

Old but gold

Homo homini lupus – stated the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, concerning political anthropology, already in the early 17th century. Going towards the rational age of the Enlightenment, the focal point became the individual man considered as an '*animal sociale*' behaving in a primitive environment which is still his *status naturalis* (state of nature), described as an eternal bellicose war status – *bellum omnium contra omnes* (war of everybody against everybody).

Within this condition of being, the man acts in function of his prime emotional and egoistic instincts, creating an atmosphere of competition and struggle for the purpose of prevailing on others. Therefore, according to Hobbes' utilitarian philosophy of society, any relationship is based on a mutual need rather than on love and feelings, in order to reach the own idea of happiness.

Cynically, the Slovenian psychoanalytic philosopher S. Žižek in his publication '*In Defense of Lost Causes*', gives us his interpretation of meanings of a list of mainstream movies, by using a deeper reading-key, which goes beyond the scenes and behind the plot.

'Numerous treatises have been written about the perception of a historical Real in the terms of a family narrative as a fundamental ideological operation: a story about the conflict of larger social forces (classes and so forth) is framed into the coordinates of a family drama. – And then he clarifies – This ideology, of course, finds its clearest expression in Hollywood as the ultimate ideological machine: in a typical Hollywood product, everything, from the fate of the knights of the Round Table through the October Revolution up to asteroids hitting the Earth, is transposed into an Oedipal narrative.' (Žižek, 2008, p.52)

In fact, after a cynical and psychological general introduction called 'Capitalist realism', he points out the pre-existence of a 'big plot', which combines flawlessly in itself the business of a critical political and social case (catastrophe) with the pleasure of a surreal and often dramatic love story, where the sad gran finale is the moral sceptical demonstration of the real ideologies in action.

'Therein resides the film's ideology: with regard to the two levels of the story [...] is a clear dissymmetry, since the Oedipal level is what the story is "really about," while the external spectacular is merely its metaphoric extension.' (Žižek, 2008, p. 57)

According to the philosopher, the empirical and physical example of this twofold cinematographic strategy is shown across the epic-romantic disaster of the '*Titanic*', movie by James Cameron in 1997. Through the camouflage of a tormented and passionate love affair on shipboard, in which the lovely, gracious and wealthy Rose crashes into a humble and stormy artist, Jack, the director illustrates us how futile was to try to ascend the pyramid of an embedded society.

As matter of fact, we can see evidently from the beginning that those events unfolding between the two characters would not ever end without colliding and losing against social conventions. Actually what collided before them was the ship itself, indeed, against an iceberg.

This glitch marks in both ways the double final tragic failure of a hope: the one of the most massive luxury transatlantic of the Age, symbol of the economic and technological progress drowning together with the one of an impossible revolutionary social climbing led by emotional feelings.

Therefore, following the characteristics of the egoistic human behaviours taught by Hobbes, everyone needs others just to understand better who they actually are and which are their roles into the society.

In these terms, Jack, being her exact opposite alter ego, was responsible to mediate Rose to the high-society world where she belongs (and so she can't escape it) in order to resolve her identity crisis and accept it, and then, once his job is done, he can just disappear.



<https://it.pinterest.com/pin/459859811932239581/>

The scene in which he draws her portrait naked is a strong symbolized realization of this concept, where the idea of the artistic nude, commonly seen as a strong act of liberation\rebellion, here becomes a symbolic process of knowing herself deeply through a broken aesthetic stereotyped vision of her physical appearance. Eventually, the sketch, drawn straight by the pencil and so the eyes of Jack, results very similar in styling and posing to the fetishised Impressionist portrait of the prostitute '*Olympia*' (1863) by Edouard Manet.

'The importance of this, outside of the narrative enigma and the potential narrative motor that the portrait\Rose will represent, is that the first time we see Rose it is as a sexualised woman on display, a woman after-the-fall of idealised, feminine whiteness.' (Bergfelder-Street, 2004, p. 202)



In the 1997 film, Di Caprio, who plays Jack Dawson, meets and falls in love with Winslet's character, upper class beauty Rose Calvert.



Olympia 1863
Edouard Manet oil on canvas
130,5 x 190 cm Musée
d'Orsay, Paris

Also, this masterpiece, considered as one of the main cinematographic critique to the Marxist society, has been criticised itself for its contradictory super expensive budget of production, reaching \$200 million.

Therefore, the resulting point discloses in no chance of reaction and revolution within a steady society structure typical of the pre-modern Age, where hierarchies were already pre-established from the origin, from birth.

The Hollywood American stage has been actually the mis-en-scene par excellence for Marxism of the classes-struggle performance, until it got to the Western European cinematographic culture as well, up to the Academy Award. In fact, Paolo Sorrentino, Italian filmmaker, reached the 86th Oscar as the Best Foreign Language Film of the 2013 with his masterwork '*The Great Beauty*'.

Through drama and satiric irony he put on scene the aristocratic Italian society, keeping a dynamic narration with a fast pace of a very static of a gaunt content, which is sadly the reality, stuck into ideology.

The cynical voice is here on the stage: it is actually the main actor, Jep Gambardella, a charming art critic and journalist who tells intertwined stories of a group of friends, aged over 60, members of the inner Roman

circle in which he finds himself unsatisfied and unfulfilled. However, although he emerges for his intellectual knowledge within an environment built on appearances rather than hidden thorny truths, he seems to appear weary and resigned at the inability of growing.

‘We all are on the brink of despair, all we can do is look each other in the face, keep each other company, joke a little... Don’t you agree?’- he says in the movie during a monologue.

At the first sight, this opus can appear as a caricature of the Italian politics, but this as a theme would be ‘extremely boring and not-lasting’ (Kohn, 2013).

Behind the luxury ostentation of actual emptiness that oozes from trash parties and frivolous arguments typical of a Plato’s Symposium, the hidden message of the director lies not just in the gap between two opposite social poles, but also in the clash of two distant generations. As matter of fact the youth is not even portrayed in the whole length of the script, which symbolises the actual contrast amongst the two groups.

By articulating the movie on a hyperbole, Sorrentino exaggerates in a negative way the dusty ‘old’ in order to emphasise and encourage the ‘young’, holding out of that the hope of a better future. In fact this ‘hope’ of Jep of changing his futile existence and regain some form of creativeness resides in his encounter with Ramona (Sabrina Ferilli), a stripper whom, despite her profession, is pure, genuine and sincere. In short, a very different woman from the vacuum characters Jep has become accustomed to associate with. She is also much younger than him and he hopes that her youth and platonic relationship they have developed will help him to reinstate some depth in his life. Alas, this is not going to happen since she dies shortly after from a sudden disease.

But this theme of a clash between the expectations and purposes of two generations, which seems to have replaced in modern times the Marxism class struggle, will be resumed more and better in his next film ‘*Youth*’ (2015).

[Mick Boyle showing his protégée the distant Alps through a telescope] - ‘You see that mountain over there? Everything seems really close. That’s the future. And now...[he flips the telescope around so it is in fish eye lens] - ... everything seems really far away now. That is the past.’ (Keitel, 2015, *Youth*)

Here the two main actors are in their latter seventies and old friends who meet a sanatorium-like luxury hotel somewhere in the Alps. Fred (Michael Caine) is a composer and conductor who lost completely the will to perform. The other, Mick (Harvey Keitel) is a famous film director who has lost, instead, his creativity despite efforts. The feeble light of hope here, as in ‘*The Great Beauty*’, lies in youth which, among other characters, is epitomised by a Miss Universe whom, in addition to have a statuesque body, seems to be the most rational thinking of all.

‘[...] the dehumanization of people under capitalism makes it very difficult for them to grasp and fight the system that oppresses them. Born into an alienated society, we tend to see it as inevitable, the way things are.’ (Hess, p. 14-16)

In a modern world where the concept of *evolution* is not necessarily considered as a positive improvement of the life itself, but rather it challenges the ability of a life to adapt to circumstances, the Marxist theme of the Titanic from the West Coast, focused on wealth here shifts to a more biological perspective, linked to the evolution theory of the ‘*social Darwinism*’ (‘*survival of the fittest*’ v. Spencer, 1864).

Similarly, the two mainstream examples mentioned above share, together with an intrinsic conflict-base, an automatic and natural process by which the characters leave the stage once they become ‘useless’ to achieve the main final purpose or the morals.

Although, while Jack (Leonardo Di Caprio) needs to disappear into the Ocean at the end of his script because of its unsatisfactory and unchangeable class condition, in Rome, the bourgeois Jep (Toni Servillo) needs to step aside because of his age as representation of the end of an era, a generation.

As the theory of evolution suggests, after the character has fulfilled his role in life and cannot do anything more, he is ready to give way to the new cast.

However, as we can see through an earlier English masterpiece of the Italian director entitled '*This Must Be The Place*' (2011), the depression of the emblematic end of a successful and honourable career can be faced in different ways. In there we can find the positive side, interpreted by the figure of David Byrne, who does not resign in front of his elderly age, continuing to play music as he has done for all his life; and then the dark side of the depleted artist, who, despite his economically and musically accomplished path, seems to have lost his will and inclination to music, embodied by the protagonist Cheyenne (Sean Penn). Herein, the conflict occurs more intimately inside one single identity, splitting it into two distinct personalities: the one that was in the past and the one that would be in the future.

Now, the *time* seems to deserve more consideration instead of the capital itself, as *it* becomes the unit of measurement of that inner gap. As a climax, the psychological and spiritual journey makes a temporal displacement starting from the sparkling, fertile age, passing through the disorientation and dissatisfaction period due to end where the original hope and impulse have started: the youth. The final attempt of Cheyenne, who has finally avenged his dead father, to go back in the past by just changing his aesthetic appearance is as desperate as much as meaningful evidence of what just explained above.

Here, John Locke comes into play. With his doctrine of '*the blank slate*', previously inspired by Aristotle, the English philosopher from the seventeenth century compares the human mind to a clean sheet that needs to be furnished during the time. The only concrete solution appears to be the *experience* of the outside world (also meant as relationships with others) as well as the own interior and intimate sense.

Ergo, if we are able to assume that the concept of '*ideology*', for definition, means a system, a body of theoretical ideas and beliefs belonging to an individual or a group of brains, which turn out in actual practice when they are applied to the society, we also need to be aware about the etymology of the word itself. In fact '*ἰδέα*' as noun comes from the Greek irregular verb that means 'to see' (*ὁράω*) that has a particular unique translation of its present perfect form (*οἶδα*): 'I have seen (it)' therefore '(now, once I have seen the object) I know (it)'. Indeed, for ancient Greeks the knowledge belonged to the eyes, as they can actually have the experience of the object they are looking at. Consequently, on this basis, we can also deduce that any kind of ideology is strictly connected with the empirical - even unconscious - experience of something already existing and not just utopic and abstract.

Especially during the '900 it has been assigned a 'negative' meaning to it, as it has been used for long time as a propaganda-matter for all kind of extremism. Since the 'turbulent flow' of those years had passed, the expression became more popularly satirised and underestimated by media. Luckily, the big-minds of the cinema have kept developing and sharpening new techniques to treat gently and discreetly a delicate art such as ideology, hiding it behind the art of the big screen and using it as opportunity of cultural entrainment-propaganda.

In conclusion, as we have seen, the unsolved content of an ideology can be developed more or totally shift during the time, becoming 'age' instead of 'being gold', but I do not consider a random coincidence the fact that all the main characters of those films cited until now are involved in artistic fields. Leonardo Di Caprio, the painter; Toni Servillo, the elite critic; Michael Caine, the composer; ending with Sean Penn, the rock star.

This art must be the place, though.

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