Fantasy, Economy, Wish-fulfilment and Demand Stimulus.

On *Shame* (Steve McQueen), *The Invader* (Nicolas Provost) and *Code Blue* (Urszula Antoniak)

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The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the "saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment." But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.[1] MAX WEBER

The subject of *Shame*, Steve McQueen's penultimate film, is all too obvious. It seems self-evident that the film broaches the taboo of sex addiction. The promotion surrounding the film was, on this point, wholly unambiguous. Nor did the film itself give rise to any misunderstandings about the issues it wanted to address. It is almost as if the protagonist's lack of self-awareness is compensated for at the intrinsic level of the cinematographic medium. When we see Brandon engaged in sex with prostitutes, the tone is always negative: too much sex is bad for you; this man is sick. Melancholic string music fills the air. This is a serious case, says an imaginary voiceover.

Perhaps this ideal framework serves to conceal the fact that aspects of stupefaction, habituation, addiction and repetition are, to a certain extent, inherent within the cinematic experience. Like Brandon, the viewer wants to lose himself for a brief moment, and to disappear into the womb of time. But film is also a seismic medium, in the sense of Walter Benjamin: a medium that records vibrations. Through these vibrations, individual and personal aspects are connected to the social life of the collective. Sex is just such a vibration – a tremulous, physical sensation that results from the tension between external stimuli and internal processes. Sex is never just about sex. In the sexual act you reproduce, time and again, the history of the human species and the drama of your own conception. Fucking unravels your relationship with your father and mother – it is an eternal return to the primal scene, and a tribute to these two people who, in their own time, also failed to grasp the import of their actions. It is a complicated performative mode that not only brings you into contact with your tribe, but also throws you back upon yourself.

My essay provides an analysis and interpretation of three films from 2011 that all, each in their own unique way, exploit this seismic potential: *Shame* by Steve McQueen, *The Invader* by Nicolas Provost and *Code Blue* by Urszula Antoniak. In comparison with *Shame,* the two other films achieve this without the façade of a "legitimate" theme. Nevertheless, a common treatment brings allegorical aspects to the fore that also feature in McQueen's film, hidden beneath – and incongruous with – the surface story of sex addiction.

The origin of the world

A first allegorical element shared by the three films is the architectonic setting. The main characters often find themselves in sleek, modern architectural capsules – comfortable, upholstered cells of glass, steel and concrete, embedded in a metropolitan environment. Crucial scenes in the films play out in these spaces. Brandon's New York apartment is a contemporary "laptop" home, compact and sparsely furnished – a stylish flat for a single yuppie. Amadou, the homeless African immigrant who arrives in Brussels, and around whom the story of *The Invader* revolves, spends an afternoon and a night with a rich white woman in a luxurious designer apartment. And Marian, the hospital nurse from *Code Blue*, lives in a modernist residential building with large windows, situated on the edge of a Dutch city. Her flat is strewn with unpacked boxes, and a solitary mattress lies on the floor. From a conversation between her and a doctor, we learn that she has worked in many hospitals, but has left each of them after a very short time. The allegorical potential of modern architecture, as an indicator and catalyst for alienation and uprooting, is exacerbated by the quasi-transparency of the space and the expansive exterior views. The picture windows offer an ironic commentary on the protagonist's inability to have an overview of her own situation.

That something similar applies to both Brandon and Amadou can be inferred from two respective but highly similar – and striking – scenes from *Shame* and *The Invader*. In each, we see the main character standing with a woman, naked, in front of a huge window in a high-rise building; the woman leans forward against the glass, her arms outstretched for support, while the man penetrates her from behind. In *Shame*, the setting is a hotel room overlooking the harbour and the Hudson River, to which Brandon has brought a prostitute in the middle of the day. As Brandon

takes her, the camera looks over his shoulder, through the window, to take in the urban landscape outside, where cars zoom past and cargo is prepared for shipping. In *The Invader*, Amadou has sex with the female project developer that he has managed to seduce, standing with her in front of the large window in the Brussels apartment that she uses as a pied-à-terre and guest residence. Again, the woman leans against the glass while being taken from behind. The forceful thrusts of his lower body against hers suggest that they wish to break the glass capsule together. Yet this is destined to remain only a virtual possibility, for this man and woman clearly dwell in separate capsules in far-flung corners of the universe.

It might be no coincidence that both films contain such similar scenes. Having sex standing up, in front of an enormous window in a high-rise building, is based upon a desire for lightness and liberation. It alludes to a dream-like state, in which the individual is no longer burdened by a "care for external goods". As they fuck the characters absorb the vast urban panorama – not only with their eyes, but with every fibre of their beings; they allow their exaltation to radiate outwards across the world, until everything finally becomes one. The visual projection of lust onto the world, via the window, has the effect of magnifying the sexual ecstasy, which even assumes metropolitan proportions.

Fucking in front of the window is the antithesis of eating in front of the television. The television will make you eat your meal without enjoying it, or even without tasting. The electronic image sucks you up, and negates the physical experience. The viewer, with a plate of food on his lap, is hooked up to the media circuit of "channels" and "stations". Fucking in front of the window of a high-rise building is predicated upon the fantasy of breaking through that circuit; the window is the screen onto which the fantasy is projected. The orgasm introduces a climax in the non-linear image of the city and urban life below: the world of labour and the cycles of the economy; transport and transactions; the pressures of time, routine and the daily grind. This lends a degree of logic to the fact that in both films the scene takes place in daylight and on a normal workday.

Ironically, Brandon can only realise this narcissistic fantasy on the basis of an economic transaction with a woman whose business is to sell her body. He initially takes Marianne, a colleague with whom a romantic relationship has begun to blossom, to the hotel. Once in bed with her, however, he loses his erection. After this anti-climax Marianne leaves, and her place in the hotel room is immediately usurped by the prostitute Brandon has called for, and with whom he enacts the window scene. He apparently needs a "professional" woman in order to stay hard. Romantic feelings for a woman make him go soft. Later, the temporary erectile dysfunction acts as a signal that his world is on the brink of collapse – a rigid structure that has suddenly slackened.

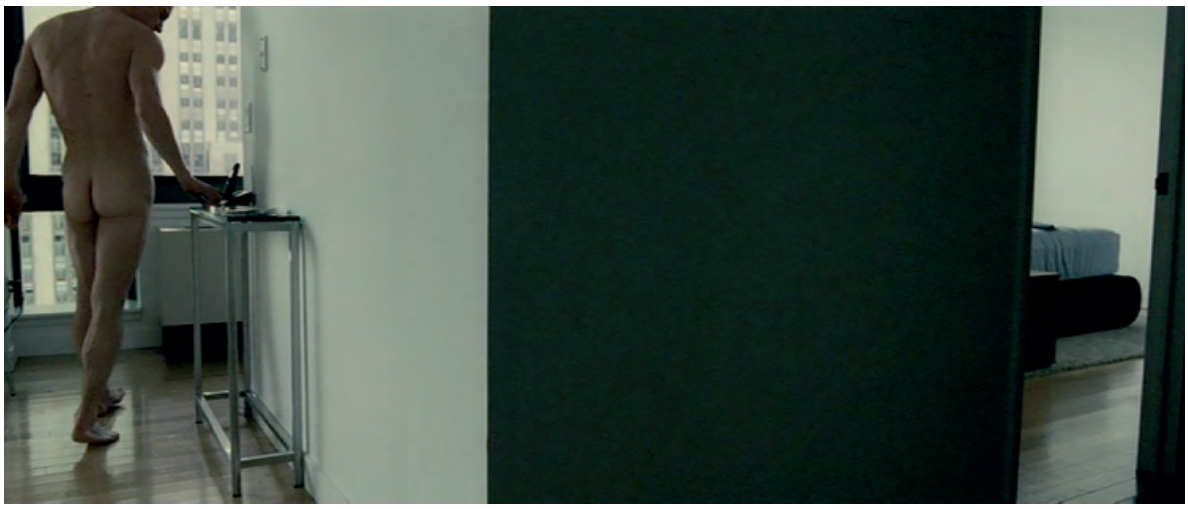
Amadou's problems seem to be of an entirely different nature. He has no need of a prostitute to be able to reach a climax. But Agnès, the woman with whom he makes love (in front of the window in her apartment), does in fact have an indirect economic relationship with him: she is the project developer of the construction site where Amadou works after his arrival in Brussels. Unbeknown to her, she is complicit in his exploitation by a gang of human traffickers.

The respective male protagonists in *Shame* and *The Invader* are connected to each other as if by invisible threads. What they have in common is their difficulty in integrating into the world of work and the neo-liberal capitalist system. Fifty minutes into *Shame*, the audience casually learns that Brandon is an immigrant too; he moved from Ireland to the United States at the age of ten. With his well-paid office job, Brandon is admittedly much better off in material terms than Amadou, whose "career" in the rich West begins in a hell of demolition and renovation works. What money Amadou earns behind the drill he immediately hands over to the people smugglers, to pay off his debt to them. The fact that both characters are immigrants is nonetheless significant. By focusing on each man's moment of entry into the economic system, it is indirectly confirmed that the system does have an outside, and that a completely different sphere exists beyond the horizon of "our" world.

A luxury apartment is the material manifestation of the wealth and social status to which both immigrants aspire. Yet even Brandon, who lives in just such an apartment, does not feel he completely "owns" his status, and is unable to justify it to himself. His alleged sex addiction is not an isolated fact; rather, it is the symptom of a deeper underlying problem, or one that lies elsewhere. Apart from this, he lacks the confidence of Amadou, who boldly approaches the woman he wants to conquer. Despite their different positions on the social ladder, sex is the only way that these two men can connect with others. Whereas for Brandon this indicates a supposed psychological problem, for Amadou sexual temptation is simply a way out – it affords him an opportunity to rapidly improve his dire socio-economic situation. This is the solution that was explicitly promised him, from the moment he set foot on European soil.

In the opening scene of the film, when Amadou literally washes ashore on a sunny nudist beach somewhere in the south of Europe, he immediately comes face to face with a young, naked woman. She has gotten up from her beach towel and walks towards him as he crawls from the sea. Just before that, in the first frame of the movie, we saw a close-up of her reclining body, in a tightly framed shot from chin to knee, with her cunt in the centre of the image – a composition clearly borrowed from *L'Origine du monde* by Gustave Courbet. As the camera zooms out and pulls back, the woman stands up and starts walking towards the sea. Other nudists can be seen moving in the margins of the image, their attention similarly captured by the group of shipwrecked refugees. The woman, who is young, slim and more attractive than the other nudists on the beach, walks past several washed-up bodies and goes straight to Amadou, who is dragging a half-dead friend through the surf. She stops and takes a long look at him, with a probing, somewhat pensive gaze. As Amadou, in his soaking clothes, rises with difficulty, they face each other without speaking. It is as though they are aliens from different planets, searching for a common wavelength in order to

The Invader, 2011



Steve McQueen, *Shame*, 2011

communicate. The moment this wordless contact is made, a look of panic shoots across the expression of the black man, underlined and reinforced by the sharp *glissandi* of the soundtrack. The camera, which registers this closely, begins to waver and retreat. It appears as if Amadou, in the blink of an eye, receives a new identity, one that has been "uploaded" by the white woman in front of him: the non-identity of a homeless person and *sans papier.* But the information flow – abstractly evoked by the tunnel sequence that immediately follows this scene – contains much more; it teaches him, in a flash, everything he needs to know about his new social status, about the life that awaits him, about the city in which he will live and its inhabitants, their habits and morals, the relationship between the sexes, about exploitation and the power of money. His encounter with the nude white woman, who in a certain sense has dragged him onto the continent with her cunt, is a true revelation. In her gaze and physical appearance – the first thing he sees of Europe – he recognises the key to his future career: his sexual attractiveness to wealthy white women. This, for him, is the "origin of the world" – the beginning of a new life, an entrée into the decadent prosperity of Europe, a continent where high-earning middle-class citizens visit nudist beaches and swinger's clubs in order to "be themselves".

Caring for the other

The cinematographic medium has the capacity to represent invisible and global socio-economic processes, provided it finds a proper visual form for them, one that is allegorical and can be understood intuitively.[2] Architecture lends itself particularly well to the creation of such allegories. Within the modern economy, buildings are primarily seen as investment opportunities. This is the world of real estate: solidified capital poured into the mould of universal profit calculation, project development and financial security. The legacy of Modernism – geometric shapes, flat roofs and cantilevers, acres of glass and bare concrete – is still being played out today within the field of designer architecture. This formal vocabulary is the zero degree of modernity: a seemingly timeless register that can be quickly and efficiently realised in any given circumstance. But the bare luxury of glass, steel and concrete also highlights the duality of asceticism and hedonism that defines the lifestyle of today: both indulgence and restraint are, in fact, two modes of individual self-realisation. As the differences between work and leisure are invariably shrinking, it is no coincidence that contemporary office and residential buildings have also started to look identical. The office space and the apartment are two environments aimed at the same ideal of well-being and individual development. In each of these places, men and women are permanently engaged in a project of self-cultivation. While the standard office space now has a lounge area, the living room at home includes a computer.

According to Max Weber's analysis, the spirit of capitalism is imbued with the Protestant ethic of self-control, discipline and asceticism. The true believer honours God by working hard; his life is dominated by industry and thrift, which leads almost automatically to the accumulation of wealth. Weber indicated the inevitable outcome of this process as early as 1920: that the spirit of asceticism would gradually disappear from the harness of materialism and worldly possessions. Perhaps this is where the allegorical meaning of the architecture in these films lies? The "care for external goods" has solidified into a bare and empty skeleton of glass, steel and concrete. Brandon's spartan apartment is the epitome of asceticism, yet facilitates his desire for sexual gratification and pleasure, all under the guise of a contemporary lifestyle. He eats takeaway meals in front of his laptop, a portal to the world of pornography and pay-per-view webcam sex.

Marian, the main character in *Code Blue*, lives in similar conditions but is, in many ways, the opposite of Brandon: no hedonistic yuppie, but a gaunt, ascetic-neurotic character who travels through life as a loner. She lives like a homeless person within her own apartment, surrounded by boxes, always ready to leave for elsewhere. The only time we see her shopping is before a dinner at home with friends. Her way of life is a form of spirituality that borders on the pathological. She lives for her job, a professional calling that she has reduced to an inflexible core: offering help to terminally ill people by accelerating their demise. According to Weber, the modern-rational way of life, as based on the idea of a professional calling originally stemmed from the Protestant sense of duty to God. Yet religious motivation has completely disappeared from Marian's life, and all that remains of asceticism is just an empty shell.

Her experience of sexuality is permeated with violence and death. The only intimate contact she has is with her patients, in the moment that she frees them from their suffering. From the picture window in her apartment, she observes a woman being raped in the field opposite. Marian watches without doing anything. The next morning, she searches for the place where it happened, finds a used condom and takes it home. Once indoors, she removes her trousers and underpants and allows the sperm to trickle out of the condom over her naked thigh. She touches her cunt and begins to masturbate. Her thighs appear to be covered in old scars – presumably traces of self-mutilation.

Marian's favourite film is *Doctor Zhivago*, and she tells her neighbour that she has a "gentle" lover. Yet the man she takes home enjoys beating her up. She first notices him on the bus, while travelling home. She is seated; he stands next to her; she surreptitiously sniffs the scent of his crotch. When he alights, she follows him to a video rental store where he returns pornographic films. Marian rents the same movies and, that evening, watches them at home. She is naked, and starts painting one of the doors in her apartment a blood-red colour. Her only source of light is the glow of the television screen, which is filled with copulating bodies. The moans and groans of the porn actors echo through the empty space of her flat.

Caring for others in today's neo-liberal climate has become a painful problem. The imperative to indulge in life, as individual consumers of prefabricated happiness, is difficult to reconcile with illness and dependency. How is it

possible to care for people who are unable to care for themselves? In this context, the real tragedy of disease and decay is not physical suffering, but the embarrassing loss of personal autonomy and self-reliance, not to mention the inability to enjoy life and be capable of expressing that joy. Through her work as a hospital nurse, Marian is confronted with this problem on a daily basis, and her asceticism compels her to choose a radical solution for people who find themselves in this predicament – although it would be more accurate to say that *she* is the one who is chosen, given her compulsive behaviour. She acquiesces, time and again, to the death wish that she projects upon her patients. Involuntary euthanasia is the means by which Marian short-circuits the problem of caring for others. But her solitary act raises the question of whose problem she is actually solving.

During a cigarette break, a colleague strikes up a conversation with Marian. She is a young woman who has absorbed the language of a television psychologist, wedged between advertising slots: "Je moet goed zijn voor jezelf. Als je niet goed bent voor jezelf, dan ben je ook niet goed voor iemand anders. Ga gewoon wat leuks doen. Echt hoor. Ga shoppen, of neuken." ['You have to be good to yourself. If you aren't good to yourself, then you're no good for someone else. Just go and have some fun. Really. Go and shop, or fuck someone.'] In *Shame,* it is Brandon who puts this contemporary philosophy of happiness into practice, and takes it to an extreme. He embodies not only the self-imposed predilection for pleasure, but also the neo-liberal inability to care for another person, to take responsibility for someone without expecting anything in return. When his younger sister, with the archetypal name Sissy, comes knocking on his door looking for support, love and shelter after the breakup of a relationship, Brandon is incapable of any adequate response. He tolerates her presence for a few days, but ultimately rejects her request for help. When she says, "We're family, we're meant to look after each other", he replies: "I didn't give birth to you, I didn't bring you into this world." He calls her dependent and a parasite: "You're a burden. You're just dragging me down." He has a home and a job, he says, and does not depend upon anybody. The conversation between brother and sister takes place on the sofa in Brandon's room. They do not yell, but speak in hushed tones, as though they were children afraid of waking their parents. We see their heads in close-up as they converse, the blurry images of an old cartoon playing on the television in the background – a distant echo of their childhood, of a time when they were still close and connected within the domestic sphere.

The irony is that Brandon is ultimately subsumed by the neo-liberal ideology he has been promoting. He needs help, as the film suggests, yet considers people who cannot care for themselves to be losers and parasites. This is one of the reasons why he is unable to start a relationship. The idea that two people would enter into an intimate bond, and take care of one another, does not accord with his worldview.

In *The Invader*, it is Agnès, the real estate developer, who embodies the neo-liberal mentality. She wants to get rid of Amadou after just one night. It does not occur to her that she could let him stay in her unoccupied guest apartment. She just gives him some money and then dumps him. Only her gay business partner offers to take Amadou into his home – to the dismay of the African, who understands very well what's expected in return. Amadou embodies a tribal form of solidarity and care for others, as imagined by white Westerners. He tends to his sick friend Siaka, with whom he made the crossing to Europe, and who is unable to work and thus cannot pay off the traffickers. Amadou proposes to work twice as hard, so as to repay his friend's debt, but the criminals want to dispose of the sick man. Not long afterwards, Siaka disappears from the illegal dosshouse. His body has undoubtedly been dumped somewhere.

Wish-fulfilment and demand stimulus

Many years ago, Fredric Jameson proposed a critical hermeneutic model for the analysis of narrative art forms such as literature and film.[3] His model is based on the social and economic contradictions that generate anxiety and stress within the collective consciousness, but which also trigger a desire for change, revolution and redemption. According to Jameson, the function of art and mass culture in the era of capitalism is to act as a counterbalance to its destabilising effects. This can only happen, however, if these forces are first evoked within the work, and given a visible or tangible form: "[...] such works cannot manage anxieties about the social order unless they have first revived them and given them some rudimentary expression; we will now suggest that anxiety and hope are two faces of the same collective consciousness, so that the works of mass culture, even if their function lies in the legitimation of the existing order – or some worse one – cannot do their job without deflecting in the latter's service the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity, to which they can therefore, no matter in how distorted a fashion, be found to have given voice".[4] Ideology and utopia are thus indivisibly linked. The ideological function of cultural production lies in the recuperation of the utopian desire for freedom and revolt, which is initially expressed but then smothered or reversed.

That narrative art forms lend themselves especially well to this "management of desire" is connected to their temporal dimension: the linear sequence of actions and events that unfold according to a narrative logic and which culminate in an inevitable "solution". Films and literary texts, in Jameson's view, have the task "to evolve 'imaginary resolutions of real contradictions', to use Levi-Strauss's apt formula: non-conceptual 'resolutions' in which the very narrative logic itself – like the rebus or the dream – rotates swiftly enough to generate an after-image of appeasement, of harmony, and of conflictual reconciliation [...]".[5] The medium of film in particular – especially in its mass cultural form, but also in its more artistic guises – displays characteristics that are critically important to this hermeneutic model: namely, the fact that a film narrative unrolls, almost mechanically and in its own time and rhythm, before the eyes of the viewer; that it is impossible to scroll backwards or forwards, or to read faster or slower. This formal qualification may have faded into the background in the age

Urszula Antoniak, *Code Blue*, 2011

of DVD and video-on-demand, but it remains substantially unaffected. Indeed, it is still the seminal, ethical foundation that underpins all cinematic narratives: the actions, choices and decisions of the characters are all seen in the light of their inevitable consequences. This is the first rule of cinematography: after A comes B; one thing leads to another; what happens now is the result of what happened before; actions have consequences, and the fates of the characters can be interpreted as a reward or punishment for their previous exploits.[6] This creates room for ambiguous forms of identification on the part of the audience: we might identify with a character that indulges in transgressive behaviour, and then subsequently delight in the inevitable correction or the violence with which the "status quo" restores itself. The three films discussed in this essay are permeated with the social contradictions of an economic system based on wish-fulfilment and demand stimulus. Within this system, the sale of material goods is encouraged and stimulated by the illusion that such goods respond to non-material needs – needs that must be perpetually maintained because of the demand for revenue and economic growth. Satisfaction is always short-lived, as the representational system that fulfils wishes also creates, simultaneously, a new "demand". The unconscious collective desire to break free from this cycle of wish-fulfilment and demand stimulus undermines the functioning of the capitalist economy – and is therefore dangerous.

In *Code Blue*, Marian embodies the collective fantasy of an "entity" that can read our deepest desires, namely, the longings that we did not even know we possessed. The patients for whom she cares either do not actually realise that they want to die, or they resist that wish out of cowardice or fear. Marian is the ambulatory intelligence, the person who is able to divine the patients' yearnings and cut through the Gordian knot. Her physical detachment enables her to "see" each patient's unconscious death wish. She executes the ultimate type of wish-fulfilment and, in so doing, brings the gears of the affective economy to a standstill. The finality of death indicates the desire to break free from the endless chain of consumption. It is hardly a coincidence that we almost never see Marian eat or drink. Her emaciated body is a harbinger of the moment of exit from the cycle of endlessly recurring needs.

Yet the film, in the end, does not present the nurse's intervention as a truly good deed. Marian does, in fact, enact a form of demand stimulus: she fulfils a wish, but one that probably did not exist until she made contact with the patient. The collective fantasy that she embodies is, at the same time, an idea that evokes a deep collective fear: to be at the mercy of an authoritarian entity that can read our deepest desires. Anyone unaware of his or her own desires would find it difficult to determine whether the system had not implanted false longings. This is exactly what Marian does, and she receives her punishment in

accordance with the fundamental structure of the cinematographic medium, a discipline in which every type of behaviour has its own consequences. She voluntarily opens the door to Konrad, her violent lover. Like Marian, he too is something of a pathological case – yet when he batters her, he is in fact acting on behalf of the collective. The fantasy of a benevolent agency that brings our wishes and desires to fruition is one that must, eventually, be punished and forcibly suppressed. And the collective body, represented by the film audience, must also be punished – for daring to nurture such a fantasy in the first place. The audience is compelled to watch, passively, while Konrad is beating up Marian.

Spheres

In *Shame*, the fates of Brandon and Sissy are indelibly intertwined. This "destiny" is, of course, a synonym for their familial bond, a bond that is denied by Brandon when he throws his sister out. The consequences are dramatic. During their conversation on the sofa in front of the TV, Brandon seems to anticipate the events, when he says: "Why is it always dramatic with you? Everything is always the end of the world." That same night, as Brandon's appetite for sex lures him into the depths of New York's nightlife, Sissy slashes her wrists in the bathroom of his apartment. Brandon finds her in time, but it seems clear that he is being punished for refusing to protect her. She has a history of suicide attempts, as evidenced by the scars on her arm, and so he should have known not to leave her on her own. On this overt level, he comprehends his failure at the end of the film, and appears to want to improve his life. When he sees a woman on the subway whom he had previously tried to seduce, he ignores her willing gaze and looks away. But beneath the surface of sex addiction and family drama there lies yet another hidden layer. Brandon is actually being punished for his inability to keep his professional and personal lives separate. His sex addiction is a metonymic (or "displaced") symptom of the stress caused by the two conflicting tendencies that characterise post-industrial society: on one hand, the imperative of professionalisation; on the other hand, the blurring of the division between the professional and the private domain. Today's employees are expected, above all, to be professional, competent, sharp and fully committed; they need to manage and compartmentalise their time efficiently. This trend has become so dominant that it has penetrated deep into the private sphere. In the most diverse fields – be it kitchen design, sports, parenting or sexuality – the media disseminate increasingly professional standards that citizens subsequently imitate in their private lives.[7]

Brandon watches and stores hard-core pornography on his office computer, and this is his only real sin – not that he views porn, but that he can't keep it private; not that he masturbates constantly, but that he does so at work; not that he spends money on expensive prostitutes, but that he is unprofessional and arrives late at the office. In the eyes of the collective, this is what is really wrong with him – which is also the implicit message carried by the film. The world of money and business transactions has perverted his sexuality. It is as if his lust can only truly flourish in a professional situation. The hotel room where he takes his female colleague is the corporate version of a private bedroom; the women he receives at home are call girls who provide him with a paid service. Brandon is unable to compartmentalise his life in the correct way. His compulsive tendency to disassociate lust and love from each other is the *wrong* partitioning, one that replaces and perverts the desired separation of professional and private spheres. All of these contradictions come together when Brandon's boss and Brandon's sister are making love in Brandon's bed – a moment that marks the beginning of his inevitable downfall.

While this film both evokes and touches upon the stress experienced by the collective as a result of conflicting social expectations and demands, it reduces these issues to an individual case history that is clearly "different" – one that is abnormal, ill-adjusted, sick. The demands of professional compartmentalisation, which have been internalised by the collective but continue to induce stress, are converted into (and concealed by) a pitiful case of affective over-compartmentalisation – an individual excess that is seemingly "not about us". Thus the issue is raised and, in one fell swoop, resolved.

Code Blue is imbued with the same set of social contradictions. Marian is utterly committed to her professional calling, to such an extent that her private life becomes, quite literally, an empty plate. Like Brandon, she is depicted as a disturbed, deviant figure, someone "not like us". As a solitary case, she takes the collective suffering upon her shoulders and makes it quietly disappear. Her relationship with her patients, whom she endeavours to put out of their misery, reflects something of this secularised martyrdom. Meanwhile, the collective still requires a psychological explanation for Brandon and Marian's abnormal behaviour – a need that each film acknowledges to a certain degree. A remark by Sissy at the end of *Shame* suggests that she and her brother have had a troubled, perhaps traumatic, childhood: "We're not bad people. We just come from a dark place." In *Code Blue*, Marian carries a picture of a girl with her – "my daughter" – a child that she may have lost. These suggestions may serve to reassure the viewer, simply because they situate the characters within an accepted psychological and behavioural model. On a structural level, however, the films do not actively support these explanations.

Of all the characters in the three films, only Agnès, the real estate developer in *The Invader*, is able to overcome and even play with the social contradictions. She buys her way out of her problems, with cash; she grabs every opportunity that arises, in accordance with her professional ethos as an entrepreneur. Her opportunism makes it possible to suspend, at will, the distinction between work and private life, or to keep it sharply defined. Agnès, who also organises exhibitions in her upmarket suburban villa, sells art to her wealthy relations. She allows Amadou into her life only when she feels like it, and is quick to show him the door when she has had enough. For him, Agnès embodies the

link between sexual desire and material wealth – the promise that was made to him on that southern European beach. Yet he eventually falls victim to the vagaries that she can afford as a result of her social success.

As a project developer, she is the demiurge of the capsular society. She builds hospitals, offices and hotels; she erects the modern apartments that professionals such as Brandon and Marian attempt to inhabit; she initiates the construction projects where illegal immigrants such as Amadou are put to work in tragic circumstances. Indemnified by a comprehensive economic apparatus, she manages the system that imprisons the other characters.

When Agnès breaks off her affair with Amadou, she is punishing him for stealing her keys, for intruding into her world, her apartment and her real estate. Nevertheless, the last scenes of the film suggest that her exclusion of the black man has failed; that he is inside and will remain there. He is able to enter her house and mingle with the guests at her exhibition opening. He can, that very night, effortlessly take the place of her husband and lie down next to her in bed. This final scene can be interpreted, in conventional terms, as a wishful dream – the hallucination of someone gradually losing his grip on reality. But there is also another possible reading.

The unreality of the final scene extends retroactively throughout Amadou's career in Europe. In a very short span of time he realises, on a phantasmatic level, a meteoric career. Six or eight well-chosen stills would be enough to bring this imaginary story, a rags-to-riches trajectory, into convincing focus. Amadou begins by extricating himself from the criminal milieu in which he is imprisoned. He finds a few bags of firewood, which he sells, thereby earning his first money. Later, he sleeps with an attractive blonde woman in a luxury apartment. Finally, he attends the opening of an art exhibition, and eventually lives with the same wealthy woman in a large villa on the outskirts of the city. During a meeting in the street with an acquaintance from the illegal dosshouse, Amadou makes it clear that things are going well for him: "Ma vie a complètement changé maintenant. J'ai une femme. Une femme d'ici. Elle m'aime. On va vivre ensemble" ['My life has completely changed now. I have a wife. A woman from here. She loves me. We're going to live together']. That this is a largely fictitious story does not take away from the reality of the banknotes in his pocket, which were given to him by Agnès. Upward social mobility turns the life of this immigrant into an allegory of the self-made man, the man who starts with nothing but through his own initiative amasses a fortune. This classic scenario, of which Hollywood has produced countless versions, is projected onto the life of a homeless black man. It is a projection that remains visible as such, in the sense of it being *a projection*. Amadou's career is not therefore a fairy tale, but a fantasy, a particularly contemporary chimera, and one that closely resembles the trajectories of success stories that we hear about in the media: "If I'm smart, work hard, and have some luck, I'll make it by thirty-five". This dream scenario is always accompanied by a fearful suspicion that it *is* in fact a fantasy – and will always remain so.

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[1] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [1920], tr. Talcott Parsons (London / New York: Routledge, 2005), 123.
[2] Cf. Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press / London: British Film Institute, 1992).
[3] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).
[4] Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture [1979]", in: Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 30.
[5] Fredric Jameson, "Diva and French Socialism [1982]", in: ibid., 59.
[6] I applied these ideas earlier in "Magnolia, of het verlangen naar pure film", in: *De Witte Raaf*, no. 87, September–October 2000, 5–6.
[7] Cf. Bart Verschaffel, "Kwaliteitsbeheer: het fantasma van de professionele samenleving", in: *De Witte Raaf*, no. 90, March–April 2001, 21–22; and Camiel van Winkel, "Professioneel falen", in: Joost Heijthuijsen et al. (eds.), *Zonder titel. Amateur en professional in de beeldende kunst* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2012), 108–113.