kenny works for Dillon, he remains ignorant of the danger that this entails, countering Frankie's revelation, by saying: "So what?" Although, his ignorance is partially caused by him being high, it can also be seen as him not really caring about the danger. Nonetheless, whereas Markie's confession is entirely irrational, Russell's is much more connected to capitalist ideology. Not only did Russell get himself in trouble for attempting to hire Kenny, but he also changed from stealing and selling dogs to a more profitable, but also more dangerous career of dealing drugs. In Russell's mind both selling stolen dogs and robbing the mafia protected card game were ways of raising enough cash to start his own business. Russell's dedication to capitalistic pursuit is stressed by the fact that even when learning from Kenny that hitmen are after him, he still opts for staying around and attempting to hire dealers to work for him, rather than selling the drugs quickly as this would significantly reduce his profit from the deal.

The film's interest in the nature of desire to constantly replace its goal-object and money as a perfect vehicle for such a deferral becomes even more apparent as Russell and Frankie are about to execute Johnny's heist plan. The scene begins with Russell complementing Frankie on the chosen getaway car. While I will analyse the use of cars in *Killing Them Softly* more closely below, it is important to recognise here how the car operates as a reference point for Frankie's desire. As Frankie is also very fond of the car, Russell suggests that Frankie should simply keep it for himself. Russell's amateur status as a robber is hinted by the fact that he fails to consider that by keeping the getaway car Frankie would obviously make it much easier for the mafia to associate him with the robbery. That is why Frankie bitterly replies to Russell: "That's just what I need – is a nice hot car". As after this Russell starts teasing him for still "not getting any", the car can be seen as being "hot" in two different ways – being a marked car and being hot in sexual terms, as a prop that supposedly is alluring to women. The film highlights that both Frankie and Russell see the car to an extent as a means of attracting the opposite sex, rather than as means of transportation. This is further supported by the fact that soon after the heist, Frankie is shown to have brought himself a "hot" car.

The large heist car, which Russell describes "as a lounge room", is also often considered in the American Imaginary as a place to have intercourse. Such a sexual connotation, produced by countless cinematic images of couples parking their cars on a promontory overlooking the city, indicates how media helps to commodify one's most intimate desires. For instance, the advertising industry typically associates cars with an image of freedom – with black mustangs running next to the shiny vehicle in Grand Canyon like setting – whereas in reality people spend

a large proportion of their time stuck in traffic. This is particularly the case in the United States where the distances between homes and workplaces are often very long, and because the state generally favours private transport over public transport. The key point here, however, is not that one is unaware of the actual traffic situation when purchasing a car or that such commercials manage to deceive people about reality, as earlier theories of ideology would have one believe, but rather that, according to Žižek, it is precisely one's belief that is a determining factor in such situations.<sup>376</sup> Žižek describes the situation in the following way via *Kung Fu Panda*'s (Osborne; Stevenson, 2008) plot about a secret recipe: "I know very well there is no special ingredient, but I nonetheless *believe* in it (and act accordingly)".<sup>377</sup> He continues by saying: "Cynical denunciation (at the level of rational knowledge) is counteracted by the call of "irrational" belief – and this is the most elementary formula of how ideology functions today".<sup>378</sup> To put it differently, consumerism does its best to ensure that one's subconscious urges get the better of one's conscious decisions. As Žižek puts it: "The progress of capitalism, which necessitates a consumerist ideology, is gradually undermining the very (Protestant ethical) attitude which rendered capitalism possible".<sup>379</sup> Consumerism is an aspect of capitalism that directly contradicts capitalism's original core of concentrating on work ethic and increasing the efficiency of production.

The line of reasoning that "I know that money is just a piece of paper, but I treat it nonetheless as there was something more to it", Žižek argues, highlights precisely the fetishist disavowal related to money.<sup>380</sup> Not only is money an ideal object of desire because it can be seemingly converted to almost whatever one desires, but money is also highly appealing in such a role in its own right because there never seems to be enough of it. *Killing Them Softly* highlights such senseless greed in the heist scene where, despite the clear danger to their lives, Frankie, after receiving all the money from the safe, decides to also steal the mobsters' personal cash and valuables. In order to get the mobsters cooperating Frankie appears to remind them the imaginary side of money by saying: "Give it all up and nobody gets hurt. It's *only* money". With Frankie pausing between the two sentences and the film calmly studying his face as he advises the mobsters there is a clear emphasis on the latter part. This is advice that Frankie himself has ignored by allowing his desires to bring him so close to death.

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<sup>376</sup> Žižek 2011: 70.

<sup>377</sup> Žižek 2011: 70 (emphases in original).

<sup>378</sup> Žižek 2011: 70.

<sup>379</sup> Žižek 2011: xiii.

<sup>380</sup> Žižek 1989: 18.

The fact that one is almost trapped in attempting to fulfil their desire and that such a pursuit is exactly what drives Frankie and Russell to risk their lives is further suggested with the remaining dialogue of the car scene. Right after Russell and Frankie's sexually explicit discussions about women, homosexual encounters, and zoophilia, the film shifts from what it depicts as cheeky and active joking to a much more intimate and slow-paced tone, suggesting an actual emotional bond between the men. *Killing Them Softly* thus highlights how the explicit discussion also offers a necessary distance for the men to bypass their masculine image of themselves. The emphatic connection between the two also suggests that they are to some extent looking for personal contact and safety, which is desirable precisely because they do not have it. However, it is a desire for which they do not need any money. Russell can be seen attempting to comfort Frankie by telling him about another one of his sexual adventures, but also indicating a fine line between pleasure and pain, as Russell's sexually explicit tale ends with the revelation that after the intercourse the woman promised to kill herself. Although now it is Frankie who attempts to comfort Russell by claiming that it does not mean anything as women supposedly always say that, the film ends the discussion with a lengthy silence, followed by Russell finally saying "yeah" as if emerging from deep contemplation. It remains unclear whether the woman that Russell had in mind did commit suicide or not, but Russell's serious thoughtfulness suggests that the story brought back painful memories for him. In more psychoanalytical terms, it is a momentary encounter with the Real, because of which Russell drops his cheerful bluster, and allows the gravity of what they are about to do to weigh him down. In this light the nature of their current approach to life can be seen striking him as utterly futile. The film stresses that if one pushes the pursuit of desires too far, one will inevitably come to face death.

The fact that pleasure has a dark side in the form of pain and that there is a delicate balance between the two is emphasised also as the film cuts from the car to outside. In this scene Frankie and Russell can be seen slowly arriving at the gambling joint with their large muscle car. The scene's sombre tonality, haunting music, and the sound of a lightbulb quietly sizzling nearby suggest the nervousness of the two even before the film cuts back to the inside of the vehicle. *Killing Them Softly* then reveals that the air is tense inside the car and the friendly teasing long gone. Without any music to accompany the scene, all the diegetic sounds are highly amplified as Russell anxiously searches for the equipment necessary for the robbery. To indicate the sudden tension between the men, Frankie immediately begins complaining over Russell's choice of dishwashing gloves for the job and the length of the sawn-off-shotgun's barrel from which the heads of the cartridges can be seen – factors that will make them look like amateurs, something that Johnny had particularly stressed should not be the impression.

Before Frankie exits the vehicle, he asks Russell whether he is “ready to do this”. Russell indicates that he is trying to get the dishwashing glove on. A long take studying Russell’s worried facial expression again suggests that he feels that he has gone too far to back out now. The lengthy shot exploring Russell’s face as Frankie has already left the car, where Russell looks deeply concerned and can be heard sighing heavily suggests that on some level he himself realises that this time he has crossed a fundamental line in pursuing his desire [Figure 3-7]. Once inside the gambling joint Markie instantly attempts to take advantage of the apparently more amateur and vulnerable Russell, as he begins to encourage him that it is still not too late for him to escape if he is willing to sacrifice Frankie. That this could be seen as a hopeless attempt by Markie to actually save his own life is suggested by the fact that his facial expression when he realises that his gambling game is being robbed again clearly echoes Russell’s worried gaze. One glance at all the serious looking mobsters around him indicates that Markie is well aware that his desire to set up the first heist has come back to haunt him, and that similarly to these two characters, he is now a “dead man walking”.



Figure 3-7 Russell pondering how he got to this point.

### 3.7 Back to the simple times

The way capitalist ideology is shown in *Killing Them Softly* to operate via one’s fears and desires becomes even more accentuated through Jackie – a slick enforcer depicted as an absolute professional who seemingly has no fears or desires. Jackie, played by one of the film’s producers and production company’s *Plan B Entertainment* co-founders Brad Pitt, gets a grand entrance as the soundtrack compares his arrival via Johnny Cash’s *The Man Comes Around* to

no lesser event than Jesus Christ's second coming. The choice of musical accompaniment suggests that Jackie is a sort of miracle in a time of widespread corporate mentality. An image of Jackie as a strong individual that most movie-posters created by having only Pitt on them, firmly aiming a shotgun, or at least by always placing him at the centre of the character axis (both being uncommon features of the multi-protagonist film), is immediately affirmed by the film. Jackie is introduced via a long sequence, in which we see him wearing sunglasses and smoking, while driving a muscle car. This rather unusual imbalance for a multi-protagonist film in favouring so clearly one of the characters over the others emerges partially from the source material, as the novel on which the film is based, *Cogan's Trade*, focuses on Jackie Cogan. At the same time this distinction also indicates that the film represents some of its main arguments through Jackie. Because Jackie is quite a "cynical bastard", as Driver puts it at the very end, *Killing Them Softly*'s emphasis on him makes the film's articulated understanding of ideology run into a pitfall that is specific to the contemporary difficulty of envisioning an alternative to the current capitalist situation.

When Jackie first enters Driver's vehicle a commentator on the radio can be heard saying that President Bush has to "sway public opinion" in order to build support for the idea of coming to the aid of the major banks. That *Killing Them Softly*'s comparisons to the 2008 economic downfall are becoming more and more pronounced was already indicated in the heist scene, where the mobsters were wedged side-by-side in Markie's new gambling joint, reminiscent of a group of accountants working at a stock exchange. Right after Frankie reminds the gangsters that all he is taking from them is money, the film concentrates on a speech by Bush on the television about people losing their finances and becoming rightly worried about the current economic situation. In Driver's car Bush can be heard explaining his difficult choice of either stepping in "with dramatic government action" or allowing "the irresponsible actions of some, to undermine the financial security of all". The earlier parallel between financial companies "robbing" the American people and the heist is now repeated by comparing Frankie and Russell's robbery to the irresponsibility of bankers as both actions brought their respective economies to a temporary standstill. The film's parallelism continues with Bush talking about a "loss of confidence", something that the mafia attempts to restore with the help of Jackie. These examples make apparent *Killing Them Softly*'s lack of subtlety in applying real-life political material to its action, something which many commentators criticised.

However, an even bigger problem than *Killing Them Softly*'s occasionally heavy-handed style of delivering its message, could be argued to emerge from the message itself. As Jackie begins to lay out the plan for how to contain the fallout, he immediately makes it clear that it

does not matter if Markie organised the robbery or not because he has to be killed either way.<sup>381</sup> The reason for this is that the card games are closed because of the heist until order has been restored, but in the meantime “people are losing money” due to the organisational limbo. The film once more indicates how business rationality is the leading factor in the characters’ decision making. Nonetheless, despite the soundness of Jackie’s logic, Driver does not give him the clearance to kill Markie as the mafia does not want to be involved in murder. It turns out that the days of a central kingpin style of management are long gone, and that the contemporary mafia is led by a committee, lacking proper leaders. The corporate system, likely because it can lead to a shared responsibility where nobody is directly liable for the mafia’s actions and the consequences of these actions, is clearly despised by Jackie, indicated by his stunned facial expression upon hearing about the new organisational model.

*Killing Them Softly*’s preference for the older, more direct type of business is highlighted via the contrast the film creates between Jackie and Driver. Whereas the leather-jacket-wearing and cigarette-smoking Jackie is a confident straight-talker, Driver is a hesitant old man in a grey suit who does not like when people smoke inside the car and who makes constant use of euphemisms when referring to the violent nature of their occupation. Driver is thus a perfect example of the corporate mentality for which he criticises the mafia. To further indicate that Driver firmly belongs to this new type of mafia, he is called *consigliere* only once in the entire film, being reduced to a much more mundane and easily replaceable position.

One of the most suggestive ways in which Driver differs not only from Jackie, but from all the criminals in the film is highlighted through the cars they drive. While Jackie arrives at the meeting in a classical 1967 Oldsmobile Toronado, Driver has a 2010 Lexus LS 460, marked in the script as Mercedes S series.<sup>382</sup> Even though the model has changed in the film compared to the script, it is important to note that most of the cars are mentioned already in the script, indicating their significance in the film. More importantly Driver has in both cases a foreign contemporary luxury car, while Jackie and all the other major characters drive American cars. Frankie and Russell use a 1972 Buick Riviera as their getaway car, which both compliment as a good car. After the successful robbery, Frankie gets himself a 1968 Pontiac GTO. Jackie and Frankie later use a 1972 Buick Skylark Custom when killing Johnny. Both Markie and Dillon drive Lincoln Town Cars from the 1990s, while Barry and Steve have a 2006 Dodge Charger. Even the small-time muscle Kenny at one point blows up his 1988 Ford LTD Crown Victoria

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<sup>381</sup> On the importance of appearance over reality, see Žižek 2011: 145.

<sup>382</sup> There is an anachronism in the film concerning the 2010 Lexus as the film is set in 2008. Regarding the reference to Mercedes, see Dominik n.d.: 28.

Wagon that he had used with Russell to transport stolen dogs. It is thus hardly a coincidence that Driver, whose name gains special significance in this context, is the only one to drive a Japanese car.

The fact that Jackie does not like to see the independently inclined America adopting the corporate mentality that he recognises Driver as representing, is suggested by a ship sounding its foghorn in the background right after Driver has identified the current structural problem of the mafia. The reference to the Judgement Day that was made just prior to Jackie getting into Driver's Lexus via the Johnny Cash song, is repeated now with the foghorn echoing the horns of the four horsemen of the apocalypse and Jackie saying seriously: "Christ sake, this country is fucked, I am telling you – it is a plague coming". Jackie's worried view of the future is emphasised by the double exposure shot ending the exchange between the men, which depicts an electric substation – similar to, if not the same as that from the beginning of the film – filmed through the car's window on which we also see a reflection of Jackie. Such pessimism also shares a similarity with Žižek's opinion according to which the American century has ended with the emergence of different global economic centres.<sup>383</sup>

It has to be noted that the idea of a grander and yet a more simple past that Frankie appears to desire is, according to Žižek, itself of an imaginary nature, a mythical time when a "king was really a king" that never was.<sup>384</sup> The film is very aware of the fact that past receives its appeal mainly for being entirely beyond one's reach. As such Jackie, in his final forceful monologue also deconstructs the idea of Thomas Jefferson as noble statesman. At the same time, Jackie appears to contradict himself by interfering with the local free market of crime-capitalism, while standing up for his right for a higher payment, which is based on market logic – now that Dillon is dead, and Mickey is in prison, the supply and demand relationship allows Jackie to ask for a raise. Or are we to see him as a heavy handed modernist relic, in which case his help to uphold the dominance of the corporate Mafia clearly contradicts his preference for individualism, as it is the mafia that puts Johnny permanently out of business. Such questions suggest that while *Killing Them Softly* is convincing in drawing out a recent change in the American Imaginary, how ideology structures one's understanding of reality, and a situation where no alternative to capitalism seems to be imaginable, its positive emphasis on Jackie, the ultimate neoliberal avenger, is less than ideal as a conclusion to the current situation.

The freedom Jackie gains from the ascetic repression of his own desires turns him into a perfect tool for the local "rigged" capitalism. This is further proven by the fact that the only

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<sup>383</sup> Žižek 2011: 166.

<sup>384</sup> Žižek 2011: 12.

desire that he allows to run wild is his craving for more money. Žižek explains this type as follows: “What this means is that the “subject of free choice” can only emerge as the result of an extremely violent process of being torn away from one’s particular lifeworld, of being cut off from one’s roots”.<sup>385</sup> Thus, following Žižek, Jackie’s freedom is a formal freedom to choose within the given rules, not the actual freedom of changing the rules of the game.<sup>386</sup> While Jackie might not represent the same type of corporate mentality that Driver does, he, in his self-awareness of the situation, is hardly in any better position. While a professional of a similar type in *Thief* (Mann, 1981) escapes from the grasp of the mafia after having to painfully give up his earnings and loved ones for this freedom, Jackie in *Killing Them Softly* some thirty years later holds no illusion of ever escaping the system structuring his world; all he can muster up is to follow its rules and ask for a raise.

The celebration of individualism that *Killing Them Softly* ends with can be seen as running directly counter to psychoanalytical scepticism of a subject, suggesting a potential reason for the latter’s rapid demise in today’s society. Analysing the film by drawing insight from Žižek’s thinking has, however, brought out several different aspects of the film that have currently been overlooked or that are understood contrastingly differently. Psychoanalytically inspired film theory can still offer a nuanced understanding of desire. Žižek uses the latter to offer an understanding of the appeal of ideology – it is not that one is necessarily deluded by the ideas produced by the dominating class, rather than one simply desiring and protecting oneself with a suitable set of ideas. *Killing Them Softly* can be seen as offering a complex understanding of how ideology provides for one’s fears and desires. The film is also rather militant in revealing the workings of ideology, a characteristic that is a likely reason for some of the negative responses that the film received. Nevertheless, such an analysis of the workings of ideology within a film is not a one-way exchange. *Killing Them Softly* can be seen to be highlighting the fact that Žižek’s cynical subjects are highly unlikely to ever make a collective effort. The film can be seen to be illustrating a weakness in both Žižek and Rancière’s thinking, where either social contingency or a radical break in society is seen hopefully as a positive occurrence. *Killing Them Softly* on the other hand appears to suggest that, given the current capitalist situation, if there were a temporary rupture of social organisation, there is a high probability that an efficient capitalist avenger would emerge to set things back in “order”.

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<sup>385</sup> Žižek 2011: 52.

<sup>386</sup> Žižek 2011: 358.

## 4 CHAPTER FOUR – The politics of aesthetics and the perverted pleasures of *The Big Short*

Whereas *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing* and its political potential has been largely overlooked in the current writing on the film, and *Killing Them Softly*'s political tone, while hard to miss, has been viewed critically by many, Adam McKay's 2015 satirical comedy *The Big Short*, about the events leading up to 2007–2008 economic crisis, received praise from both the audience and critics alike.<sup>387</sup> Despite the widespread approval that *The Big Short* enjoys, its political side – emerging most apparently from the film's criticism of the U.S. government's insufficient control over the major financial institutions – proved problematic for a large number of commentators. This is chiefly so, as I will go on to demonstrate, because of *The Big Short*'s playful way of depicting the 2007–2008 economic crisis. The film repeatedly fluctuates between its factual material, found footage, and a depiction of the economic downturn as a global economic disaster, and its pop cultural references and comedic aspects. Because of the film's surprising generic choices and the abandonment of form content unity, according to which a serious topic matter should be depicted in a serious manner, *The Big Short* likely did not confirm a lot of expectations regarding a film on the financial crisis. As such it confused reviewers from both the left and right of the political spectrum.<sup>388</sup> However, as I will demonstrate, according to Rancière cinema is a unique form of art precisely because it combines so many different ways of understanding arts.<sup>389</sup> As Rancière says: “*Cinema, like painting and literature, is not just the name of an art whose processes can be deduced from the specificity of its material and technical apparatuses. Like painting and literature, cinema is the name of an art whose meaning cuts across the borders between arts*”.<sup>390</sup> Such questioning of the limits of art is precisely from where film's political potential arises. This is so because, as Oliver Davis has argued in relation to Rancière's thinking, art can draw attention to the contingent nature of reality by exemplifying its own contingency.<sup>391</sup> *The Big Short*'s multi-protagonist form and

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<sup>387</sup> As an indicator of the positive audience reception, the film scores a respectable 7,8 stars out of 10 on IMDb (based on over a quarter of a million votes as of October 2017), and highlighting the favourable criticism that *The Big Short* received, it has a score of 81 out of 100 on Metacritic, a website aggregating critical reception. See, “The Big Short A” and “The Big Short B”.

<sup>388</sup> Although Michael Lewis' 2010 non-fiction book of the same title, *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine* also has comedic elements and its subtitle hints at the disaster genre, the film along with its original addition of pop cultural references, develops these sides much further compared to the original source material. See, Lewis 2010.

<sup>389</sup> Rancière 2001: 4.

<sup>390</sup> Rancière 2001: 4 (emphasis in original).

<sup>391</sup> Davis 2013: 155–168.

playful nature just make this tendency very apparent, suggesting that the film acts as a kind of a metalevel reflexion of the multi-protagonist form. In the following, I will explore these aspects of the film and make use of Rancière's conceptualisation of regimes of art and Žižek's concept of the perverted spectator, to analyse features of *The Big Short* that are potential causes for some of the puzzlement surrounding the film.

#### 4.1 Above all a question about an economic liberalism

*The Big Short* is a film about different groups of people from the world of finance who predicted the credit and housing bubble and crash in the mid-2000s. The latter could be argued to have culminated in the 2008 bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers – at the time the fourth largest investment bank in the United States. *Thirteen Conversations* makes subtle suggestions that the dominance of neoliberal thinking in the economy leads to insubstantial financial control over companies – as only one of the four central characters is directly impacted by the risky financial choices made by his superiors. *Killing Them Softly* takes this interest further by showing all the characters as favouring the economic over all other aspects of life. *Killing Them Softly* chooses a metonymical portrayal of the 2007–2008 economic downturn via a credibility crisis of a fictional mafia. *The Big Short* engages directly with the American financial market's influential role in the global economy and what the film depicts as a lack of regulation over it. As such *The Big Short*'s engagement with the topic of the 2008 financial crisis is also recognised as bearing a high importance. This can be noticed, as I will exemplify, from the fact that several top-level politicians and some of the most known political journals and talk show hosts engaged in a debate about the film. Considering how the discussion about *The Big Short* is perceived as having a significant position on the understanding of the present state of American finance and its role in people's lives, and the contrasting opinions that the film sparked on both sides of the political spectrum, I am going to examine some of the more pronounced commentaries in detail. My goal is not to engage in argument with the different authors, but to suggest via my reading of the film's reception that the articles are representations of a larger difficulty of approaching politically oriented mainstream films. This difficulty, as I will demonstrate, emerges partially because politics is understood in a very narrow sense of the word and a film such as *The Big Short* is considered political if it is recognised to be correlating with the positions of a real-life political party. According to Rancière, as I have argued, politics means something entirely different – the act of bringing to light everybody's equality with everybody else. Film can be

part of this process by questioning the hierarchical dividing lines between different arts and a separation of arts from the non-arts. It should be noted that when I make use of terms such as “classical” and “conventional”, I am not referring to how these terms are often used in Film Studies – marking a relation to the classical narrative cinema – instead I have in mind what Rancière calls the representative regime, a traditional understanding of art beginning with Aristotle’s thinking. Some of the rules of this regime are established already in *Poetics* such as the form content unity and an understanding that in the interest of coherence an artwork should restrict itself to one genre and a clear thematic position (suggested by what in the neoclassical form are known as the unities of space, time, and action).<sup>392</sup> As my overview of the related critical reception will illustrate, the rules of the representative regime still often inform value judgements about a given film. I will go on to explore how *The Big Short*’s controversial approach to the serious topic of financial crisis via a mixture of different popular genres can be seen to be making this aspect particularly apparent.

Before analysing some of the reviews on the film, I will briefly point out a few other elements that likely made *The Big Short* appear very topical, particularly with the film being released during the 2016 United States’ presidential primaries. Unlike the fictional characters and actions of *Killing Them Softly*, the protagonists of *The Big Short* are mostly based on real-life people and the story draws from actual historical events. The film is an adaptation of a 2010 non-fiction novel, *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine*, by a respected author on the topic – Michael Lewis, who, as a former bond salesman at Salomon Brothers, is widely known for his insight into the world of finance. What makes the film’s position on the issue complex is that its central “heroes” were not only correct in their estimation of the future direction of the United States’ housing market and its potential negative impact on the economy, but that they also took advantage of the vulnerable state of the economy by shorting bonds that relied on the stability of the housing market. The film’s main characters – similarly to the people that the film is based on – actively bet against the bonds of the major banks, which earned them a significant fortune and contributed to the widespread defaults that brought about the credit crisis. The fact that *The Big Short*’s main characters cannot be easily classified on the traditional hero-antihero scale, as I will demonstrate, is part of the problematic in interpreting the film, a problematic on which Žižek’s understanding of the perverted spectatorship can provide a new angle.

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<sup>392</sup> Aristotle 2013.

Because of the seriousness of *The Big Short*'s topic, the impact of the film, and the influential real-life people that it depicts, the role of the director received significant attention in the related reviews. Adam McKay, although a seasoned director of several successful comedies, was likely seen by many as an odd choice for the job of directing a film on financial crisis. McKay's approach to the topic via comedy and playful mixture of genres, was likely recognised by many as disrespectful. *The Big Short* can be identified as a turning point in McKay's career as the film moves away from the buddy-comedy emphasis common to many of his earlier films.<sup>393</sup> The turn of interest in McKay's career is also suggested by the fact that his following films focus heavily on politics and corporate finance. *The Big Short* can be claimed to be a gateway film in McKay's career, featuring elements from both his past in comedy and his growing interest in exploring politics and business. Still, for many, little in McKay's filmography suggested that he should be granted the opportunity to address what the film depicts as the greatest economic cataclysm of recent times.

This is a conclusion to which the director himself arrived, when he first thought about adapting Lewis' book, but then quickly dismissed the idea by saying: "I'm the guy who did *Step Brothers* [...] I'm sure somebody already has this [the film in making]".<sup>394</sup> The way *The Big Short* combines the different genres and the film's tendency to constantly break the "fourth wall" and the unity between form and content, emerge at least partially from McKay's schooling in improvisational comedy. Comedy is widely recognised as a genre where the digression from the conventions of the classical narrative cinema are most common. This is recognised also by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, even if their approach to classical narrative cinema is not so much concerned with genre as it is with exploring the style and modes of production of the classical Hollywood cinema. Bordwell finds that comedy is the genre that most often offers "non-diegetic commentary".<sup>395</sup> The latter is frequently used also in *The Big Short*. Yet, let it be repeated that my argument is not about how *The Big Short* differs from the classical narrative cinema as described by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, but rather how the representative regime – offering the most detailed rules of how to differentiate the serious

<sup>393</sup> *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004) and *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues* (2013) concentrate on the adventures of a fictional news reporter and bigot Ron Burgundy (Will Ferrell), who has to cope with the modernisation of the broadcast industry during the 1970s and 1980s respectively; *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2006) accomplishes its humour via stereotypical Southern state setting and by following the career of a fictional halfwit NASCAR driver Ricky Bobby (Will Ferrell); *Step Brothers* (2008) is a film about two grown-up men (Will Ferrell and John C. Reilly), still living at home, as they become stepbrothers when their parents marry; and *The Other Guys* (2010) is a comedic pastiche of cop-film clichés that centres around two mismatched detectives (Will Ferrell and Mark Wahlberg), who have to save the day when the department's top detectives die because their overblown egos had begun to distort their take on reality.

<sup>394</sup> McKay 2015.

<sup>395</sup> Bordwell, 1985: 19.

arts from the comedic ones – expands well beyond the fine arts. Following this logic McKay's sentence above can be seen as almost a form of self-censoring or indeed policing, according to which a director of comedies should stay far away from the serious topics of politics and finance. This recalls Rancière's abovementioned argument that for Aristotle it appeared only *natural* to exclude artisans from (self-)governing because they simply would not have the time for it. Rather than seeing the confusion that *The Big Short* caused as the film's weakness, I will go on to explore via Rancière's thinking that it is precisely the film's playful questioning of genre boundaries that makes the film politically so effective. With its comedic approach to the financial crisis, *The Big Short* can be seen to be echoing the unruliness of films such as *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Kubrick, 1964), where an issue is considered so severe that a serious take on the matter appears impossible. In such cases only a sharp discrepancy between a film form and its subject-matter is recognised as causing a rupture in the general discourse. *The Big Short* can be thus seen as suggesting that the recent past of the U.S. – which, as I will illustrate, according to the film is highlighted by increasing neoliberalisation – can be properly understood only through comedy.

The assumption that McKay's background in comedy makes him somewhat inadequate for approaching the complexities of the subprime mortgage crisis, which played a central role in the 2008 global financial downturn, also appears to inform some of the critical comments that the film received. Commentators on the right often accuse the film for being unintentionally misleading or deliberately dishonest. This is accentuated, for instance, by Michael Grunwald's analysis of the film. Grunwald begins by revealing his position on the matter by declaring that he helped the former Treasury Secretary and previous president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, now a president of a Wall Street private equity firm, Timothy Geithner, write his memoir.<sup>396</sup> As helpful as such a clarification appears to be, Grunwald neatly bypasses the fact that the film is particularly critical of the revolving door between Washington and Wall Street (exemplified also by Geithner's career), where a former government employee takes their insider knowledge to the private sector. Given Grunwald's self-confession it is hardly surprising that he finds that the supposedly misinformed *The Big Short* is not "good for you, unless you happen to be Bernie Sanders".<sup>397</sup> The film is recognised by Grunwald as benefitting Sanders' campaign because *The Big Short*'s "angry take on the financial crisis is misleading and its furious take on financial reform is wrong".<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Grunwald 2016: n.p.

<sup>397</sup> Grunwald 2016: n.p.

<sup>398</sup> Grunwald 2016: n.p.

The aim here, as stated, is not to criticise a critique of the film, but to highlight how seamlessly one's own political position informs an understanding of *The Big Short*. The film makes no reference to Sanders, yet this connection, as I will also illustrate below, is made by several commentators from the right. Recognising *The Big Short* to be "angry" and "furious" appears strange and uncalled-for considering that the film is clearly much more neutral in its take on the topic, than films such as the Academy Award Winner *Inside Job* (Ferguson, 2010) – which, as already the title suggests, puts forth a direct criticism of the current economic and financial model that allegedly benefits above all industry insiders. Via my reading of the critical reception I would suggest that the harsh description of the film partially emerges from *The Big Short*'s successful use of the multi-protagonist form and its merger of genres and conventions. Unlike the straight-forward criticism of the *Inside Job*, *The Big Short* playful mixture of genres makes the film's critical intent much more elusive and thus harder to dismiss. Although a number of authors in Film Studies such as Rick Altman and Steve Neale have noted that the cross- and multi-genre hybridity has always been part of genre cinema, my reading of the criticism as texts suggests the prevalence of understanding that a film, especially one that considers itself politically relevant, should have a clear position that correlates with its chosen genre.<sup>399</sup> The multi-protagonist film – which is an ideal film form for evasiveness, because via its different main characters it can propose variety of positions on the same issue – highlights how there exists a certain difficulty in approaching mainstream films that are evasive on their political position. In *The Big Short* only one main character out of the many, Mark Baum (Steve Carell), is openly angry and furious about the situation. Even in Baum's case, *The Big Short* highlights, that his dislike of Wall Street emerges from a personal tragedy (he blames Wall Street for his brother's suicide). Considering the multi-protagonist film's limited options to draw out all the different characters in detail, this can be seen to be a telling sign of *The Big Short*'s efforts of offering a manifold representation of the crisis.

I would like to further highlight how the film's take on the matter is judged from a position informed by a specific political understanding. This becomes even more apparent when considered that Grunwald is writing for *Politico*, an outlet that has been accused by media watchdog groups for having a Republican Party bias.<sup>400</sup> Grunwald's strong take against further reforms of Wall Street clearly exemplifies his preference for a notably neoliberal understanding of free market economy.<sup>401</sup> Tendency to judge or praise a film based on one's own (political)

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<sup>399</sup> Altman 1999; Neale 2000.

<sup>400</sup> For an overview, see Maloy 2007.

<sup>401</sup> Grunwald 2016: n.p.

preference, following Rancière's understanding of the regimes of art, which I will explore in more detail below, is not specific to *The Big Short*. According to Rancière, the arts have traditionally been valued either based on their political, pedagogical, and ethical effectiveness, or according to their own rules – such as coherence, achieved by, among other things, the unity between subject-matter and formal choices.<sup>402</sup> Film, on the other hand, is an inherently unruly medium, because it confuses the dividing lines between different arts by using features of the other arts – literature's fable, plasticity of sculpture, composition and lighting logic of painting, and actors' gestures from drama.<sup>403</sup> *The Big Short*, due to its multi-protagonist form and playful nature, makes this feature of cinema, and consequently commentators' inclination towards a certain understanding of art, particularly apparent.

Similar implications – that *The Big Short* is not politically neutral, but serves rather a certain political agenda because of the director's supposed reluctance to separate his own political views from an accurate representation of the crisis – are developed much further by some other commentators. In a *New York Post* article by Paul Sperry, boldly titled “*The Big Short* is a \$ 28 million campaign ad for Bernie Sanders”, the author calls the film a “leftist political propaganda posing as entertainment”, and supports the argument by revealing that McKay openly endorses “the Marxist curmudgeon [Sanders] for president”.<sup>404</sup> Such a harsh rhetoric emerges not only from *New York Post*'s tabloid style, but also from the matter that the tabloid style is recognised by critics to serve a very noticeable right wing agenda. The newspaper is owned by Rupert Murdoch, a billionaire media proprietor who some commentators from the left such as David Harvey hold to be a primary example of a contemporary capitalist exercising “considerable influence via his media interests in politics”.<sup>405</sup> The review also serves as a clear indicator how *The Big Short* is banished from the realm of entertainment and identified as “propaganda” simply because it goes against the reviewer's political preference. I have already suggested and will demonstrate in more detail below that the question of what counts as art, according to Rancière, has always been concerned with the latter's ability to establish a certain understanding of the world more generally.<sup>406</sup>

While a director's political preference should not be an indicator of a film's political position, such a connection was not only drawn by those critical of *The Big Short*, but also

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<sup>402</sup> Rancière 2004: 14–15.

<sup>403</sup> Rancière 2001: 15.

<sup>404</sup> Sperry 2016: n.p.

<sup>405</sup> Harvey 2005: 35. It is likely due to the newspaper's strong political bias and a preference for a style that aims to spark controversy, that it was found by one study to be the only newspaper in New York to receive a higher negative than positive credibility rating, see Trichter and Paige 2004: 4.

<sup>406</sup> Rancière 2004: 14.

suggested by McKay's own actions. Likely in an attempt to soften a possible negative effect of his political involvement and in the hope of allowing *The Big Short* to "play across partisan lines", McKay repeatedly claimed to have distanced himself from Sanders' campaign.<sup>407</sup> However, with his name figuring on the list of artists supporting Sanders' candidacy, *The Big Short* was recognised by many as serving the aims of those that associated themselves politically with the independent candidate for the 2016 Democratic nomination for the President of the United States.<sup>408</sup> Given the film's subject matter *The Big Short*'s potential alignment with Sanders was likely recognised as particularly problematic because of the latter's election promises included a considerable reform of Wall Street.<sup>409</sup> The concern for some critics over *The Big Short*'s potentially negative influence on neoliberal ideals, was further justified when Sanders claimed that *The Big Short* was one of the few films that he had managed to see due to his busy schedule during the campaign and that the film was "excellent".<sup>410</sup> As the *New York Post*'s article suggests, Sanders is recognised by some as one of the main Marxist opponents of the free market in the United States' politics. Yet, it is worth noting that several authors have brought attention to the fact that neoliberalism does not actually object to government interference with markets, but is more concerned with establishing the *impression* of valuing above all else economic and financial freedom.<sup>411</sup> The use of public money to save private businesses and various implementations of austerity measures in many parts of the globe in the aftermath of the crisis to bring the economy back to balance clearly contradict the ideal of the free market and remove risk from the capitalist equation that equates the amount of risk with a potential return on investment. Harvey claims likewise that "in many of the instances of public-private partnerships [...] the state assumes much of the risk while the private sector takes most of the profit".<sup>412</sup> Similar questions about appearance and reality are raised, as I will demonstrate, by *The Big Short*. The film, as some of the criticism suggests, because of its topic and the fact that it was in cinemas during the Primaries, was recognised as an actual political threat to the current *status quo* on the Wall Street.

Even if Grunwald's criticism of *The Big Short* is mostly based on an argument about economy, whereas the *New York Post* appears to be more concerned with issues such as

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<sup>407</sup> McKay 2016A: n.p.

<sup>408</sup> "Letter Signatories" n.d.: n.p. Although, Sanders is a self-described social democrat, recognised even as a "Marxist" by the *New York Post*, it is worth noting that Noam Chomsky has argued that Sanders' claims are rather similar to the New Deal ideals, generally recognised as progressivism. For Chomsky's comment, see Chomsky 2016.

<sup>409</sup> Sanders n.d.: n.p.

<sup>410</sup> For the related clip from Bernie Sanders' twitter feed, see McKay 2016A: n.p.

<sup>411</sup> Harvey 2005, Springer 2016.

<sup>412</sup> Harvey 2005: 77.

McKay's wife's activity on social media platforms, both accounts counter the film's representation of the mortgage crisis rather similarly – by largely ignoring the actual representation. Both accounts discredit *The Big Short*'s take on the situation by drawing from extratextual resources – associating the film with Sanders and by disgracing the director, who, according to Grunwald, clearly did not "know what he was talking about".<sup>413</sup> In opposition to such comments that attempt to undermine *The Big Short*'s representation of the crisis by seeing the director as dishonest or incompetent, I would argue that one of the central concerns of these authors is the film's popularity. Grunwald's article appears to be sparked by *The Big Short*'s recent nomination to the Academy Award for Best Picture and the *New York Post* is worried about the film's effect on the public accomplished via "Hollywood wizardry".<sup>414</sup> This "wizardry", as I will exemplify, emerges primarily from *The Big Short*'s entertaining, but complex, form, which allows it to appeal to the most varied audiences. Again, the latter is achieved at least partially because of McKay's extensive background in comedy, a genre known for breaking the audiences' expectations. This conclusion is supported by one of the film's producers Dede Gardner, who thought that McKay would be an ideal director for a financial crisis film because of his previous work in comedy.<sup>415</sup> It could be argued that it is not so much McKay's supposed lack of knowledge of the financial world that concerned the reviewers, but rather his ability to make the largely secluded and impassable topic accessible for many. Such estimation appears to be supported by Lewis' understanding of the film, who claims that "*The Big Short* is just a movie, but it's also an invitation, to a huge popular audience, to have a smart and interesting discussion about the place of money and finance in all our lives".<sup>416</sup> As such, one cannot help but get the impression that some of the dismissive commentary on the film suggests that several commentators from the right were not interested in inviting the larger public to join in on the conversation about the nature of contemporary finance.

Although the accounts above might lead one to believe that *The Big Short* has next to nothing to offer for viewers identifying with the political right, this is not necessarily the case. For instance, several commentators from the Fox News Channel, a network long accused by critics of biased reporting that favours the positions of the Republican Party, enthusiastically recommended the film to their audience.<sup>417</sup> Most notably, at the time, Fox News Channel's political commentator Bill O'Reilly – considered widely to represent a strong conservative

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<sup>413</sup> Grunwald 2016: n.p.

<sup>414</sup> Grunwald 2016: n.p.; Sperry 2016: n.p.

<sup>415</sup> Gardner et. al. 2015.

<sup>416</sup> Lewis 2015: n.p.

<sup>417</sup> See, Compton 2004: 204; La Monica 2009.

stance – to his surprise, failed to identify the film’s “left-wing spin” that he was expecting from a Hollywood film on finance.<sup>418</sup> Perhaps more to the point, at the time, Fox News Channel’s news anchor Greta Van Susteren states that she has a “million reasons” for supporting *The Big Short* and goes on in her interview with McKay to express her disappointment over the matter “that nobody went to prison for this [potentially contributing to the economic downturn]”.<sup>419</sup> Because, in passing, *The Big Short* also plays around with the idea that in an alternative reality chief executive officers would have been imprisoned for their role in bringing about the crisis, and considering Grunwald’s strong objection to such a prospect, the contrast between the different commentators from the political right suggests that at the heart of the discussion is a question about economic liberalism.<sup>420</sup> It appears that the key to the differences in opinion is exposed by this particular fantasy of justice that the film offers. The conservative right and the supposedly leftist Hollywood film appear to be united by the idea of potentially penalising failure arising from excessive risk taking, while for the more neoliberal authors even such a thought appears preposterous. For the former, justice has not been served without executives going to prison, because as money is exchanged every day, fining the major companies seems a lot like business as usual.

It is worth noting that Van Susteren is not simply speaking idly on the matter of legal justice and what she sees as the necessary culpability of the major banks for the crisis. Being a former criminal defence and civil trial lawyer, Van Susteren not only has an insider’s view on how the United States’ justice system operates, but she also logically supports the principle that more could be expected from the head of the United States Department of Justice. Van Susteren finds that indictments in corporate trial cases would set a necessary example of responsibility for many other company heads, and goes on to explain why the currently popular legal practice of mostly opting for civil fines, is a preferred practice by both the justice department as well as by the company executives under trial.<sup>421</sup> Civil fines are favoured, Van Susteren claims, because, on the one hand, CEOs do not have to face a prison sentence, while the shareholders

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<sup>418</sup> O'Reilly 2016. Concerning O'Reilly's political position see Stelter 2011: n.p.

<sup>419</sup> Van Susteren 2016.

<sup>420</sup> It is clear that the film has a different understanding, than many commentators, of what is just. *The Big Short* argues for an option of prosecuting the financial workers involved in bringing about the crisis and for a proposal of breaking up the big banks as a solution to the problem. In contrast, Grunwald suggests that nobody was sentenced to prison because nobody is directly responsible for downturns in an economy and claims that the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act that was implemented after the crisis is doing enough to avoid the situation from repeating. Although all the major banks were prosecuted and financially penalised, McKay, as I will show, could be seen as favouring the imprisonment of banks' chief executive officers for their involvement. On recent fears of financial companies bypassing Dodd-Frank legislation, see Partnoy 2017: n.p.

<sup>421</sup> Van Susteren 2016.

and ultimately the consumers end up compensating for the losses caused by the fine; and, at the same time, prosecutors are perceived positively by their peers for making a large profit for the treasury.<sup>422</sup> In other words, what Van Susteren can be seen as highlighting is a shortcoming caused by the neoliberalisation of the United States' justice system, where financial settlements are increasingly becoming the norm. . Van Susteren's reasoning therefore creates a close parallel with *Killing Them Softly*'s criticism of the United States' favouring of the logic of the market to that of justice.

The same argument, that fining the big companies is not a sufficient strategy for making them avoid pursuing what many consider to be overly risky business tactics, is supported by McKay. In his interview with Van Susteren, McKay claims that a company's stock usually gains value following the news of a company being fined instead of other legal action, and he continues this logic by bringing examples of company heads who have publicly boasted of being able to "afford" the fines.<sup>423</sup> While this argumentation is debatable – for instance, the stock of Deutsche Bank (one of the main "nemeses" in the film) hit a rock bottom because of the uncertainty over the exact size of its reparation in the aftermath of the crisis – it is clear that Van Susteren and McKay's opinion on the matter differs completely from that of Grunwald's. Grunwald finds instead that "no Wall Street executives went to jail for their role in the crisis, despite a glut of politically ambitious prosecutors, [... because] their activities, however idiotic and irresponsible, were not provably illegal".<sup>424</sup> As *The Big Short* itself jokes about the fact that it is difficult to distinguish stupidity from criminality, it is understandable why some would prefer to solve the issue simply with a claim of ignorance. Van Susteren and McKay's discussion illustrates that others recognise the situation as nothing short of an erosion of justice.

While for Grunwald *The Big Short* is unjustly harsh in its take on Wall Street, for some of the commentators from the left the film does not go far enough. For example, Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian* – a self-described centre-left newspaper that is recognised by the public as the most left-leaning major newspaper of the United Kingdom – claims that the film is "overvalued stock".<sup>425</sup> The film's reputation is "inflated", according to Bradshaw, because *The Big Short* "doesn't let you have your cake, or eat it".<sup>426</sup> That is because, Bradshaw goes on to claim, "*The Big Short* is fatally unsure about whether it is a righteous condemnation of fraud,

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<sup>422</sup> Van Susteren 2016.

<sup>423</sup> McKay 2016B.

<sup>424</sup> Grunwald 2016: n.p.

<sup>425</sup> Bradshaw 2016: n.p. This is not to say that Bradshaw's review represents *The Guardian*'s view on the film, as Mark Kermode's review, published couple of days later, was positive of the film, see Kermode 2016: n.p. Regarding the public opinion about *The Guardian*, see Smith 2017: n.p.

<sup>426</sup> Bradshaw 2016: n.p.

or a black comic romp with cool amoral dudes and rebellious outsiders".<sup>427</sup> This statement echoes the criticism addressed above, according to which a film should be clear about its position on a matter. Even more to the point, one of Bradshaw's main criticisms is that *The Big Short* is inconsistent in its generic choice, because the film does not know whether it aims to be a playful depiction of the greed of Wall Street such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Scorsese, 2013), or if it favours a serious documentary-style take on the crisis such as that offered by *Inside Job*.<sup>428</sup> In connecting the film to other films with several lead characters such as *Ocean's Eleven*, *The Dirty Dozen*, and *Inglourious Basterds* (Tarantino, Roth, 2009), whose artistic level according to Bradshaw *The Big Short* does not reach, the author fails to recognise that the film is already consistent in its main form – that of the multi-protagonist film, a film type most suitable for addressing complex social concerns via its multiple characters and the ability to provide various perspectives on the same issue.

Bradshaw's criticism largely echoes some of the views of the commentators from the political right, as both sides judge the film partially based on their own political preferences, rather than relying purely on what the film is proposing. Bradshaw does not seem to hide his bias on the matter, saying boldly that he "wanted a real attack", but that *The Big Short* "comes up short".<sup>429</sup> Bradshaw does not clarify what he expected *The Big Short* to attack, the current financial *status quo* or capitalism as such. Clearly neither is a small task for a feature length mainstream film. The question is not about the validity of Bradshaw's opinion, but how his article exemplifies a common expectation, according to which if a film is political it must be fully dedicated to its mission. Bradshaw's militant opinion on the matter represents a very narrow understanding of what a politically minded film should be. Again, my aim is not to discredit the specific viewpoints that I have focused on, rather I have read these comments as texts that highlight the problematic that the multi-protagonist film can cause. It is a form that often breaks down the conventional belief that a film should maintain a single political position and a unity between its form and content matter. In contrast to Bradshaw's view that recognises *The Big Short*'s flux between different modes of representation as a shortcoming, I will offer an interpretation of the film that explores this side as *The Big Short*'s main strength.

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<sup>427</sup> Bradshaw 2016: n.p.

<sup>428</sup> Bradshaw 2016: n.p.

<sup>429</sup> Bradshaw 2016: n.p.

## 4.2 Starting with equality

*The Big Short* is an aesthetically rich film that crosses genre borders – including heist film, comedy, documentary, drama, and disaster film – and repeatedly breaks the “fourth wall” by having characters address the audience directly. The film also makes use of real-life found footage and applies celebrity cameos to explain the complexities of contemporary finance. Largely because of this aesthetic mixture, I argue, critics of *The Big Short*, from left and right political spectrum alike, appear united in their accusations about the unbalanced nature of the film. Interestingly, this is also the aspect that many supporters of the film value the most.<sup>430</sup> For example, *The New York Times* praises the film as such: “A true crime story and a madcap comedy, a heist movie and a scalding polemic, *The Big Short* will affirm your deepest cynicism about Wall Street while simultaneously restoring your faith in Hollywood”.<sup>431</sup> Because opinions about the film’s stylistic choices vary to such a great extent, this side of the film deserves closer attention than it has currently received.<sup>432</sup> Particularly as the film’s undecidability can be seen as echoing the main problem at the heart of representing financial crises. If, as the last chapter explored, the very thought of an alternative to capitalism appears to evoke an impassable deadlock in contemporary thinking, how does a film depict a halt in capitalism?

Given *The Big Short* and *Killing Them Softly*’s shared interest in the neoliberalisation process, where business logic and monetary actions are recognised as absorbing the most varied aspects of life, and considering the very different reception that the films received, it is interesting to briefly explore how the films situate themselves differently already with their opening scenes. Similarly to *Killing Them Softly*, *The Big Short* also opens with a black screen – the latter stating that the film is based on a true story. Unlike the darkness at the beginning of *Killing Them Softly* that is accompanied by an ominous sound, a beautiful bird-song can be heard in the beginning of *The Big Short*. In a similar manner, while *Killing Them Softly* opens to an industrial wasteland that it recognises America to be, *The Big Short* gradually joins the bird’s singing together with idyllic music, and opens to a summer field with the bluest sky.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> The same kind of mix of genres was also present in McKay’s *The Other Guys* that likewise deals to an extent with the financial crisis, although being a buddy cop film. In their overview of films on finance, published prior to *The Big Short*, Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano analyse *The Other Guys* as an unlikely, but successful example of a financial crisis film, see Kinkle and Toscano 2011: 39–51.

<sup>431</sup> Scott 2015: n.p.

<sup>432</sup> This is not to say that the film has not received academic attention, for example, Miriam Meissner has analysed the relationship between global financial crisis and space in *The Big Short*, see Meissner 2017.

<sup>433</sup> The piece is from the film’s official soundtrack and is called *Boring Old Banking*. It is composed and performed by Nicholas Britell, see Britell 2015A.

*The Big Short*'s interest in the American Imaginary is clear from the start as it opens to an iconic image of the American pastoral, an endless open field as the frontier to be explored, but also – particularly important in the context of mortgage crisis – identifying land as property up for grabs, wilderness waiting to be turned into a garden. With both the child and father dressed in denims and flannel shirts, an iconic American clothing, the footage recalls the American past, as the down-to-earth clothing suggests contact with land through manual labour. I have shown *Killing Them Softly* adapting a socially critical tone similar to some of the 1970s Hollywood Renaissance films and offering a drastic depiction of the United States that, which according to the film's director, Americans do not want to recognise. *The Big Short*, in contrast, opens with a quote from Mark Twain that states: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you in trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so". The quote is presented in two parts with the first sentence appearing alone on a dark screen, which then slowly fades into an image of a father giving his child a piggyback ride in a field, the first sentence then joined by the second [Figure 4–1]. The figure of Twain as one of the most famous representatives of the down-to-earth American Imaginary, always telling like it is, and widely known for his scepticism of the stock market, plays a particularly significant role in this context.<sup>434</sup> Given that in the beginning of *Killing Them Softly* the screen violently flashes between a pitch-black screen and a point-of-view shot from within a dirty dark tunnel, the transition from darkness to light could hardly be any more different between the two films.

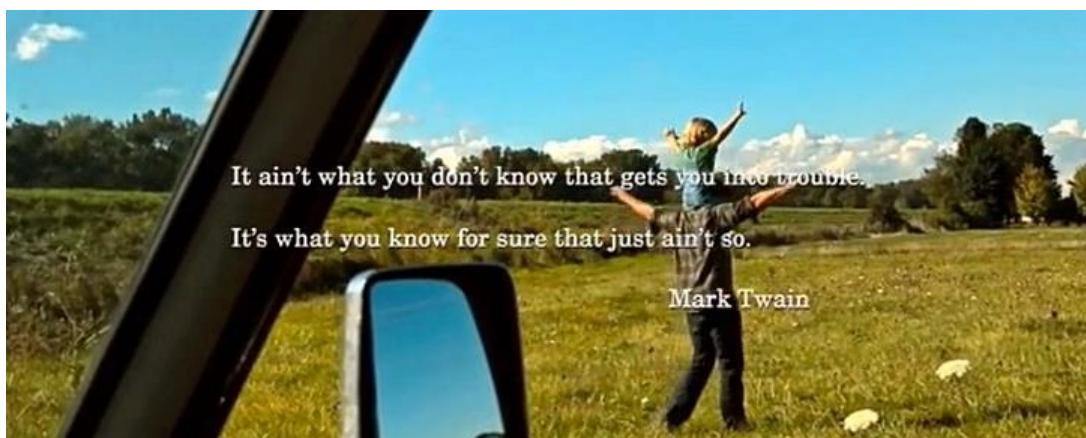


Figure 4-1 *The Big Short*'s invitation to see the American Imaginary from within.

Although on the most apparent level the Twain's quote refers to the ignorance of the financial workers that according to *The Big Short* largely led to the crisis, it can also be seen as

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<sup>434</sup> One of the best known comment of the stock exchange by Twain is the following: "OCTOBER: This is one of the peculiarly dangerous months to speculate in stocks in. The other are July, January, September, April, November, May, March, June, December, August, and February", Twain 1974.

a suggestion of the film's stance towards its audience. While *Killing Them Softly* considers that the supposed ignorant bliss of Americans, provided by the comforting American Imaginary, must be broken with the "truth" of the film's social realism, *The Big Short* appears to propose instead that the extent to which the American Imaginary constitutes one's reality must also be explored. Whereas *Killing Them Softly* proposes that ideology should be recognised merely as a tool that helps one to cope with the harsh Real of our world – that because of our personal fears and desires we are all alone on a very fundamental level, as Frankie understands – and *Killing Them Softly* can be seen as valuing this revelation over ideology itself; *The Big Short*, on the other hand, seems to propose with its opening scene that even if ideology in the form of the American Imaginary is all that one has in terms of comprehending reality, it needs to be interrogated and not simply dismissed, because it has a very real effect on one's life (particularly in the context of financial crises). *Killing Them Softly* can be seen to be interested in how ideology works, whereas *The Big Short* explores the specific form it takes.

The Twain quote could thus be recognised as indicating a preference for equality that is very much akin to Rancière's take on pedagogy, as discussed in the second chapter. Whereas *Killing Them Softly* proposes that the audience's ignorance of what the film depicts as the harsh social reality of the United States allows Americans to overlook the importance of money and how it relates to one's fears and desires – echoing the ideology-critique of the 1970s Film Studies that was often engaged in similar revelations – *The Big Short* suggests instead that it is not a lack of knowledge, but above all a misinformed belief that led to the financial crisis. Arguably, *The Big Short*'s approach does not create a hierarchy between the educated (the active and knowledgeable director) and the ignorant (Americans unaware of their country's "true" state) that *Killing Them Softly* unintentionally proposes, instead *The Big Short* begins its exploration of the American Imaginary from a position of equality, where all people have similarly placed their trust in something "that just ain't so" (invincibility of the United States' housing market).

From the very opening shot *The Big Short*'s interest in the American Imaginary and the film's preference for a playful mix of genres starts to emerge. Highlighting the film's play of genres, the opening shot recalls the style of home movies with their low-quality imagery, the slight instability of the camera (marking it as a handheld camera shot), and the framing from inside of a vehicle. This deliberate amateurism stresses from the start that the film does not place itself outside or above its subject matter of collective ignorance, but rather *The Big Short* begins its investigation of the economic crisis from the very limited perspective of the interior of a family car. The film could therefore be seen as implying that this American family is any

American family whatsoever, and that their dream of America as the land of the free – evoked by the seemingly endless field of grass and the father and child spreading their hands wide as though they were about to fly – is equally shared by a large number of Americans.<sup>435</sup> This universalisation is also suggested by the several iconic elements of the image that I described above.

Even though such universalisations are very common in the multi-protagonist film, *The Big Short* at the same time emphasises, via the subjective camerawork, the specificity of the situation. By beginning its exploration of the 2007–2008 financial crisis from the limited perspective of an inside of a family car the film deliberately robs itself from the multi-protagonist film's generic tools such as its ability to universalise through its different main characters. The film can be recognised as pointing to the impossibility of rising above its subject and looking down on the topic from a perspective of objectivity. Regarding certain topics, the film implies via the amateur footage, such as the economic crisis, objectivity is impossible to achieve even when applying the multi-protagonist format – a form recognised for its ability of universalisation via the different lead characters. Instead of attempting to suggest authority and objectivity via a talking head factual documentary style such as that seen in *Inside Job*, *The Big Short* makes use of amateurish documentary footage to evoke a sense of shared ignorance on the topic. Unlike *Inside Job*, *The Big Short* does not aim to educate its audience about what really led to the crisis, but begins by proposing equality between itself and the spectators via an easily identifiable scene from everyday life, shot deliberately in a way that is accessible to all who have ever recorded a home video.

I have shown that *Killing Them Softly* also stresses that it is impossible to hold a position outside of ideology. *Killing Them Softly*'s combative way of revealing this aspect of reality nonetheless aligns its approach with the top-down vision of Althusser's ideology-critique, which sees scientific Marxism as a method to educate people about their subordinated situation. This, as I have argued, Rancière claims actually re-establishes the hierarchy it sets out to demolish, because by teaching the workings of subordination, the teacher also teaches respect for their authority on the matter, keeping the teacher always one step ahead of the pupil. *The Big Short*, on the contrary, can be seen to be at pains from its very beginning to avoid such an

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<sup>435</sup> However, it is “a necessary structural illusion”, as Žižek would put it, see Žižek 2011: 12. This world is no longer there, the film proposes by quickly leaving it behind and by accompanying it with oversweet idyllic music, because it has never been there in the first place. The nostalgic American Imaginary that persists in our minds and that is deployed widely for political purposes as part of national myth-making, has always been a phantom, a fictional structure rendered desirable by the sentiments of our youth and our lack of detailed understanding of historical complexity.

authorial high ground and as attempting to equate the audiences' limited perspective with its own via the amateurish opening shot.

### 4.3 The perverted spectatorship

In addition to *The Big Short* exemplifying its limited perspective on its topic matter from the onset, the film aims towards equality of all its characters – a democratic feature that the multi-protagonist film excels at. After the initial opening shot, the film fades to black and then cuts to the inside of a bank. Instead of, say, creating a contrast between the lovely American family on the summer field and the money-hungry capitalism of the major banks secretly orchestrating their lives, *The Big Short* unites the two scenes with a sound-bridge of idyllic music.<sup>436</sup> The dreamlike impression of both settings is further supported by Ryan Gosling's voice over narration, which assures the spectator that banking in the late 1970s was not a highly profitable business for employees, and that its general tempo resembled rather a light sleep. As the voice-over narrator uses profanity to suggest the latter, the initial impression that *The Big Short* might now switch to a proper documentary style that will provide a historical overview of the conditions that eventually led to the crisis, or that the film is in some way nostalgic for the past, is quickly undermined. To further challenge the narrator's authority and objectivity and to distance viewers from a contemporary understanding of the world of high finance, the voice over narrator states that banking back then was "filled with losers", showing his voice to be invested in the matter. The historical documentary style is, however, completely thwarted with a sudden cut to Jared Vennett (Ryan Gosling), a modern-day trader and one of the central characters of the film, who turns out to be the voice over narrator, although he is sitting behind one of the 1970s banking tables and addressing the audience directly.

Vennett's incongruity is emphasised by his tailor-made suit, contemporary haircut, and exquisite watch, elements that, in addition to his much younger age compared to the bankers of the 1970s, make him stand out. Vennett is also speaking from a position in which he has the advantage of hindsight. Unlike *Killing Them Softly*, which can be seen as nostalgic about the 1970s more direct political style of filmmaking, *The Big Short* appears to ridicule a longing for the era that it characterises, via Vennett, as slow-paced and lacking in the power and ambition of today's banking. At the same time, the film also calls one to question Vennett's position on

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<sup>436</sup> Such crosscutting, as Kinkle and Toscano have shown in their overview article on the topic, being relatively common in the related films, see Kinkle and Toscano 2011: 39–51.

the matter because he appears to be scorn 1970s banking for its lack of capitalistic mercilessness. It soon turns out that Vennett is a Deutsche Bank insider and thus the only main character who works for one of the large financial institutions that played a significant role in the crisis (all the other main characters are depicted as outsiders to the world of high finance).

*The Big Short* plays a complex game with the viewer via Gosling's heartthrob star image that makes one side with him rather than with any of the anonymous middle-aged bankers that the film deliberately undermines by keeping them out of the centre of attention. Vennett is also giving us the “scoop”, as he is freely sharing his insider's secrets with us (he later states that he expects that majority of the audience “don't really know what happened”), which further endears him to us. Vennett's subjective position on the matter also indicates that he lacks the authority of financial experts such as Alan Greenspan – then the head of the Federal Reserve System, who, later in the film, is identified as a figure on whose opinions most people relied on before the crisis.<sup>437</sup> With Vennett's limited perspective *The Big Short* further avoids siding with the authoritative stance of the kind of financial specialists that people have incessantly heard explaining the crisis. The set of contradictions that the figure of Vennett embodies, is the first hint of the perverted spectatorship that *The Big Short* can be seen to be constructing, because the audience is called to sympathise with characters that do not represent the interests of most spectators.

*The Big Short* continues to play with genres – a method that I have shown some critics disapproving given the film's serious topic. The music suddenly switches from the idyllic sound that had accompanied the informative historical documentary part, to a fast-paced heist film score as Vennett begins to explain that Lewis Ranieri (Rudy Eiszendorf) changed banking forever by pioneering the area of mortgage-backed securities.<sup>438</sup> To further complicate the “proper” understanding on the matter, Vennett's enthusiastic voice, from which it becomes clear that he sees Ranieri as a hero of sorts, and the exciting heist film musical score, create a sharp contrast with the image of Ranieri – an overweight middle-aged man, who has an outgrown beard and whose thick glasses make his eyes appear very small, and who thus hardly resembles a cool heist film anti-hero. The unflattering image of Ranieri is made particularly apparent by turning a convention that one sees typically used in the heist film genre, the “cool” freeze-frame shot, upside down by depicting a character whose features go so clearly against the

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<sup>437</sup> It is worth noting that after the crisis both *Time* and *The Guardian* placed Greenspan on a number one spot on their “25 People to Blame for the Financial Crisis” articles, see Anonymous C n.d.: n.p.; Finch et. al. 2009: n.p.

<sup>438</sup> Another original piece by Britell called *Lewis Ranieri* and recalling in its style 1970s popular music ballades, which are often used in mafia casino films and casino/bank heist films, see Britell 2015B.

genre tropes of young and charming mavericks such as Mark Wahlberg and Charlize Theron in *The Italian Job* (Gray, 2003) or George Clooney and Brad Pitt in *Ocean's Eleven* [Figure 4–2].

By associating the invention of a new type of bond with the heist film genre, where the “heroes” usually rob a bank and thus interrupt with the most recognisable image of capitalist accumulation, *The Big Short* turns the tables around by suggesting that Ranieri came up with a way of robbing the public. Because of the energetic music and the mise-en-scène involving the viewer in the excitement, thrill, intensity, and the energy of the heist – all of which are positive attributes and associations – the film can be recognised as further developing its mode of perverted spectatorship. This is so because the radical departure from the “boring old banking” (as the title and the slow-paced tone of the first musical theme describe the situation) that led to the eventual “heist” of the American people, is depicted as the most exciting accomplishment of recent times. The musical transition from idyllic to action-packed suggests that the peaceful idealism of the nuclear family on the field is replaced by the “real” action – the deeds of the bankers that we might not know about, as Vennett explains, but that change our lives much more than all the things that we do know about combined. The scene also suggests self-irony by expressing the struggle to make the complex and boring finance exciting and interesting for a large audience. It is important to repeat that with the change of mood, *The Big Short* can be recognised not so much as contrasting banking with the lives of regular people, but rather as exhibiting a noticeable excitement about leaving both behind as elements of the boring past.



Figure 4-2 A “cool” heist film freezeframe shot exemplifying the film’s use of generic devices against the grain.

The perversity of the “heist” segment emerges from the fact that the action-oriented music and noticeable change of editing tempo creates the impression of a real progress, even though mortgage-backed securities have later been widely blamed for allowing for the risky financial speculations that led to the crisis. There are no cuts in the first scene and the banking

scene begins with a slow-motion sequence, whereas the editing becomes much faster in the “heist” scene. The perversion of spectatorship that film can suggests can be understood as a viewing practice where the spectator identifies with the gaze of an other, causing a shift in one’s subjective position. Žižek explains the perverted spectatorship in relation to the scene in *Psycho* where Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) drives the car into the swamp with the murdered Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) inside:

When the car stops sinking for a moment, the anxiety that automatically arises in the viewer – a token of his/her solidarity with Norman – suddenly reminds him or her that his/her desire is identical to Norman’s: that his impartiality was always-already false. At this moment, his/her gaze is de-idealised, its purity blemished by a pathological stain, and what comes forth is the desire that maintains it: the viewer is compelled to assume that the scene he witnesses is staged for his eyes, that his/her gaze was included in it from the very beginning.<sup>439</sup>

The perversity of such a scene does not emerge so much from the fact that one secretly looks at Norman’s perversity, but rather that the gaze of the pervert is included in the scene, calling one to reconsider their desire in relation to the film.<sup>440</sup> The perverted spectatorship could be thus understood in terms of the viewer not seeking their own pleasure, but the enjoyment of the Other, where the latter does not simply have to stand for a character in the film, but in the multi-protagonist film’s case for the Other, which crudely put, stands for a social structure reaching far beyond the spectator’s and the film’s capacity for conceptualisation. Clearly intricacies of high finance that led to the starker market crisis of this century serve well the role of an ungraspable concept that cannot be comprehended in full and without leaving room for various other opinions on the topic.

The perverted spectatorship becomes apparent also without going into psychoanalytical terminology. The perversity is clearly expressed in cinematic terms, because, as I have demonstrated, the film through a variety of measures creates a positive sensation of an exploration that ultimately leads to destruction. By representing a novel way of merging mortgages as the progressive turning point of 1970s banking, *The Big Short* begins to render highly enjoyable its representation of the process that eventually led to the wipeout of countless people’s lifesavings. The spectators are engaged in the excitement of the discovery, but this interest, according to the film’s later drastic depiction of the crisis, resembles a desire to gaze

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<sup>439</sup> Žižek 1992: 233.

<sup>440</sup> See also Vighi 2009: 31; McGowan 2014: 73–75.

into a nuclear blast. If thinking beyond capitalism is nearly impossible today, as I have shown Žižek arguing, then *The Big Short* invites one to do just that – to approach the unknown and the impossible to imagine. This is not an invitation for a constructive and rational contemplation, but an emotional trip that renders the unknown thrilling and intense. It is a call to embrace utter contingency where one loses grasp of familiar coordinates. This allure of catastrophe, Žižek argues, has a distinctly American characteristic and is expressed for instance by American cinema's obsession with the end of the world.<sup>441</sup> I showed in the last chapter how such desire for catastrophe and the accidental is directly related to the impossibility of thinking about alternatives to the current capitalist *status quo*. The appeal for the accidental that *The Big Short* depicts, appears therefore to be very similar to Doane's argument, according to which the attraction of the early cinema emerged because cinema was recognised as a countermeasure to the rising rationalisation and modernisation of society in the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>442</sup> According to Doane, cinema offered a safe setting in which one could come into contact with the accidental that modernisation attempted to minimise for the sake of increasing efficiency of production.<sup>443</sup> *The Big Short*'s exploration suggests that such interests have not left cinema. Based on *The Big Short*'s exciting depiction of the discovery that eventually led to the severest financial crisis since the Great Depression, it can be argued that the film recognises that contemporary society is experiencing similar pressures, as those associated with modernisation, due to an increasing financialization of life.

Via the figure of Ranieri *The Big Short* once more complicates the typical image of an evil banker, as he is shown to be the type of person who gets mustard stains all over himself when eating a hot dog that he likely got from a stand down the street by a subway entrance. Ranieri, as represented by *The Big Short*, therefore hardly fits the playboy image of the Cristal-drinking investment banker that the film later shows to be popular amongst contemporary bankers. Neither does Ranieri match the sterile image of a highly competitive and calculating genius that another multi-protagonist film on the crisis, *Margin Call*, shows today's financial workers to be. Rather, according to Vennett, Ranieri is a sort of accidental hero who is not himself fully aware of the extent of his actions and how they will come to change banking forever. While some commentators have pointed to *Margin Call* as a positive example of how to engage with the economic crisis in a serious manner – the implication being, as I have been suggesting via Rancière's thinking, that a film on such a grave topic must be gravely serious –

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<sup>441</sup> Žižek 2002.

<sup>442</sup> Doane 2002.

<sup>443</sup> Doane 2002.

it could be claimed that it is rather *The Big Short*'s endeavour to complicate our understanding of Wall Street, often by going against viewers' expectations by switching between different genres, that is not only more in line with the complexity of real life, but also potentially more politically effective by opening up the debate to many.<sup>444</sup>

By depicting Ranieri as an unlikely candidate to develop a highly successful financial instrument that, as Vennett later puts it, "mutated into a monstrosity that collapsed the whole world economy", the film highlights the importance of contingency as a factor in leading to the crisis. *The Big Short*'s emphasis on accidentality becomes clear from the matter that in addition to Vennett's explicit statement about Ranieri's unawareness of the effects of his actions, the film depicts his team's excessive celebration in strip clubs that followed their sudden profitability – suggesting that they stumbled upon an unexpected fortune that does not match their efforts. Such an emphasis clearly moderates the possibility for any direct criticism of accountability for where this profitability eventually led. Vennett's suggestion of the catastrophic proportions of the fallout from Ranieri's endeavour further pardons him from any direct responsibility as the problem appears almost too big to have been averted, similarly to how no one person can be held responsible for global climate change.<sup>445</sup> The emphasis on contingency and the retrospective angle leave an impression of faith or destiny in these early scenes, suggesting that if it was not Ranieri, somebody else might have come up with a similar financial instrument. Such a shift from a sense of contingency to destiny emerges, as I discussed in the first chapter, because of the fact that the multi-protagonist film has to constantly find a balance between its interest in contingency and its rigid narrative structure, and between exploring an issue from different perspectives via the high number of lead characters and creating coherence of the whole. With *The Big Short*'s initial emphasis on accidentality, it is little wonder that some commentators particularly dislike the film's latter part wherein its criticism of Wall Street's financial scheming becomes much more apparent and straightforward.<sup>446</sup>

Another example of the fact that according to *The Big Short* Raineri did not fully understand the potentially negative outcome of his idea is his explanation of the reliability of

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<sup>444</sup> Bradshaw 2016: n.p.

<sup>445</sup> Another crucial difference between *Killing Them Softly* and *The Big Short* is that while the first evokes an impression of messianic foresight, particularly with the scene that I addressed in the third chapter where a foghorn can be heard and Jackie contemplates about the future of the United States, *The Big Short* instead starts to create an impression of the useless hindsight of a disaster film.

<sup>446</sup> Grunwald notes that despite starting off with a quote from Twain emphasising the importance of ignorance in the matter, "by the end of the film, *The Big Short* flips from blaming stupidity to blaming evil", a development that he condemns, see Grunwald 2016: n.p.

investing in mortgage-backed bonds: “Well they’re mortgages, and who the hell doesn’t pay their mortgages!” Through this the film suggests why the idea of investing in mortgage-backed securities initially seemed such a brilliant idea. People were not likely to default on their mortgage because according to the general consensus back then, that would also mean that they would lose the property that they lived in. As we know in retrospect, such a sense of responsibility changes when a person owns several properties. Via the run-of-the-mill figure of Ranieri, *The Big Short* suggests that rather than necessarily being the result of the maliciousness of certain individuals, it was to some extent almost accidental that the mortgage-backed securities developed into such a toxic asset. The film’s strong emphasis on contingency is partially problematic in this case, because while no single person or financial instrument is to blame for the crisis, the situation, although a result of collective irresponsibility, was not an unavoidable *force majeure*. Instead, as I will illustrate via *The Big Short*, similarly to Ranieri’s belief that nobody would fall behind with the payments of their own mortgage, it is the American Imaginary, stressing the value and stability of homeownership, that can be recognised as the primarily stimulus of the collective misbelief that led to the crisis.

The film’s judgemental take on the development of banking, although multi-layered, is there from the beginning. After the freeze frame, *The Big Short* cuts to Ranieri demonstrating the idea of mortgage-backed securities to a potential customer (Casey Groves) – explaining them as a financial instrument that delivers a high yield, while limiting the risk via bundling together a large number of mortgages. By focusing primarily on how Ranieri’s team hustles the pension fund manager into buying more bonds than he originally intended, the film overlooks an obviously humanistic dimension of Ranieri’s idea – that the bundling of mortgages allowed people with less than perfect credit rating to make their dream of homeownership a reality. The possibility for excessive spending that this allows, as we know today from the vantage point of hindsight and as the film suggests later when returning to a modern-day strip club, where an exotic dancer (Heighlen Boyd) reveals that she has “five houses... and a condo”, is partially the reason why the mortgage-backed bonds defaulted and turned “into a monstrosity” as Vennett puts it. Despite this hazard, the progressive aspect of such a development should not be neglected either.

The positive side of mortgage-backed securities becomes particularly clear when considering that helping to fulfil the aspirations of potential homeowners is such an important aspect of the American Imaginary and as such is depicted in heroic light in one of the most popular films on finance – *It’s a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946). In the film the protagonist George Bailey (James Stewart), a head of a small financial institution, strives to outsmart his

fierce business competitor Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore), by providing risky loans to people who alternatively would turn to Potter to finance themselves. As a clear indicator of *The Big Short*'s take on the matter, the film instead of focusing on the potential benefits of Ranieri's idea, depicts his sales team as encouraging the pension fund manager to be reckless, after which the bankers literally throw money around as they excessively celebrate their "heist" in a strip club. The positive aspect of mortgage-backed securities is mentioned in the script, but not represented in the final cut.<sup>447</sup> This omission can be seen as a simplification of the matter made in order to provide coherence of the complex topic, indicating that even with its multi-protagonist form and a unique approach to the financial crisis, *The Big Short* struggles to represent the issue in all its intricacies.

From the start it becomes apparent that Vennett is a selfish person who values money above all else, an impression that the film only comes to confirm. Vennett is the only main character who is neither redeemed via having a family or by expressing some remorse for playing a part in the severe economic downturn. Despite what could be recognised as the film's antipathy regarding Vennett, he, as Gosling also explains, neither invented credit default swaps that allowed him to "bet" against mortgage-backed securities, nor rated the mortgage-backed bonds dishonestly.<sup>448</sup> Vennett simply sold instruments that he figured would be profitable if the market optimism faltered. The latter once again highlights the difficulty of placing a direct blame on somebody in today's world of finance, where, according to Žižek, it appears that breaking the rules has become part of the rules.<sup>449</sup> While Vennett did not even break any of the rules regarding securitisation, he did take his insider knowledge to another firm and urged them to short the bonds that his employer was currently profiting from. Although the film does mention that Vennett was ridiculed for his market pessimism by his peers at Deutsche Bank, it appears that Vennett's potential breach of work ethics has become such a standard practice in the industry and an integrated part of contemporary business that *The Big Short* does not even stop to question the nature of Vennett's actions.

The film appears to suggest that it is not the remorseful main characters abusing the financial insurance system by betting on the demise of the United States' housing market that are really to blame for the crisis, but the ones who came up with the concept in the first place. *The Big Short* shows both Ranieri and Vennett to be insiders of high finance – one works for Solomon Brothers and the other for Deutsche Bank – while the rest of the main characters are

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<sup>447</sup> McKay and Randolph 2015: 3.

<sup>448</sup> Gosling 2015: n.p.

<sup>449</sup> Žižek 2011: 9.

described by Vennett as “outsiders and weirdos”, who at best run a small hedge fund. The former is rather a perverse suggestion given that Ranieri developed a financial instrument that offered not only a solid way for investors to earn a profit for decades and in the process to invigorate the American economy through re-capitalisation, but which also allowed millions of people who would not have been financed otherwise to buy homes for their families. The main characters, on the other hand, simply discovered a way to exploit the system in the name of personal profit and in the interest of a small number of investors. Thus, although *The Big Short* aims to represent the complexity of contemporary life with a specific focus on the financial world, it occasionally falls back on stereotypical easy answers.<sup>450</sup> By doing so *The Big Short* represents a perversity of a different kind, potentially calling the viewer to go along with its reproduction of harmful stereotypes.<sup>451</sup>

#### 4.4 Continuing with equality

*The Big Short*’s playful attitude towards genres, emphasised by the switch from the slow-paced and idyllic historical documentary style to a fast-paced heist film setting continues with a very fast-paced montage sequence that resembles television aesthetics and which suggests that in the 1970s not only banking, but also the American Imaginary more broadly went through a significant change. Although Vennett keeps the spectators’ focus on the changing nature of finance, saying that after the development of mortgage-backed securities “the money came raining down [for the major financial institutions], and for the first time the banker went from the country club to the strip club”, the montage sequence which follows stresses a wider change towards excessive spending in the United States. Before taking a closer look at the significance of the American Imaginary in *The Big Short*, the film’s use of genres deserves more attention.

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<sup>450</sup> The real moral complexity regarding contemporary finance could be termed, following Žižek, as the “Soros paradox”, and which he describes as such: “George Soros is undoubtedly an honest humanitarian whose Open Society foundation more or less single-handedly saved critical social thinking in the post-Communist countries. Yet a decade or so ago, the same George Soros engaged in speculation on the currency market, exploiting differences in exchange rates to make hundreds of millions of dollars. The massively successful operation also caused untold suffering, especially in South-East Asia, where hundreds of thousands lost their jobs, with all the attendant consequences. Such is today’s “abstract” violence at its purest: at the one extreme, financial speculation pursued in its own sphere, with no obvious links to the reality of human lives; at the other extreme, a pseudo-natural catastrophe which hits thousands like a tsunami, for no apparent reason”, see Žižek 2011: 291.

<sup>451</sup> Another instance of this, that unfortunately I do not have the space to go into, is the missing case of Meredith Whitney, a female financial analyst who is present in the book, see also Merle 2015A: n.p.

From the strip club scene ending with one of the bankers throwing money in the air, the film cuts to a very fast-paced montage sequence. The sequence creates an impression as if someone were quickly going through different television channels with a remote control, giving the spectator barely time to spot all the different images and clips. The sequence begins by depicting countless people on the streets and then cuts to a still image of endless rows of brand new houses on a hill. The film, thus, marks its central concern – people's desire for private property and how the finance sector has taken advantage of this desire (the segment later returns to images of a private home being constructed). The montage sequence then starts to switch between images of popular culture icons [such as *The Blues Brothers* (Landis, 1980), *Top Gun* (Scott, 1986), Apple computers, Snoop Dog and Tupac, Eric Cartman from *South Park* (1997–...)], more general American iconography (people in a typical American diner, the Twin Towers, a farmer by a silo, a heavy industry worker), and the different American presidents, marking the passing of time (Ronald Regan winning the election, Bush senior giving a speech, Monica Lewinsky celebrating with Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush looking worried while addressing the public). The illusory nature of all these easily recognisable images is suggested by the film repeatedly returning to a scene depicting the growing Manhattan skyline and Vennett saying: “And America barely noticed as its number one industry became boring old banking... And then one day almost thirty years later in 2008, it all came crashing down”. On the one hand, the sequence's aim is rather clear. As all the different images are being repeatedly crosscut with time-lapse footage of new skyscrapers being built in Manhattan, this part of the segment becomes its anchoring point, suggesting that while the media images, politics, and people's lives were in constant flux, the banks, in the meantime, got steadily bigger – their prosperity and stability expressed by the ever-growing real-estate [Figure 4–3]. The implication that the public was to an extent preoccupied – with politics, popular media, and their own lives – while the banks made a fortune with the help of the American Imaginary, is further suggested by the energetic saxophone music, which is the latter part of the lively heist-film score of the earlier scenes, slowly dying down and the images becoming more and more focused on stock exchanges, while a haunting note begins ringing in the background.



Figure 4-3 The pattern of American success.

At the same time, as almost everybody can associate with the easily recognisable images, they suggest a certain familiarity and perhaps even intimacy, bringing back memories of the past decades and suggesting that the audience is part of these images. *The Big Short* does not seem to want the audience to witness the United States' transition from a safe and uninvolved distance. The film can be seen to be denying a position from which one can simply observe the selfish actions of the big banks as if one had no responsibility in the matter. The shared responsibility for the general shift towards excessive spending can be recognised as being hinted at already before the montage sequence begins, with Vennett saying that after the discovery of mortgage-backed securities "stocks and savings were almost inconsequential [for the banks]", meaning that debt and housing began to increasingly outweigh stocks and savings. Although Vennett's words appear again to be directed at the banks, on closer inspection *The Big Short* can be seen to imply that the financial system transformed because people moved from owning a portion of a company and keeping their savings in a bank, to a lending-based consumerism that found its main focal point in a desire for private real-estate.

Historically real-estate is one of the weakest contributors to wealth appreciation and a loan can be used to pay off a loan – a tactic that *The Big Short* later shows the modern-day stripper using to "own" five houses and a condo. The film could be identified as discretely allowing the audience to recognise their own part in the broader transition to debt-culture. The latter can be argued to have significantly reduced people's actual purchasing power by allowing an individual's expenses to exceed their income. Via the montage sequence's focus on the growing Manhattan skyline and the images of private housing, *The Big Short* suggests that the changing focus on creating an impression of prosperity rather than actually being well-off, concealed both the general public and 2007–2008 financial industry's heavy reliance on debt and real-estate. The American Imaginary in this case is not just imaginary, in a sense of being

a fantasy, because via a loan one can indeed enjoy the benefits of prosperity, without actually being well-off. According to the montage sequence's overview of the three decades leading up to the 2007–2008 crisis, the United States has, since the late 1970s, undergone a drastic shift towards imaginary success, upheld by debt and expressed via luxury housing, over an actual financial stability, emerging from a balanced combination of all aspects of finance, including stocks and saving.

While making use of pop-cultural images, especially televised images, is a highly popular choice in the multi-protagonist film, the way *The Big Short* deploys the montage sequence deserves closer attention as it differs from more common uses of found footage or televised imagery in the form.<sup>452</sup> For example, although *Killing Them Softly* makes use of actual documentary material, while multi-protagonist films as diverse as *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia*, and *Babel* recreate television aesthetics to deliver certain aspects of their narratives, in all such cases the television images remain neatly within the diegetic world. *The Big Short*, on the other hand, does not confine the images within the characters' world, but directs them at the viewers by using images from popular culture in a manner approximating how we might have encountered them originally. A closer look at *71 Fragments*' use of televised images provides an example of the originality of *The Big Short*'s approach in the context of the multi-protagonist film. On the one hand, *71 Fragments*' appliance of found footage appears to provide the closest parallel to *The Big Short*, because the film similarly starts with apparently unmediated news footage. As with *The Big Short*, the television news broadcast in *71 Fragments* appears almost unmediated, as the televised images are presented as closely as possible to how one would have experienced them originally. In this way both films take an important step towards equality as the films are willing to curtail their own role as active mediators of the film world.

On the other hand, *71 Fragments* begins by depicting news about Gamsakhourdia's fighters and displaced people, failed peace negotiations in Somalia, and the unsuccessful U.N. intervention in Haiti. *71 Fragments* continues to offer similar news of war zones and humanitarian crises throughout. The film's highly negative, and thus one-sided, take on evening news, and therefore reality more broadly, is suggested already with the first cut from the news

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<sup>452</sup> *Babel* shows how an accidental shooting of an American tourist in North Africa is turned into a media spectacle of the War on Terror, and how the same news is depicted with an ironical distance in Japanese media. *Babel* furthermore emphasises how the sufferings of the American protagonists mean little to the Japanese protagonist – as she switches through the television channels – who is dealing with her own existential anguish. *Magnolia*, on the other hand, uses television in order to suggest that the lovable “perfect” people we see on television screen can have dark secrets of their own. While formally *Babel*'s televised images remain firmly within the diegetic world like it is in *Killing Them Softly*, then *Magnolia* experiments with the shooting style of television within the film as the televised parts were shot on different stock and nonstop to mimic the conditions of a making an actual television game show.

sequence to a young migrant boy fleeing through ice-cold water. By contrasting the detached and omnipotent position of the evening news with the local perspective of one of the countless anonymous migrants fleeing from a large-scale political conflict, while also opposing the two scenes via their duration and pacing, *71 Fragments* could be argued to represent television news as greatly differing from, if not distorting, reality. The film returns time and again to different news sequences, until it eventually shows the film's own action – a seemingly unmotivated shooting in a local bank and the suicide of the attacker to follow – as forming one of the clips in the evening news broadcast. Another anonymous piece of footage, the film appears to suggest, in an endless mass of information.

Although *71 Fragments* initially treats film and television as equal media, the film ends up creating a sharp contrast between the two. Whereas *71 Fragments* seems dedicated to carefully exploring the lives of all those involved in the shooting spree, the television news is depicted as reducing the occurrence to a simple bulletin. The moralising intent of *71 Fragments* becomes most apparent when the film twice returns to a news sequence ending with a story about paedophilia accusations against Michael Jackson. This segment about Jackson also ends *71 Fragments*, but only after the spectator comes to realise that the news piece about the film's topic of interest was presented just prior to news about Christmas in a war-torn former Yugoslavia and the accusations against Michael Jackson. The media is thus shown as lacking taste and as treating the most disparate news on the same plane, seemingly unable to differentiate between different topics and levels of importance.

*The Big Short*, on the other hand, does not create a hierarchical contrast between its film and television images as both media, while offering drastically different modes of narration, greatly develop the narrative. After all, the found footage does a significant amount of work, filling the viewer in on changes taking place over three decades, before any of the main characters are even introduced. Although *The Big Short* eventually cuts from the media images to its central characters in a similar way to *71 Fragments*, it downplays the importance of the main characters by having Vennett characterise them as a bunch of “losers and weirdos”. Because of Vennett's screwball character, the film complicates the possibility of taking this characterisation at face value. This becomes even more clear from the fact that Vennett quickly distances himself from the other main characters, by explaining that he is not one of the outsiders, because he is “pretty fucking cool”. The main characters who could successfully predict the collapse of the United States housing market, are therefore marked as almost accidental heroes and as highly unlikely candidates to represent the truth about where the market was heading. *The Big Short* therefore does not contrast television news and popular

media with reality, but shows instead that the American Imaginary is entirely inseparable from reality. This is why, according to *The Big Short*, only a handful of people, whom the film depicts as having great difficulty adjusting to the American Imaginary, had a different view of where the economy was heading. *The Big Short* has been accused by many commentators of being “smug” about its explanations of the crisis, yet a closer examination makes apparent that the film is applying an array of complex aesthetic devices in order to reduce the sense of its authority over the subject matter as much as possible.<sup>453</sup>

#### 4.5 Neither fish nor fowl: is uncertainty in a film a bad thing?

*The Big Short*’s mixture of different styles, genres, and modes of representation, offers a certain resemblance with Rancière’s thinking on film. Rancière argues that arts within the Western tradition of thinking follow primarily three regimes of understanding: *the ethical regime* of Plato’s heritage, which considers arts worthy in relation to their bigger ethical or pedagogical goals that arts should aim for; *the representative regime* of Aristotle’s legacy, which frees arts from such outside obligations by setting up rules specific to them; and *the aesthetic regime* dreamt up by the German Idealism, which sees arts as a combination of conscious and unconscious elements – doing away with art-specific rules, but thereby placing arts in constant danger of losing their distinction from non-art.<sup>454</sup> For Rancière, these are not just different ways of understanding the arts, but different ways of organising and sharing the comprehensible (what he terms the primary aesthetics), captured in the phrase *le partage du sensible*.<sup>455</sup> As stated in the second chapter, the term *partage* stands for both uniting and dividing (its equivalent in English could perhaps be “to part-take”). In other words, the shared understanding and support for a “proper” separation of arts and politics, is also the type of thinking that rationalises people’s designation to their “proper” places within a society.<sup>456</sup>

As stated before, Rancière’s political and aesthetic thoughts are field-specific, but that the two sides meet via the notion of the distribution of the sensible. This means that the more traditional understanding of political art, as represented for example by Bradshaw’s article that wishes that *The Big Short* would decide if it is a proper genre film or if it aims to deliver a

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<sup>453</sup> See Schlussel 2015: n.p.

<sup>454</sup> Rancière 2004: 20–23.

<sup>455</sup> Rancière 2004: 12–13.

<sup>456</sup> Rancière illustrates this by showing how for Plato it was natural to exclude artisans from governing, because in his mind they simply would not have the time for it, see Rancière 2004: 12.

proper attack on Wall Street, could be seen as supporting the system of governing that it seemingly challenges – accepting the proper dividing lines between arts and politics and thus keeping people tied to their proper places within a social system. As such, the question for Rancière is not about separating arts and politics into their proper places, or making an artwork's political implications readily recognisable, but calling such dividing lines into question in the first place. This is precisely what we have seen *The Big Short* to be primarily engaged with via its mixture of genres and playful depiction of the global economic crisis.

The constant tension between different ways of understanding arts is also the reason why Rancière has dedicated considerable attention to cinema – as blurring the boundaries between the different regimes of art comes naturally to film. This is so, according to Rancière, because cinema arises almost as a kind of a mockery of high modernism.<sup>457</sup> In the heyday of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, an art-form emerges that not only restores the traditional narrative rules that such writers had tried to overcome, but which also breathes new life into generic conventions.<sup>458</sup> In addition, cinema's mass-appeal differs sharply from the intentional intellectual intricacies captured in some of the works of modernists, subject today to above all an expansive, but narrow scholarly debate. The reason behind cinema's unruliness, Rancière argues, is that the problems central to the older regimes of art – focusing on the separation lines between conscious and unconscious, active and passive gestures in the arts – are solved by the cinema from the very outset.<sup>459</sup> Uniting the conscious and unconscious, and making matter speak – that which the German idealism could only dream of – is accomplished naturally in the cinema by the union between an active director and a passive camera.<sup>460</sup> According to Rancière, cinema has to invent its own games from the means of other arts; as Rancière says: “Cinema can only make the games it plays with its own means intelligible to itself through the games of exchange and inversion it plays with the literary fable, the plastic form, and the theatrical voice”.<sup>461</sup> Borrowing the expressive tools from other arts and using them anew, thus calling into question the dividing lines between different arts, is where cinema's inherent potential stands.

However, as we saw in the second chapter, it is important to note that Rancière speaks deliberately from the position of an amateur regarding cinema. Rancière appears to find a certain pride in claiming that he has never taught film and often argues that cinema belongs to

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<sup>457</sup> Rancière 2001: 10.

<sup>458</sup> Rancière 2001: 3.

<sup>459</sup> Rancière 2001: 2.

<sup>460</sup> Rancière 2001: 9.

<sup>461</sup> Rancière 2001: 15.

everybody who has ventured into its worlds. Because of this it could be argued that Film Studies and its habitual concepts are something of an improper territory for him. As such, Rancière recognises mainly the games that cinema plays with the other arts and never discusses the games that cinema plays with its own past and by drawing from its different genres. Rancière's scepticism of film scholars is likely similar to my questioning of the film criticism that the three films have received, because the interests of the specialists (be they academics or critics) often go against the interest of the amateurs, as the former tend to place themselves between a film and its audience. By doing so they re-establish a hierarchical relation that amateurism seeks to undo, claiming that all approaches to cinema are equal. This procedure of extracting a preferred fable of film by neglecting other aspects of cinema, Rancière argues, is fundamental to the idea of cinema – as directors often film their own versions from other people's scripts, spectators connect their own memories and experiences with the film they view, and critics could be argued to be frequently talking about films that they would have liked to see instead of the ones that they saw.<sup>462</sup> Thus, all major parts of cinema, according to Rancière, extract their preferred version of a film from the actual richness of its body. Although cinema itself suggests such a mixed reception because it draws so heavily from different arts and switches between different modes of understanding art, Rancière avoids the language of Film Studies likely because it can be seen as leading back to a hierarchical relationship between the educated and ignorant.<sup>463</sup> I will demonstrate how *The Big Short* exemplifies how Rancière's understanding of the aesthetic regime of art could benefit from including the notion of genre. By adding to Rancière's thinking the aesthetic regime of art is demonstrated to bear a new significance to the understanding of cinema.

Firstly, it is clear from the criticism related to *The Big Short* that the way the film breaks the rules of the Aristotelian heritage is still often considered problematic, thus the film's mischievous use of genre is a properly political act by making one question the "proper" function of mainstream genre cinema. Secondly, *The Big Short*'s mixture of genres and representation of the found footage as one would have seen it originally, distorting a separation line between original use and a divergence, disrupts the expectations set up by the representative regime that aims to create a clear distinction between fact and fiction. Perhaps the most interesting example of *The Big Short*'s mischievous characterisation is not the way the film

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<sup>462</sup> Rancière 2001: 5.

<sup>463</sup> At the same time, one could claim that Rancière avoids the cultural studies aspect of Film Studies because his cinephilia has a highbrow characteristic given his frequent preference for directors such Pedro Costa and Béla Tarr who could be seen as working in the European art cinema tradition.

repeatedly breaks the “fourth wall” by having the main characters and celebrities address the public directly, or the way the film represents the serious topic humorously (therefore mixing tragedy and comedy that originate from theatre), but, as I will demonstrate, by drawing from much more cinema-focussed genres and by depicting the 2008 economic downfall in the style of a disaster film.

In the latter half of *The Big Short*’s prologue sequence, after Vennett says: “in 2008... It all came crashing down”, the film begins to emphasise the vast influence of the financial sector in the lives of Americans. The tonal change to seriousness is suggested by the editing tempo of the montage sequence greatly slowing down and the energetic saxophone music being gradually replaced by a haunting note lingering over images that now predominantly focus on stock exchanges. The film’s depiction of finance and the ghostly bass note can be recognised to be further related to a proposition that although we were unable to notice it within the vividness of the music, the ominous sounding bass was always the underlying feature of the lively piece. This creates a parallel with how the banks got increasingly larger, “while the whole world was having a big ol’ party”, as Vennett soon says. Similarly to the bass forming the musical base of the entire tune, the banks through loose monetary means allowed Americans to engage in excessive consumer spending.

The most important image of the latter half of the montage sequence, suggested already by the length of the shot, is a slow fade-in to the New York Stock Exchange over which several still images from popular culture and a scene of Times Square are double exposed. Although barely noticeable, likely the most haunting of these images exposed over the stock exchange is a still image of a firefighter, with which the film could be seen as making a clear reference to 9/11 [Figure 4–4]. After quickly showing the firefighter, all the familiar images fade away while the scene of the almost empty trade room remains. Given that, as I have suggested, thinking beyond capitalism is something of a Real to contemporary thought, an indestructible barrier that no idea can penetrate, *The Big Short* has found a way in which to represent a disruption in the capitalist machinery. The barely noticeable reference to the terrorist attacks literally suggest something ungraspable, as the image of the firefighter is depicted so quickly that spectators cannot be sure that they even saw it.<sup>464</sup> At the same time, the practically empty stock exchange is all that remains giving an impression of the day the Earth stood still. Together the two images suggest a certain gap in time and memory that one is unable to fully comprehend.

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<sup>464</sup> If the film’s attempt to represent the unrepresentable one could see a certain similarity to Jean-François Lyotard’s understanding of the sublime.



Figure 4-4 Ghastly presence of finance.

The lone ethereal firefighter, as his image appears as a partially transparent ghost lurking in the empty stock exchange, evokes a particularly gloomy mood because the film has made several hints to 9/11 – such as an image of the worried looking George W. Bush and a skyscraper in ruins. While again it is almost impossible to say upon a normal viewing of the film whether it is an image of Ground Zero, the specific historical suggestion is nevertheless apparent, because not long before *The Big Short* had already shown an image of the Twin Towers on a sunny day. If it really is easier today to think about the end of the world, than about an alternative to capitalism, as I have shown many authors including Žižek arguing, then *The Big Short* can be seen to be taking this idea, with a reference to 9/11, to its logical conclusion, suggesting that a halt in capitalism is nothing short of an end of the world. The perverse weaving of these scenes emerges from the fact that the film offers a range of glossy and shining images, which, at the same time, suggest 9/11. The perverse interlacing does not call the spectator to cheer for 9/11 as it was with the discovery of mortgage-backed securities, but suggests the need to see the financial crisis as an utter tragedy.

The impression of a disaster that the mind has difficulties accepting is further supported by *The Big Short* fading to black from the scenes depicting stock traders. Over the pitch-black screen distant voices can be heard as news reporters begin informing the viewer about the catastrophic state of stock markets. The way the film presents the information over a black screen reassures an impression of trauma and the unrepresentable. This is further suggested by the voices from television not addressing anybody directly, but spreading panic whether anyone is listening to them or not. The film then quickly cuts from the black screen to a CNBC news image, which shows the plummeting of all the major U.S. market indexes. The darkness, distant voices, and quick flashes of visual information, emphasise a feeling of uncertainty, as if one

was in a state of shock, only temporarily able to make full use of their senses. The fragmentation of reality is suggested by keeping the cutting so quick that if the spectator blinks an eye they would miss the market chart or some of the following images entirely. By representing the desperate explanations by the news channels as unrelated to how people actually experienced the situation, *The Big Short* further supports an impression of being too close to the trauma, which is not yet rendered harmless via rationalisation.

This impression that the news cannot really relate to reality is affirmed by the following image, where the contents of a person's house are carelessly thrown on to the street, suggesting that the intimacy of private lives was suddenly intruded upon by a foreign power. Because both the news and people's situation after the collapse of the United States housing market are presented similarly via quick flashes, *The Big Short* does not seem to favour one over the other as it was the case in *71 Fragments*, rather the televised news and people on the streets are shown to be equally perplexed over the situation, unable to piece together a clear understanding. Symbolising the former house owner's lack of control over the situation, we see her caught in the cold wind, about to be blown over. The feeling of estrangement and helplessness is reinforced by another menacing bass sound slowly growing louder, until it becomes uncomfortable to bear. The menacing sound playing over images of people's unhappiness – a woman covering her mouth in anguish as she hears about her dire financial situation, a chart showing the increasing rate of unemployment, houses with boarded up windows for sale – create an impression of a familiar world that has suddenly turned alien, a premise of many horror films about zombies where an unknown virus renders the habitual unrecognisable.

The impression that *The Big Short* ventures into a horror film territory is further articulated by Vennett's voice over, which states that: "In the end Lewis Ranieri's mortgage-backed security mutated into a monstrosity that collapsed the whole world economy". This is said over a scene depicting people, as if a row of mindless zombies, waiting in line at an unemployment office. The ghastly score continues to accompany images of an abandoned house, a lone sign calling out for job seekers to register, and a county sheriff attaching an announcement on the wall. Being presented in a continuous sequence like this, it is not hard to recognise in these images the stock tropes of a horror film. The voice-over narrator then goes on to say that none of the leaders saw it coming (a typical premise of the disaster film), except a few "outsiders and weirdos" – our unlikely heroes who the film has not even introduced at this point. These weirdos, as the narrator puts it, were able to identify a giant lie at the heart of the economy. The film could be seen as again recalling a common trope of the horror genre, the idea of a secret experiment being hidden in some government or major company's

laboratory, which eventually causes a catastrophe (for example, the *Resident Evil* series relies on such a premise).<sup>465</sup>

It is important to note that the latter part of the montage sequence consists of images that were originally standard images of the economic crisis, similar to those one can find in any picture bank. When assembled together like this the images achieve their effectiveness because they conform to the horror and disaster film generic rules. On the other hand, the way the images are assembled grants them largely a new function, similar to how mortgage-backed bonds function, turning a simple element into a complex system that receives far greater significance than the sum total of its components. *The Big Short*'s use of familiar images to suggest something entirely unexpected is a gesture of the aesthetic regime *par excellence*, because, as Rancière says, this mode of art undoes the categories of high art and popular culture, by using potentially everything for its artistic purposes and for its ability to show the images of the past from a new angle.<sup>466</sup> *The Big Short*'s play with the horror genre is not how George A. Romero uses zombies as allegory for mindless consumerism and racial bigotry. Whereas *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978) are part of the aesthetic regime because they question the proper role of a genre film, especially because they belong to a genre that was initially considered as one of the lowest in the genre hierarchy. At the same time, the films largely remain within the bounds of their chosen genre. *The Big Short*'s approach, on the other hand, is much more in line with the aesthetic regime's ability to interpret existing artefacts anew and use potentially everything for arts' purpose, because stock images of the economic crisis are used to depict the event via the horror genre as a full-blown catastrophe. The disaster film's generic element of a useless hindsight perspective, which Vennett enjoys, pardons Ranieri to an extent, showing him as a sort modern-day Frankenstein. By including the spectators within the group of those responsible for the crisis, *The Big Short* shows the shared responsibility for this catastrophe. By turning the screen black for most of the ending of the montage sequence, *The Big Short* could be seen to be accepting an equal share of such responsibility. The economic crisis was not something that the film could claim to have foreseen. Paradoxically by keeping the spectators literally in the dark for the last part of the prologue, the film does not establish its superiority, but rather achieves equality by not showing what it did not know.

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<sup>465</sup> The films, based on a computer game series of the same title, are as follows: *Resident Evil* (Anderson, 2002), *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (Witt, 2004), *Resident Evil: Extinction* (Mulcahy, 2007), *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (Anderson, 2010), *Resident Evil: Retribution* (Anderson, 2012), and *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter* (Anderson, 2016).

<sup>466</sup> Rancière 2001: 10.

After the darkness *The Big Short* ends the time-lapse intro, that is to say the film opens with an image that many multi-protagonist films such as *Babel*, *Crash*, and *Short Cuts*, end with – an aerial shot of a housing district. It could be argued that the aerial shot calls us to see not only the misplaced belief in the value and stability of the U.S. housing market, but provides a different perspective on property. From this grand top-down perspective all the potential individuals in these houses are dwarfed into insignificance compared to the larger pattern of the district. This suggestion comes across also from the film’s poster, where the stars are placed into figures of small houses that like arrows bring them all together, seemingly without any consideration for individual will [Figure 4–5].

Just as in the disaster film where doom is inevitable, the so-called heroes of *The Big Short* are unable to avert the housing crisis, despite attempting to question the rating agencies or informing the press about the severe housing bubble. The universalising notion emerging from such an ascending aerial shot rising above the main characters to display the larger setting that they live in, is reversed in *The Big Short*. The film does not end with the pedagogical notion that the world is a complex place, but starts with the assumption. By providing a bigger picture of all the houses, a perspective that people do not usually possess, *The Big Short* also emphasises the notion that a few “outsiders and weirdos” had a unique perspective, as Vennett puts it, “And they saw it [the emerging crash] by doing something the rest of the suckers never thought to do: they looked”. The film thus makes its position clear; that it is possible to see through the American Imaginary and spot a bubble.



Figure 4-5 Characters controlling property, or vice versa?

## 4.6 Seeing through the American Imaginary

The more traditional narrative part of *The Big Short* begins with Michael Burry (Christian Bale), a fund manager, hiring a new market analyst (Hunter Burke). The scene, like so many others in the film, serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it shows Burry's peculiarity, as instead of interviewing his potential employee, Burry is the one talking on a seemingly unrelated subject – the 1930s economic collapse. And, secondly, the scene, via Burry's odd subject-matter for a job interview, informs the viewers about the similarities between the 1930s economic crash and the current times. It is not only because of the seriousness of the topic that Burry catches our attention, but primarily because of the way the film stresses the importance of what he is talking about. After the fast-paced montage sequence that provided a broad overview of things that most viewers are familiar with, the introduction to Burry, in contrast, is shot in a more intimate documentary talking heads style. Via the documentary style *The Big Short* does not create an impression of having authority on the matter, but rather presents the viewer with a rare opportunity to travel back in time and to overhear a discussion of someone who had a hunch of where the housing market was heading. To further support the sense of intimacy, the cuts are few and far apart, the camera zooms and movements are noticeable, and there is no audio score except naturalistic sounds such as telephones ringing in the background and a static sound emerging from the recording equipment. By displaying Burry's name on the screen, in addition to the information from the beginning of the film informing that the film is based on a true story, *The Big Short* again incorporates elements of the documentary genre to create a unique effect within a feature film.

Burry's peculiarity is established by him playing with drumsticks, and through his casual clothing and glass eye. Attention to the latter is not only drawn by the fact that unlike Bale's eyes in real life, the character's eyes do not align properly and have a slightly different tonality; but also by the camera zooming in on Burry too fast at one point, leaving the image noticeably blurred while the camera refocuses. If it were not for the market charts on Burry's computer screen at the beginning of the scene, it would be almost impossible to relate him to the sharp looking world of contemporary finance. Burry explains that the 1930s collapse of the U.S. housing market was preceded by the complexity and rising rates of fraud, which are currently also increasing. The film suggests that something which is fairly obvious to Burry is entirely invisible to everybody else – that there are similarities between the present moment and the conditions leading up to the Great Depression. Burry claims that the “specific identifiers [of the 1930s crash were] extremely recognisable”, but the potential employee, a market analyst,

replies that he has never thought about these issues. Through this information, in addition to making Burry stand out as unique figure in the world of finance, we are also beginning to see the film's criticism of the financial sector's inability to learn from its mistakes.<sup>467</sup> The scene ending with a slow-motion shot of Burry, recalling Ranieri's freeze frame shot, shows that according to the film, today's financial heroes are often unlikely candidates for the job.

The prosthetic eye and the slow-motion shot at the end of Burry's introduction scene, which turn habitual impressions strange, thwart Bale's superstar image and reassure Vennett's impression that the main characters are a group of "outsiders and weirdos". The film continues to play with the viewers' expectations by cutting from the grownup "weirdo" Burry to young Burry playing American football like a "typical" American boy, with cheerleaders encouraging his team. But instead of depicting Burry's "normal" childhood by showing him perfectly fitting in with the rest of the team, playing one of the most popular sports in the United States, the film mutes the cheerleaders shortly after the scene begins, accompanies it instead with some eerie piano music, and turns the footage to black and white. *The Big Short* then cuts back to the grownup Burry swimming alone in a large pool and explaining how he has was never actually a team player and that he has always felt more comfortable alone.

The film then begins to crosscut between Burry swimming and explaining that it was likely because of his glass eye that he felt better alone and the football game where the cheerleaders and parents are laughing. Because the scene began with Burry and he is the one narrating, the film can be seen to be suggesting that perhaps it is the idyllic American pastime that is strange, rather than the poor young boy. The sympathy with young Burry is further emphasised by little Burry's prosthetic eye popping out from its socket during a tackle and all the cheerleaders and crowd staring him in shock, while some of them cannot hide their disgust and amusement over the accident [Figure 4–6]. The deliberate crosscutting, just prior to the scene had already made it seem as if everybody is laughing at him as a young boy. Through several other similar cues, the film establishes that the grown-up Burry is a social misfit because of his childhood traumas. *The Big Short* starts to increasingly create an impression that his inability to fit in with the proper American self-image is exactly what allows him to be sceptical of the commonly held beliefs and shared values. The film thus suggests that Burry's inability to accept common sense, difficulties of performing according to normal and acceptable social rules, and his own lack of interest in participating in the American Imaginary – depicted by the

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<sup>467</sup> The general amnesia and disinterest towards the past of economy and finance that the film suggests is also brought out by Jonathan Kirshner, see Kirshner 2014.

young Burry giving up on American football – turn out to be his main strengths, offering him later a vital advantage in life.



Figure 4-6 *The Big Short*'s questioning of the American Imaginary.

That Burry's inability to fit in carried over to his adulthood is suggested by him "complimenting" the employee candidate, by saying "You have a very nice haircut, did you do it yourself?" The attention to the jobseeker's haircut draws parallels between the potential employee and Vennett, who has a very similar haircut (slight Jheri curl), is also about the same age, and also wears a proper suit, unlike Burry. Similarly to how Burry could not fit in with the American football players, he now differs significantly from the suit wearing analysts with expensive haircuts. This aspect of Burry's ability to see through the American Imaginary because of his strange character is emphasised throughout the film, but is perhaps most apparent in the scenes where he begins to do the credit default swaps with the major banks, and his shabby look is repeatedly contrasted with the luxury appeal of both the major banks' workers and meeting rooms. All the employees of these major financial companies are shown to consider him a madman for betting against the U.S. housing market. One of the Deutsche Bank sales representative, who is celebrating at a fancy night club after making the deal with Burry, spells out the general impression of Burry when he says that "He must have gone off his Zoloft!", a prescription antidepressant. The film evokes similar reactions in the spectators through Burry's odd behaviour, but it is much more difficult for the audience to outright dismiss him as just a weirdo. This is so not only because the spectators' sympathy is directed toward Burry via focalisation, but because through hindsight we know that he is right about the Americans' misplaced trust of the U.S. housing market. The film does not so much depict Burry as the odd one out, but through his peculiar character questions our understanding of the prevailing normality. Perhaps it is not Burry who is the weird one, the film suggests, but today's financial workers, who, because they all went to the same business schools, have become

indistinguishable yuppies, unable to think outside the system and thus oblivious to the catastrophe towards which the system is heading. The indistinguishable yuppie image receives an ironical twist as Bale has contributed greatly to making the yuppie image famous with his lead role in *American Psycho* (Harron, 2000).

After hiring an analyst, whose name Burry does not even know, and Burry massaging his feet on the office table during a job interview, Burry asks the analyst whether he finds it peculiar that when the tech bubble burst in 2001 the property value in San Jose rose. The analyst does not find it interesting as housing tends to be more stable than the rest of the market. Burry dismisses that as a common belief by saying that this is “the idea” – implying that common sense can often be misplaced. In order to find out whether the general impression about housing is justified or not Burry decides to *look* for the facts and assigns his new analyst to uncover what is inside of all the top selling mortgage bonds. The analyst, who at first thinks that Burry is simply interested in knowing what the top selling bonds are, is in shock when he realises that Burry wants to know the status of all the thousands of individual mortgages that make up a single bond bundle. For Burry, in contrast, there is nothing extraordinary about such meticulous attention to detail, indicated by him beginning to casually listen to some heavy metal on his music player and starting to search for the facts that would support his pessimistic estimation. The music that at first can be quietly heard playing through Burry’s headphones and which suddenly becomes the background music of the scenes to follow, and the different point of view shots of Burry’s computer screen and of a whiteboard showing the increase of his company value bring the focalisation very close to Burry and suggest that he thinks only about investment strategies. As an indicator of how ahead of the game Burry was back then with his speculations, we see an extratextual graphic, the date “March 2005” on the screen at one point, and a little later we witness, within the diegetic world, Burry’s internet search for “SEC mortgage brokerage firm violations” come up with no results. Burry’s search indicates that he is not only different from others within the financial institutions, but also from those within the field of financial regulation, as neither side showed any doubt regarding the reliability of the U.S. housing market. The idea here is clear: that if we look beyond the American Imaginary hazing our view, the facts should be obvious for everybody. As such Burry is shown not only looking for answers at places where others have not thought of looking, like the inside of a mortgage-backed bundle, but he is also asking different type of questions that even the search engines of the time cannot answer.

After introducing Baum, *The Big Short* returns to Burry’s office and offers a complex visualisation of Burry’s search for the truth regarding the U.S. top selling housing bonds. The

scene begins, seen through a point of view shot, with the “inside” of one of the top selling mortgage bundles opened up on Burry’s computer screen. Similarly to Ranieri, Burry is also a kind of mad scientist, cutting the bundles open on his computerised “operating table”. Under the bundles’ flashy and protective outer shells of “triple A” status (similarly to bugs with hard shells, which protect their sensitive inside), Burry finds the bundles’ soft spot – the reality that the ratings are wrong. We hear Burry whisper in deep concentration, that a lot of people are already behind on their housing payments. *The Big Short* does not automatically suggest that this is something that the banks have been knowingly hiding. A little later, for example, when Burry explains his idea of betting against the housing bonds to his boss, he guesses that the banks are simply unaware of the extent of this weakness. From the shot following the numbers on the computer screen, as if the spectator was moving their head, the film cuts to a medium shot of Burry where the camera is placed behind Burry’s computer screen and has noticeable lens flare. The shot, willing to sacrifice its quality for the sake of intimacy, together with the suggestive point of view shot, emphasises again the film’s documentary-style camerawork. *The Big Short* leaves an impression of having great respect for Burry’s concentration by hiding intrusively in a tight corner.

The film starts to increasingly highlight the risk of making complex bundles by cutting quickly between Burry mumbling something incomprehensible and the numbers on screen that are getting blurrier and harder to track because of the brevity of the shots. To emphasise the difficulty of seeing through this seemingly incomprehensible mess we are reminded again of the uniqueness of Burry’s vision. Burry’s prosthetic eye can be thus seen as marking his exceptional clairvoyance, recalling the image of Tiresias, a blind prophet of Apollo. *The Big Short* accomplishes the unique sense of Burry’s vision and dedication via an intimate point of view shot – were we even see Burry’s eyelashes flashing – at his family photos, suggesting the sacrifice of family life, followed by an extreme close-up of Burry’s eyes studying the financial data. Another shot at the whiteboard confirms the steady growth of Burry’s company value, indicating that he knows what he is doing. The film returns to the whiteboard depicting the company’s value throughout and dedicates serious attention to it later, when the credit default swaps are starting to pay off and the company’s profit percentage rises dramatically. *The Big Short* again exemplifies its admiring representation of Burry and his capitalist pursuit, excluding any criticism of the fact that it contributed to the widespread credit crunch. The following cut to the parking lot specifies that Burry’s company is based in California – one of the furthest places from Wall Street in the United States. *The Big Short* thus point out that Burry’s location on the “periphery” of United States finance provided him with a clearer view

of what was going on in the centre. The positioning of Burry in California when compared to the other lead characters – some of whom have offices on Wall Street, while others work from their garage – clearly suggests the strength of the multi-protagonist film as a strategy for capturing the complexity of the topic, because both the periphery and centre can be kept in sight at the same time.

The film then begins to intercut between Burry's research and still images of U.S. housing – consisting of an aerial shot of a large suburbia, a family decorating their home, some people celebrating their new purchase, others putting their house up for sale, a father spending time with his child on their front lawn, and so forth. Via double exposure of the rows of numbers over a fast-paced footage, which shows Burry's employees working, having a coffee break, and then leaving the office, *The Big Short* shows how little connected the two worlds are. On the one shore, we have people's lifelong dreams and their most vivid emotions, on the other shore, there is the routine of everyday labour and the near impossibility of seeing human emotion behind the cold neutrality of numbers. *The Big Short* seems to highlight at this point that the contemporary finance exists only virtually, in countless numbers on numerous screens, which allows for, if not outright suggests, a certain emotional detachment that causes one to lose track of the fact that behind all these numbers are the lifesavings of millions of people. While there is a very material base to this representation in numbers and charts, it is almost impossible to realise this material complexity, beyond equally complex financial data. It is understandable that a level of abstraction is necessary to deal with such amounts of variables, but *The Big Short*, by meshing finance and housing via the intercutting and double exposure shots, while focusing on the asocial nature of Burry, questions what role the individual lives behind the big data play in today's finance.

With the editing and Burry's mumbling becoming faster, the sound of typing and Burry pounding his fist on the table becoming louder, and the images of Burry working out in his office – like a hamster running on a wheel in a tiny cage – getting more and more frequent, the film directs our attention to Burry's abnormal concentration and dedication to work.<sup>468</sup> The perverted spectatorship, depicting Burry similarly to geniuses such as John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* (Howard, 2001), becomes more apparent with the fast typing rhythm resembling his very rapid heartbeats, while also simultaneously conveying a sense of excitement and discovery. The

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<sup>468</sup> Such dedication is what got Burry in the world of finance in the first place. Lewis' book repeatedly emphasises how Burry managed to do both his doctoral residency and familiarise himself with finance at the same time, and the surprise that it caused in his later business partners. Because of such dedication to both fields, the real life Burry once fell asleep while assisting an operation while standing, see Lewis 2010.

film suggests that during such long concentration periods Burry becomes machinelike in order to grasp the big data of the financial world. The impression of Burry's inhuman work ethics is confirmed with a shot through the blinds of his office showing his young employees gazing into his world in wonder, with the analyst who we saw Burry hiring earlier noting that Burry "hasn't moved all day", while the more senior analyst adds that "he does this every few days". Burry's robotic burst of energy, depicted by the hyperrealistic montage sequence, ends with the satisfied Burry – who has not slept all night, suggested by him washing his teeth in the office over a trash bin – calling to his financial partner to tell him the good news – he has succeeded in breaking the enigma code of the mortgage-backed securities and "found something really interesting". The admiring and respectful way of representing Burry's work, depicting his concentration enthusiastically as inhuman ability, is part of the film's unintentional development of perverted spectatorship. In order to make the film on such a complex topic entertaining, *The Big Short* applies generic tools of the biographical film on geniuses, but therefore also inadvertently makes the spectators root for the fall of contemporary capitalism.

By contrasting the T-shirt wearing Burry – who washes his teeth while talking to his senior business partner – to the partner, Lawrence Fields (Tracy Letts) – an elderly man who not only dresses and acts formally, but who is located in an exquisite New York office – *The Big Short* highlights that Burry differs also from the financial backers of his own company. To emphasise the uniqueness of Burry's discovery and how different it is from the financial *status quo*, the film shows Fields chuckling when he hears that Burry, instead of his usual occupation of valuing stocks, wants to "short the housing market". Fields, situated in an office decorated with hand carved rarities from around the globe and with furniture made from the finest wood, represents the *status quo* when he explains that "housing market is rock solid. Greenspan just said bubbles are regional, defaults are rare". Burry, in an office filled mostly with cardboard boxes, dismisses Greenspan's reputation as a guarantor of the United States housing, claiming that it is a fact that the housing market will collapse once the affordable teaser rates on mortgages expire. Fields demands to know how Burry can be so sure that the mortgage bonds are worthless, especially as they consist of "thousands of pages of mortgages". To this Burry simply replies that he has read them all, meaning that he actually took the time to look into the matter. Although Fields argues that nobody but the lawyers who put the bundles together reads the texts that go into mortgage-backed securities, Burry suggests that it might be the case that even the lawyers do not fully comprehend what they have assembled. The lawyers are therefore similar to the before depicted market analysts, capable of seeing only a small proportion of a whole. Burry's asocial nature, on the other hand, that makes him mechanically pursue facts, is

the reason why he can put together the big picture. It is also the reason why he does not have to rely on the suggestions of authorities such as Greenspan, for he has seen the facts for himself.

*The Big Short*'s enthusiastic emphasis on Burry's ability to see through the American Imaginary on which the system relies all too heavily, overlooks the fact that Burry is a capitalist hardliner who is willing to sacrifice the greater good for personal gain. It is this moral failure that brings him the closest not to somebody like Ranieri, with an ingenious ability to add value to the economy, but instead to Vennett, who also does not stop for a second to reflect on broader concerns when there is a profit to be made. Pairing Burry with Vennett makes it all the more clear how different the two are from the other potential paring of the film, that of Baum and the small-timers Charlie Geller (John Magaro) and Jamie Shipley (Finn Wittrock). Regarding Burry we are told via the end-credits that he only retrospectively turned to the authorities, wondering if they wanted to know how he was able to beat the system before anyone else; while the upper-class Vennett, working for the establishment in Deutsche Bank and repeatedly emphasising his being better than others, does not show any signs of remorse concerning his part in the economic downfall. In contrast, we hear Baum constantly criticising the widespread egoism of the financial world and see him confronting Standard & Poor's regarding their positive ratings of the failing bonds. In addition, the film shows Geller and Shipley attempting to publish a news story about the troublesome state of the housing market and the financial world's general disregard of the matter. In the book it is brought out that Geller and Shipley also did what a "normal person" would do in a situation where they think they are recognising large scale fraud, they went to the police – only to be laughed out of the office.<sup>469</sup> Despite these differences all the main characters go ahead with the profitable transactions that eventually bring about one of the most significant downfalls of global economy in the recent times. This is not perhaps so much the film's uncertainty of how to depict the characters as Bradshaw suggests, but rather that depicting the main characters as heroes of a sort, which they are clearly not, creates a mode of perverted spectatorship that allows the complexity of today's finance to be depicted.

This is also why, as *The Big Short* rightly recognises, the American Imaginary is crucial to understanding the problem. It is not that the American Imaginary upheld by, among other means, the entertainment industry, deluded the American public, but rather – as the film repeatedly suggests visually by intercutting between images from entertainment, politics, banking, and everyday life – *The Big Short* suggests that it is important to explore the American

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<sup>469</sup> Lewis 2010.

Imaginary as it informs all fields of life. The impression that everybody has the means to improve their life for the better is so fundamental to the American way of life that it affects both the “mindless” media industry, as well as the “serious” world of finance. In my view it is not at all a question about whether the film should have chosen if it wants to condemn the financial world or to celebrate it as some commentators have suggested, but, on the contrary, it is *The Big Short*’s mixture of comedic and tragic elements that allows it to indicate how the world of entertainment and finance are inseparable because they are both fuelled by the same imaginary of ever-growing prosperity.<sup>470</sup> The proposition that people in finance rely more on the belief of prosperity and stability rather than the actual facts that would support such belief is the same imaginary that eventually brought down the system. Because of the emphasis on the apparent wealth of the United States, everybody presumed that even if they exploited the system, the other parties would prevent the entire system from failing as there is enough money to go around and housing will always be stable.

The film’s heavy focus on data and Burry is also problematic because it both underestimates and overestimates contingency. From the story development point of view, Burry is the one to discover the profitability of securing against the collapse of the U.S. housing market. While in Lewis’ nonfiction book Burry is also the one to have come up with the scheme, people from other companies soon started to follow his lead simply because they knew what Burry was doing. In the book, many banks quickly wanted to buy back his insurances against their potential non-payment – that is to say they realised the extent of their potential exposure. The book, thus, leaves an impression that while no bank is interested in sharing the specifics of their investment strategies, most deals are visible to other parties and the reasons why such deals, which eventually caused several financial companies to go under, were still made are manifold and complex.<sup>471</sup> The film, on the other hand, emphasises Burry’s unique role in the world of finance to a much greater extent by showing all the other main characters finding out about Burry’s logic only accidentally. The fact that such prognoses about market downturns are published all the time, while other authors claim that the contrary will happen, while both sides base their arguments on financial and economic facts and statistics, is where the film overemphasises Burry’s ability to see the bubble and underestimates the complexity of finance and the markets’ reliance on unpredictable contingent factors. Rather than a hidden truth, it was to some extent an open secret that was largely ignored.

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<sup>470</sup> Bradshaw 2016: n.p.

<sup>471</sup> Lewis 2010.

At one point the film self-reflexively considers the idea that such accidental connectivity makes for a more interesting narrative device, by having one of the characters confess that he actually did not stumble upon Vennett's prospectus (which the film shows to emerge from Burry's idea) accidentally in a bank's lobby, but that he simply read about it in a financial magazine. *The Big Short* shows a high level of self-reflexivity with the gesture, because whereas majority of multi-protagonist films emphasise the contingent aspect of life, *The Big Short* proposes that sometimes life is less interesting than the multi-protagonist film generally suggests. *The Big Short* displays a similar playful self-reflexivity regarding another multi-protagonist film's formal rule – revealing the connections between its lead characters by bringing them all together at a certain point, even if sometimes the characters themselves remain unaware of their connections. *The Big Short* likewise brings most of the lead characters together at a conference while the characters remain oblivious of each other. Unlike in most multi-protagonist films, where revealing such interweaving of lives serves as a conclusion or a culmination, *The Big Short* can be seen to be ironical of such artificiality. Its bringing the characters together is represented as a totally insignificant passing-by, which offers next to nothing to the film's development.

A similar simplification to how Burry's discovery accidentally reaches all the lead characters, is noticeable with Baum. In order for *The Big Short* to efficiently represent the bubble, Baum, who is not familiar with the real-estate market, sends his team to Miami to check out the situation on the street level. There Baum's team encounter, among other things, a character (Oscar Gale) that is at first glance depicted as a stereotype of a sleepy migrant lazing around his home all day. It quickly turns out that *The Big Short* is again interested in thwarting commonly held misconceptions, because he is actually a hardworking man who has been paying his rent (in which case his sleepiness could be seen as suggesting that he might be working on the "graveyard shift") and that it is his landlord who is to blame for falling behind on the mortgage, which the latter had filed under his dog's name. Later in the film we see the renter again briefly, in a car with his family, only now the car serves as his home [Figure 4–7]. The shot recalls the opening shot of the film, indicating that the small and seemingly insignificant perspective, is perhaps the one that tells the story about the global economic crisis most clearly. Through Burry seeing beyond the American Imaginary by looking at the data and Baum's team finding an investment opportunity when they witness the empty houses, the film invites us to see beyond the appearances and to seek the truth. Although we are similarly called to realise that the good man is still the same, only his conditions have changed, it appears rather that the house, which belonged not to his landlord, but to the bank, actually owned him and that like a

puppy after a summer vacation he is now left behind in the street. Therefore, it is not the case that we should see through the imaginary that clouds our view and uncover the truth, but rather recognise the imaginary as the truth. It is the imaginary that permits the exotic dancer that Baum meets in his search for the truth to “own” five houses and condo that she clearly cannot afford.



Figure 4-7 The burden of sharing the American Imaginary.

*The Big Short* is successful in using the tropes of different genres innovatively in order to convey the seriousness of economic crisis. It importantly questions the role of the American Imaginary as the potential cause for supporting the widespread belief in the stability of the U.S. housing market. It is perhaps less successful when it falls back to the representative regime by suggesting that all we have to do to really grasp the future of the country’s economy is just look more closely at the big data, or even worse, the actual property behind the data. One could easily argue that looking at the success and prosperity of one’s friends and neighbours in selling or renting a house for a profit is partially what led to the crisis in the first place. Despite the 2% of commission fee that the film flags up as a sign of corporate greed, it fails to mention that it is mortgage-backed securities that allowed millions of people, who would not have received credit otherwise, to make their dreams of an American home a reality. After all the shared belief in the stability of the housing market was not entirely misplaced as it took the joint effort of irresponsibility of brokers, customers, rating agencies, financial supervisors, and the big banks, to finally bring down the U.S. property market. This is precisely the reason why something like this happening seemed against all odds to the majority of the people.

The film is a great example of the distribution of the sensible – that it is the values that we share that truly divide us. Especially as not all fared equally in the fallout from the crisis. *The Big Short* offers a complex analysis of the idea how a particular imaginary fuels ideology, which is related to one’s very sense of comprehending reality. The struggle over leading this

comprehension in a certain direction is explained by Rancière via the term distribution of the sensible. A similar idea can be seen explored in *The Big Short*. The film also represents an understanding of ideology, which is very much alike Žižek's theorisation on the matter. According to such view, it is not a question about one social class deluding another, but that ideology should be rather understood as a complex weaving of ideas that offers very fundamental support to everyday reality. The film via its multi-protagonist form also appears to significantly develop Žižek's original idea of the perverted spectatorship, according to which the spectator is called to reconsider his/her own desire when he/she realises that the perverted gaze is part of the film and not his/hers. Whereas Žižek, as I have shown via his reading of *Psycho*, argues that one arrives to this realisation most often via identification with a perverted character such as Norman, *The Big Short* illustrates that such an effect can also be accomplished via multiple character-perspectives – making one enjoy the film's perversion of depicting the fall of contemporary finance as the most exciting development of recent times. As my reading of *The Big Short* demonstrates, the concept of perverted spectatorship is also very well suited to reveal the distribution of the sensible within a film, suggesting that the shared values we are offered by a film are not meant to be accepted without interrogation.

## CONCLUSION

The three very different multi-protagonist films under scrutiny here have clearly exemplified a shared interest in what I have described as the American Imaginary – a cinematic representation of a set of material and mental coordinates that inform the characters' understanding of the world around them. As I have illustrated throughout the thesis, contingency – understood by these films not only as accidentality, but also as the opposite of necessity, an understanding that the present conditions could be different – is seen by the films as crucial for their interrogation of the idea of America. The first chapter, offering a literature review, provided an overview of the multi-protagonist film, its long history and structural complexity, and the sudden growth of the form's significance from the 1990s onwards. The multi-protagonist film is a form that rejects the psychologically motivated goal-oriented character and causally motivated narrative structure of the classical narrative cinema, and chooses instead a structure of multiple lead characters of equal importance and contingency as a way of creating coherence across the different narrative strands. Because of these qualities the multi-protagonist film is widely recognised for its deep interest in contingency and for its suitability for addressing complex social concerns commonly associated with globalisation. These concerns and interests include, as various authors have also identified: an attention to the effects of a rapidly changing society due to the increasing interconnectedness of people, cultures, and economies (Azcona); the aim of bringing the characters and spectators into contact with the cultural and social other via a realistic depiction of the everyday (Tröhler); and an interest in various network formations informing and structuring contemporary society (Bordwell). Via close textual analyses of the chosen multi-protagonist films offered in the three main chapters following the literature review, I have shown that, in addition to the above described interests, contemporary multi-protagonist films are often interested in exploring the American Imaginary. The most noticeable concerns emerging from the films' study of America is a process that could be described as the neoliberalisation of the U.S., understood by the films as a change in the understanding of the workings of a society, which is caused by business and financial logic coming to inform a wide variety of aspects of life. Although the films concentrate on representing this change in the U.S., these concerns have relevance beyond America. The case study films could be seen to imply that contemporary America, with its strong emphasis on capitalistic progress and belief in private entrepreneurship as catalyst for positive social transformation, offers the ideal space in which to think through the processes of neo-

liberalisation that are also happening globally. Identifying the multi-protagonist film's deep thematic interest in contemporary capitalism greatly expands our understanding of the form's significance within today's cinema.

We have seen several authors bringing together the multi-protagonist film's interest in contingency and the form's favouring of multiple lead characters. An interest in globalisation is often identified in these films as an exploration, which reveals the increasing interconnectedness of people and the contingency that can emerge from this growing interdependence. Many authors, as I showed, have also noticed a tension between the different aspects of multi-protagonist film. The central disunity is mainly recognised as manifesting itself as a friction between a need to establish coherence amongst the several lead characters and an interest in the contingent and unexpected dimension of life in today's global society. While not attempting to challenge these conclusions and connections between the multi-protagonist film's different features, I have been interested in articulating a new way of understanding the central tension of the form. The multi-protagonist film's way of creating order across the lead characters by emphasising the accidental connections between them, functions in a significantly different way to how contingency is recognised outside film, in real life. Nonetheless, I have demonstrated, via the thinking of Jacques Rancière, which closely relates equality with an understanding of the contingent nature of all social structures, that the equality between the lead characters and the form's interest in contingency do not have to be seen as opposites. If, following Rancière, equality has the ability to reveal the sheer contingency of any social order, then the equality that the multi-protagonist film establishes between all of its lead characters despite their social position, race, sex, age, or personality, is the main factor through which the form explores social structures and imaginaries. Rather than opposing the multi-protagonist film's rigid structure and its thematic interest in contingency, the two sides can be understood to be equally invested in exploring democracy and egalitarianism's effect on hierarchical social structures. Yet, part of the multi-protagonist film's central tension is the fact that democracy is hard to achieve even among fictional characters. Despite the egalitarian features that are specific to the multi-protagonist film – such as competing equal elements and different arguments proposed via lead characters who often differ in terms of their race, sex, class, and age – the form occasionally also falls back to practices that establish a hierarchy between the educated and the ignorant. The multi-protagonist film's belief in the spectator's intelligence falters at times when, as the case-study films exemplify, the films rather bluntly express what could be seen as their central concerns. As such the proposed understanding of a different relation between the multi-protagonist film's form and content does not downplay the central friction,

but it does allow us to see the multi-protagonist film as significantly engaged in using contingency as way to interrogate the American Imaginary. Because the films show that hierarchical social structures are upheld not by a small ruling elite, but by people themselves, the three films under scrutiny in this thesis are seen to be exploring the different ways in which this is established through a shared understanding; the American Imaginary.

The second chapter opens up the exploration by closely studying the way in which *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing* can be seen to be questioning the American Dream. This is understood by the film as everybody's equal right to pursue happiness and a belief that social prosperity and upward social mobility are the logical outcome of one's dedication to their profession. As the American Dream was originally designed to be a countermeasure to the contingent dimension of life, providing everyone with equal opportunities to overcome the "fortuitous circumstances of birth or position", as James Truslow Adams puts it in his *Epic of America*, the idea of the American Dream is closely connected to the topic of contingency. The film, however, shows that the U.S. has undergone a rapid departure from the original idea. One of the lead characters, Gene, is fired from his job after years of dedication to his profession, because his younger colleagues have engaged in excessive risk-taking with the company money. This, we may assume, is possible because of America's preference for a neoliberal deregulation of businesses. Gene, the broken-down character who has sacrificed his family life for the career, encounters another lead character, Troy, whose wealth clearly springs from the fortuitous circumstances of his birth and position. *Thirteen Conversations* therefore focuses on questioning the American Dream's insistence that we are brought together by our shared desire to be happy and that personal success and affluence stems from one's dedication to one's career. The same belief in the American Dream has, after all, led one of the lead characters to misery, while it fuels the other character's arrogance, justifying his belief that the benefits he enjoys emerge from his hard work and not from the fortuitous circumstances of his birth. This and other similar concerns of *Thirteen Conversations* – when brought together with Rancière's understanding of the distribution of the sensible, according to which the values that people share and even one's very comprehension of the world, allow people to be assigned into hierarchical social formations – illustrate the complexity of ideas that the contemporary multi-protagonist film can explore. The distribution of the sensible, taking the form of the American Dream in *Thirteen Conversations*, is an organisation of ideas and sense experiences that naturalise inequality by keeping the truly political – the equality of all – at bay. When the equality of all people, on which all inequality is founded, is brought to light, the contingent nature of social hierarchies becomes plainly evident. By staging accidental encounters that reveal to the lead

characters their equality with everybody else, *Thirteen Conversations* presents a way of philosophising that arrives at very similar results as some of the key thinkers of contemporary continental philosophy.

The third chapter, concentrating on *Killing Them Softly*, shows the film to continue similar philosophical pursuits. The film is invested in revealing the ways in which the American Imaginary structures one's life. *Killing Them Softly*, set in post-Katrina Louisiana, depicts the U.S. as a rundown environment that the script compares to Chernobyl. *Killing Them Softly*'s world is inhabited by criminals and prostitutes and is filmed using a muddy colour palette. There appear to be no benefits to adopting the American Imaginary, beyond bare survival. The contingency of any social order, a realisation that *Thirteen Conversations* can be seen to be establishing, is taken by the characters of *Killing Them Softly* as a fact of life. None of the main characters want anything to do with party politics, representing an outdated American Imaginary of the community. The rejection of politics and an understanding of America as a community is emphasised by election promises being broadcast day and night in the film on all possible media. Politics is seen in the film as a master narrative of the past that is desperately attempting to re-establish its once influential role in people's lives. *Killing Them Softly* echoes Slavoj Žižek's thinking on ideology as it does not consider the American Imaginary to be a delusion, but a necessary, even if perceived negatively, support for life. It offers a means by which one might cope with a variety of fears and desires. Yet, the militant way in which the film attempts to establish this understanding of ideology is reminiscent of the top-down theoretical approaches of the 1970–80s ideology critiques. I have shown how Althusser's approach to ideology and its subsequent application by Film Studies has because of its hierarchical aspect received criticism from authors on both left and right political spectrum. The similarly authoritarian tone is likely the root of a lot of the criticism directed at the film. Despite *Killing Them Softly* attempting to reveal the social hierarchies upheld by the American Imaginary, in many ways the film ends up re-establishing the hierarchies it tries to overcome, by aiming to show to people the "real" face of America and thus considering the audience to be ignorant. The American Imaginary is not seen in *Killing Them Softly* as masking some hidden truth about reality, but as allowing one to come to terms with the fact that "we're all just on our own", as one of the lead characters puts it. The film, beginning with an Obama speech edited so that it is deprived of all emphasis on community, repeatedly undercuts the characters' belief in society as a system of shared beliefs and shows the powerlessness of contemporary politics in restoring any belief in community. *Killing Them Softly* shows that the realisation of the sheer contingency of any social order does not guarantee some sort of social transformation for the

better, as both *Thirteen Conversations* and Rancière can be understood to be hoping for. Rather, the temporary chaos of the local mafia emerging from the lack of control, which reveals the contingency of their rule, requires a more efficient capitalist avenger, only interested in making more money, to step forth. The naturalisation of capitalist logic is exemplified by the fact that business is unquestioningly accepted by all the lead characters to be a better alternative to politics and community. Everybody in the film is trying to succeed economically, from a drug addict aiming to become a dealer, to a small business man venturing into criminal activities in order to earn a higher profit. *Killing Them Softly* can thus be seen as an illustration of the fact that, despite its attempt to tear down the American Imaginary, the latter's relation to capitalism remains a bond which the film can reveal, but which it cannot challenge. This difficulty, as I have argued, is recognised by Žižek to be part of a larger deadlock in today's thinking.

The fourth chapter concentrated on the glossy and colourful imagery of *The Big Short*, differing significantly from the bleak vision and scorching critique of *Killing Them Softly*. The film shows how people in high finance can often become "accidental heroes", who develop complex financial instruments that can soon spring out of their control and whose complete effects are beyond the comprehension of their creators. These people we might not know of, as one the lead characters puts it, but they nonetheless end up changing our lives more than all the things that we do know about combined. The film suggests that some people are granted such influence over the lives of others because of contingent factors that have allowed finance to become one of the most important areas of contemporary economy. *The Big Short* is not only interested in revealing that the American Imaginary is an ideology that helps one to cope with reality, but is also highly invested in exploring what specific form the American Imaginary must take today. The film is interested in the events leading up to the 2007–2008 global financial crisis. Yet, it does not depict the bankers as evil capitalists orchestrating people's lives, as many films on the topic tend to do, but shows all areas of American society to be jointly informed and affected by the American Imaginary. We have seen *The Big Short* employing a number of complex aesthetic devices in order to place itself within this imaginary. The film could thus be recognised as distancing itself from any sense of a top-down perspective. In this way *The Big Short* places itself on a much more equal plain with the viewer than *Killing Them Softly* seems to. That being said, *The Big Short*, while being highly critical of the excessive risk-taking of the contemporary finance sector permitted by the neoliberal deregulation of businesses, is unable to think outside the logic of capitalism. While *The Big Short* could be understood to prefer stricter financial regulation, the film appears to downplay that by rendering finance interesting, it also makes heroes out of the very same people that helped to create the

financial crisis. This is an aspect of which Žižek's idea of perverted spectatorship, a viewing situation in which the spectator is called to cheer for values that they do not necessarily share, allows us to offer a new interpretation. *The Big Short* could be seen to be aware of the contemporary impossibility of thinking outside capitalism and as such the film chooses the more manageable alternative – showing the economy as eventually dooming us all. A particular effectiveness of *The Big Short* emerges from the way in which the film can be seen to be following the logic of the aesthetic regime of art, described by Rancière as an understanding of the arts wherein everything can be used for art's purpose. In a similar manner, *The Big Short* achieves the impression of a catastrophe by using found footage and images of contemporary television, pop culture, and the financial crisis in accordance with the generic rules of the disaster film. The film therefore proposes a novel avenue in which Rancière's thinking on the aesthetic regime can be expanded via genre theory, an area that the author himself has not explored. *The Big Short* exemplifies a way in which film can do much more than simply match some of the arguments of written philosophy, but offer instead a unique method for advancing philosophical arguments.

This thesis has opened up several ways of seeing the multi-protagonist film anew. Film and philosophy are shown to be related via their similar interests in contemporary society. As such it is not a question of one needing the other in order to do film-philosophy, but both shining new light on one another when brought into close proximity. The multi-protagonist film – differing from the single- or paired protagonist film – with its competing equal elements and various arguments proposed through an array of lead characters, can create a multi-vocal space of contradictions. The openness of the multi-protagonist film's structure echoes Rancière's understanding of pedagogy, emerging from an understanding of equality between the teacher and the pupil. Similarly, the multi-protagonist film regularly avoids proposing a unifying central idea (via its lead characters who often differ in terms of their class, sex, race, and age) and an ending that would offer a proper conclusion – providing an avenue for complex thinking and leaving the possible interpretations open for all. The close readings of multi-protagonist films offered here suggest a novel way of exploring the form and potentially the politically oriented mainstream cinema more generally. When the multi-protagonist film is brought together with some of the ideas of contemporary philosophy, as exemplified here via Rancière and Žižek's thinking, the form can be seen to offer an ideal embodiment of the many contradictions inherent in all cinema. Are not all mainstream films delicately balancing different ways of being innovative, while also attempting to remain coherent for the widest possible audience? It is not simply a question how we are able to make sense of film, but also how film reveals itself as a

field of contradictions combining different ways of understanding arts. The multi-protagonist films discussed here boldly ask are films free to use everything for the sake of their artistic aims and challenge ideas of politics, economy, and community that many hold dear via the different lead characters, or should films for the sake of coherence make clear their own political position and standing on these matters. With its many lead characters and their different storylines, which the multi-protagonist film often has difficulties in fully developing and controlling, the form suggests that similar frictions exist within all cinema. This tension within the form is not a weakness of the multi-protagonist film, but rather its strength, as the frictions within its cinematic representations can be seen to be pointing to how all social imaginaries are filled with similar pressures. Such estimation can be seen to highlight the significance of politically and philosophically informed Film Studies, because only by broadening the horizon of thinking is the discipline able to adequately address the complex social and philosophical concerns of politically oriented mainstream cinema such as those offered by the contemporary multi-protagonist film.

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## **WORD COUNT**

Total number of words in the thesis, excluding contents, list of illustrations, acknowledgements, abstract, footnotes, and bibliography, is 83 033.