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## **Impotence, Resentment, Incredulity: nihilism in Cinema and Education**

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**ABSTRACT – Impotence, Resentment, Incredulity: nihilism in Cinema and Education.** Nihilism can be defined as depreciation of life, establishment and loss of supreme values, crisis in the categories of finality, totality and truth, which generates impotence, resentment and incredulity. These elements are part of the contemporary imaginaries and have been studied through the films *Nocturama*, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing*, and *The House That Jack Built*, to investigate the manifestations of nihilism and its consequences in cinema and education. The methodology was guided by the hermeneutics in convergence with Nietzschean perspectivism, and the conclusion points to the possibility of overcoming nihilism through a pedagogy of choice and an unconditional affirmation of life.

**Keywords:** Cinema and Education. Nihilism. *Amor Fatí*. Perspectivism.

**RESUMO – Impotência, Ressentimento, Incredulidade: o niilismo no Cinema e na Educação.** O niilismo pode ser definido como depreciação da vida, instauração e perda dos valores supremos, crise das categorias de finalidade, totalidade e verdade, o que gera impotência, ressentimento e incredulidade. Esses elementos fazem parte dos imaginários contemporâneos e foram estudados nos filmes *Nocturama*, *Três anúncios para um crime* e *A casa que Jack construiu*, com o objetivo de investigar as manifestações do niilismo e seus desdobramentos no cinema e na educação. A metodologia pautou-se pela hermenêutica em convergência com o perspectivismo nietzschiano e a conclusão aponta a possibilidade de superação do niilismo por meio da pedagogia da escolha e da afirmação incondicional da vida.

**Palavras-chave:** Cinema e Educação. Niilismo. *Amor Fatí*. Perspectivismo.

## Introduction

Bertrand Bonello's *Nocturama* (2016) articulates youth and politics in a narrative about the (im)possibility of transforming society through terrorist acts. The opening scenes showing young people in action contrast with the immobility of the closed shopping mall where they take refuge after the attacks. Hedonists, consumerists and impatient, they see the reality mediated by screens, which cool down the initial impulses that led them to seek, by means of violence, a way to intervene in the constituted world. Thus, a crisis regarding their objective emerges. Why take the act?

*Three Billboards outside Ebbing* (2017), by Martin McDonagh, tells a mother's obsession with finding the person responsible for the rape and murder of her daughter. As the film progresses and the ambiguities overlap the apparent search for justice fades out, revealing the hatred and resentment that command the (re)actions of the protagonist and part of the characters. The end of the film, although inconclusive as to what will happen, is on the other hand emphatic in revealing a crisis of totality. There is no longer any way to believe in the representation of justice. The feeling of revenge which could attenuate hatred is questioned in the face of the resentment whose cause is the lack of a reference value.

Through a serial killer self-called Mr. Sophistication, Lars Von Trier's *The House That Jack Built* (2018) addresses the moral question by asking if it would be possible to justify evil aesthetically, that is, if serial murder could be a way of artistic expression. In Jack's logic, once art expresses itself through the decomposition of matter, he considers himself authorized to build his house out of the corpses of the people he killed and frozen in a refrigerator. Jack's speech is delivered by Virgil, in a direct reference to Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. His arrival in hell, however, is merely metaphorical, an allegory for the non-existence of the metaphysical world. In the absence of an afterworld, there is no reward or punishment other than that one has (not) among the living in the present world, the only hell there is. In this way, the film highlights the crisis of truth and of the metaphysical world that sustains it.

The three crises problematized by the three films point to a more general picture of an expanded crisis of values that can be called, as Nietzsche called it, nihilism, whose expression occurs precisely through the depotentiation of these three categories: purpose, totality, and metaphysical truth.

From the study of the films *Nocturama*, *Three Billboards outside Ebbing* and *The house that Jack built*, this paper<sup>1</sup> aims to undertake a discussion on the manifestation of nihilism in contemporary times and its implications for the thought on education, through a hermeneutical methodology that seeks to philosophically interpret the possible meanings of the films in connection to contemporary imaginaries.

Before we move on, it is necessary to be clear that cinema is here conceived as an art that articulates thoughts, emotions, imaginaries,

and create meanings that are interpreted by the spectators – its hermeneutic dimension –, comprising an educational potentiality that does not reside in the mere representation of the human experience, but finds itself plurally in possible visualities (and invisibilities). In a previous paper I wrote on the educational grounds of cinema – cognitive, philosophical, aesthetic, mythic, existential, anthropological and poetic (Almeida, 2017) – in recognition of its many educational potentialities as they dialogue with Deleuze’s perspective (1985, p. 8), for whom “[...] the great filmmakers seemed to us to be compared not only with painters, architects, musicians, but also with thinkers; they think with movement-images and time-images rather than concepts”.

In a complementary way, Derrida (2012, p. 374) enunciates a cinematographic emotion that is typical of cinema by which we free ourselves from interdicts, “authorized to all possible projections, to all identifications, without the slightest sanction and with no work at all”: because the cinematographic experience would be linked to the spectrality, to the phantasmatic. For Derrida (2012, p. 378) cinema is similar to psychoanalysis: “the vision and the perception of detailing, in a film, are in direct relation with the psychoanalytic procedure. Enlargement does not just enlarge, the detail gives access to another scene, to a heterogeneous scene”. These ghosts (in Greek the term designates precisely image) that Derrida recognizes in cinema are similar to Edgar Morin’s doubles (2014); the images are images in themselves, and they are images of something else. Thus, in a film “the illusion of reality is inseparable from the awareness that it is really an illusion, without such awareness killing the feel of reality” (Morin, 2014, p. 15).

As for the selection criteria, the films were chosen for their criticism by the time they were released, for their recognizable dialogue with contemporary issues, for the average of their Metacritic evaluation – a system that arithmetically calculates the average of the scores attributed by critics of relevant publications –, for the average public evaluation in the IMDb (Internet Movie Database) – a database that gathers information and criticism about films –, and for presenting aspects that converge with the crisis of values that constitute contemporary nihilism according to the Nietzschean philosophy. *Nocturama* scored 71/100 on Metacritic’s metascore (a metric calculated from 15 reviews: Clayton Dillard from *Slant Magazine*, for instance, gives it full marks, while A.O. Scott from *The New York Times* gives it 20/100) and 6.5/10 from the public (more than 4 thousand voters); *Three Billboards outside Ebbing* got 88 metascore and 8.1 (over 400,000 voters); *The house Jack built* didn’t pass 42 (but received 100 from Sam C. Mac and 91 from Eric Kohn) and 6.8 from over 60,000 IMDb voters. It appears from the data that the French film was less seen and appreciated by the public, but it obtained a good average rating from critics and a large number of critics scattered around the world (IMDb gathers 87); a Hollywood production and winner of 2 Oscars (Best Actress and Best Supporting Actor), *Three Billboards* is the most watched film, with excellent public and criticism (IMDb gathers 584); Lars Von Trier’s film, on the other hand, was not

welcomed by critics but attracted the public (IMDb lists 259 critics), in addition of displaying, among the three films, the most renowned and, at the same time, the most controversial director.

The films were decoupled – a study of the “structure of the film as a sequel of shots and sequences, as the attentive spectator can perceive” (Aumont; Marie, 2003, p. 71) – and analyzed from the perspective examined here: its enunciative power, by means of the fictional narrative, of a more generalized crisis that they embody and reflect, thought through philosophy, with educational outcomes which reflect on alternatives and possible ways to understand what it means to educate in the face of nihilism. The decoupage and analysis of the films, which constitute the first heuristic stage, served as a basis for the textual presentation of the narrative events and their possible meanings, which were – second heuristic stage – hermeneutically interpreted. As Derrida recalls (2012, p. 382) “an image, moreover in cinema, is always open to interpretation: the specter is an enigma and the ghosts parade in the images, they are mysteries”. Therefore, among the multiple perspectives, we sought the one which would allow the best angle to approach the ghosts in question, being based on the perspectivism: “there is only one perspective view, only one perspective ‘knowing’” (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 109, emphasis by the author).

Finally, the reflections presented here do not arise from philosophy alone – theory of general reality (Rosset, 1989a, p. 12) –, but from the dialogue between philosophy and cinematographic fiction – a set of particular facts (Rosset, 1989a) –, taking as its goal the educational implications, i.e., the philosophical principles by which education can be thought of in relation to contemporary nihilism and the possibility of whether overcoming it or incorporating it in its entirety.

## Nihilism, an old ghost that haunts us

Contemporary nihilism dates back to the 19th century, more specifically to Turgenev’s and Dostoevsky’s Russian literature and Nietzsche’s (1983, p. 380-381) diagnosis of the death of God and the crisis of finality, totality and truth of the metaphysically idealized world. This perspective, given the escalation of nihilism noted by Giacoia Jr. (2014, p. 222 ff.), is being taken up contemporaneously by thinkers such as Vattimo (1996, p. 4) who intend to investigate how “the devaluation of supreme values” impacts contemporaneity.

For Heidegger (2007, p. 23) nihilism is not a “point of view” or a “historical datum” but a “long-lasting appropriational event” which refers to its origins, according to Nietzsche (1983), to Platonism and Christianity, which in a certain way proposed to answer the question “why?” through a “metaphysical system of global interpretation of the universe and the human condition in the world” (Giacoia Jr., 2014, p. 223).

Nihilism is linked to an event that Nietzsche (1983, p. 211), in aphorism 343 of *The Gay Science* called the “death of God”: “The greatest of recent events – that ‘God is dead’, that the belief on the Christian God

has fallen into disrepute – it is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe”, i.e., a process that for him is irreversible of abandoning the totality of the world elaborated by metaphysics. This fragmentation of the world image, as pointed out by Franco Volpi (2005, p. 169), generates a deep uneasiness associated to the corrosion of beliefs, the spread of relativism and, more contemporaneously, with denialism of all kinds.

Although etymologically derived from nothingness (*nihil*), nihilism is not just a *belief* in nothingness or a *desire* for nothingness, it is also manifested in the attempts to impose or recompose supposedly universal values in the face of the generalized crisis of values. The recognition that the world has no objective meaning or rational justification by itself does not entail all nihilism, since this recognition can be a passage to *amor fati*, the unconditional approval of life (nihilism, active or complete) (Nietzsche, 1995, p. 118) or, in Rosset's (1989b) conceptualization, of the tragic affirmation. Its negative aspect is manifested in passive or incomplete nihilism, when the loss of values encourages its recomposition, even if partial and restricted, incapable of taking the place of *totality*, of pointing to a *finality*, or constituting a *metaphysical truth* as done before. The result is further fragmentation and intensification of nihilism which spreads to other fields. Examples abound: religious fundamentalism, whose discrepancy with the contemporary world causes absurd effects; femicide, whose vengeful violence is based on the disillusion of sexist possession; denialism or conspiracy theories, with their pointless theses that deny from the holocaust to the sphericity of the planet.

The political nihilism of the 21st century paints the contemporary imagination with contrasting colors. It is not a disbelief in politics which manifests itself as indifference but a resentment that encourages destruction. Wendy Brown documents this political imaginary with numerous examples taken from the North American scenario as the rise of Trumpism which are valid for Bolsonaroism and other forms of anti-democratic manifestation around the world.

Perhaps there is a form of nihilism shaped by the waning of a kind of social dominance or the waning social dominance of a historical kind. To the extent that this type finds itself in a world emptied not only of meaning but of its own place, far from going gently into the night, it turns toward the apocalypse. If white men cannot own democracy, then there will be no democracy at all. If white men cannot dominate the planet, then there will be no planet (Brown, 2019, p. 220)<sup>2</sup>.

According to Wendy Brown, the nihilism conceived by Nietzsche is unfit to characterize our present since it is not only a question of the fall of the fundamental values of truth and morality but of a humanity “that has brought the species to an unprecedented misery, and the planet to the brink of destruction” (Brown, 2019, p. 221), and that is because humans have created powers, not controlled by the humans themselves, that diminish and mock him.

Brown's diagnosis may seem exaggerated to explain the entire contemporary landscape, but it certainly depicts a kind of prevailing imagery derived from nihilism and with a paroxysmal inclination towards the destruction of humanity itself, because "it needs an aim – and it prefers to will nothingness than not will" (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 87-88)<sup>3</sup>.

In any case, what is central to the notion of nihilism in its most diverse uses is what Nietzsche called a "psychological state" that affects three categories of thought: finality, totality, and truth.

The "disillusionment about an alleged *finality* of the come-to-be as a cause of nihilism" (Nietzsche, 1983, p. 380, emphasis added) happens because it was supposed to be possible to achieve something like "the ethical ordering of the world; or to increase love and harmony in the relationship amongst beings; or getting closer to a state of universal happiness; or even to get rid of a universal state of nothingness" (Nietzsche, 1983, p. 380). The impossibility of achieving a goal empties the action of any meaning. Why take the act? Why live? The feeling of impotence in the face of the goals to achieve contaminates the process itself, because the reason for acting is not in the action but in an alleged purpose that reveals itself to be unattainable. *Nocturama* (2016), by Bertrand Bonello, dialogues with this category of thought, as we will see later on.

Nihilism also manifests itself as the disappearance of the "global representation of a supreme form of domination and government" (Nietzsche, 1983, p. 380) expressed by the idea of *totality*, or even of *systematization* or *organization*. The human loses the belief in his own worth by abandoning the belief in "a whole infinitely superior to him" (Nietzsche, 1983). In other words, the value of the human is not in itself but in the alignment with a totality on which its value depends upon. Justice, for instance, is one of these supreme values, and an unsolved, unpunished crime can compromise the belief that one has in it, shaking the very meaning of life, which then is emptied in the face of the unjustifiable. This is the case of *Three Billboards outside Ebbing* (2017), by Martin McDonagh.

The third category of thought appears when one tries to "condemn this entire world of the come-to-be as an illusion, and create a world that is beyond him, as *true world*" (Nietzsche, 1983, p. 381, emphasis added). When one finds out that this other world was created by psychological needs, the last form of nihilism emerges: "the *disbelief in a metaphysical world* which prohibits the belief in a *true world*" (Nietzsche, 1983, p. 381, emphasis added). The world that remains, the only one that exists, can no longer be denied in favor of another world, which makes it unbearable. Lars Von Trier's *The house that Jack built* (2018) is a symbol of this search for shelter in a world that reveals itself meaningless.

The conclusion which Nietzsche (1983, p. 381) comes to is that we can no longer interpret the world with the categories *end*, *unity* and *being*, which makes the world worthless. "Result: *Belief in the categories of reason* is the cause of nihilism – we measure the value of the world by categories *that refer to a purely fictitious world*" (emphasis added).



Once we understand nihilism as the modern crisis on the values that guided the world, let's see how it manifests itself in the contemporary imagination by three films, then reflect on its educational consequences.

### **Nocturama: 'I am ready to die'**

Bonello's film features seven young people of diverse ethnic origins who orchestrate terrorist attacks on emblematic places in Paris, taking refuge, at dusk, in a shopping mall, while awaiting the outcome of their actions. The film features two distinct moments. At the beginning we follow the young people scattered around the city where they plant the bombs, scenes that are interspersed with fragments of social situations from the recent past with polite questions about their prospects. In one of the fragments, for instance, a young man talks about the most appropriate argumentative strategies to pass a public exam, but his interlocutor shows no interest in participating in the exam as she does not want to end up like his parents' generation. In another scene, two young men – a waiter of Arab origin and a red-haired parking watchman – talk about their working conditions. These fragments entail the socio-economic background that will unite those young people about the terrorist attacks.

After half of the film is spent in the presentation of the characters within their social contexts, the second half, after the attacks, is dedicated to the refuge, moment in which the narrative focus in one place and follows linearly until the end, which happens with the entrance of the police squad in the mall and the sequential murder of the seven youths, as well as a homeless couple invited by them to spend the night there. The film explores the contrast between youthful rebellion expressed by the desire to change society and the hedonistic conformism of a generation that sees the world mediated by screens.

From a stylistic point of view, the work favors exuberant images captured by a predominantly static camera that frames characters, scenarios, and objects, all at the center. The scenes in the shopping mall are reminiscent of the advertising aesthetic, with young people hypnotized by intensely lit products in addition to a highly significant soundtrack, both because the youthful rhythm and the lyrics that seem to translate the state of mind of these young people of few words. For instance, while watching on TV the bombings they carried out, they are accompanied by Willow Smith's song whose lyrics say: "Keep fighting until I get there. When I'm down and I feel like giving up, I think again. I whip my hair back and forth." The young man then comments, contrasting the magnitude of the act committed, that the video clip is very funny.

This seems to be the recurring way in which the protagonists deal with reality; it is never problematized, questioned, or even considered. The seven youths set the bombs but they did not see the explosions, except on the TV screen; they also did not accept their actions or attempt a second step; they limited themselves to waiting for the further develop-



ments, hidden in a shopping mall, eating, drinking, listening to music, trying on clothes, and admiring the windows. In the philosophical perspective of Clément Rosset, they appeal to illusion, whose mechanism consists of a useless perception. This means that the young people did not fail to see, or saw in a wrong way what happened, but they did not act according to what they saw, which characterizes the uselessness of their perception: “It can be said that the perception of the deluded is as if *split in two*: the *theoretical* aspect (which designates precisely ‘what is seen’, from *theorein*) emancipates itself artificially from the *practical* aspect (‘what is done’)” (Rosset, 2008, p. 17).

Hence an “interruption of perception then sets the conscience safe from any undesirable spectacle” (Rosset, 2008, p. 14). It is in this way that, when the crucial question arises, perception gets interrupted. In one of the scenes of the film, the couple talks about their actions. David asks Sarah, “Why have you done all that?” referring to the bombing; she evades and wants to know if he’s scared. David retorts that he never thought he could have done something like that. Brief moments of tension, when he then drifts into a comment about his girlfriend’s beauty who in turn invites him to try on clothes from the first floor. Perception gets interrupted and consciousness finds itself safe from the “undesirable spectacle”, uselessly occupying itself with something else. At another point in the film, Sabrina sentences like the Cassandra from mythology: “We are going to die” and argues that a policeman saw her placing the bomb on one of the monuments, but Mika refuses this hypothesis. Moments later, the police invade the place and shoot them down without the slightest chance of any reaction. Even when, begging for his life, one of the young men is willing to surrender himself, he is not spared. Declared enemies of the State because the terrorist action, the police are not obliged to negotiate and can execute them legally.

The film ends without any direct reference to the purpose of the young people’s actions. Why did they choose the political path of terror? What did they aim for through their actions? Why didn’t they take the responsibility, or why they even refuse to think about the possible consequences? The social unrest suggested by the opening scenes does not justify the alleged revolution they desired.

The apparent lack of motivation for the political action reveals the fraying of the category of *finality*. Thought vanishes before the hedonistic attractions of the world of consumerism and, with it, any possibility of meaning. No wonder, at a given moment, Greg, who seems to be the leader of the gang, writes that he is ready to die and asks that an autopsy be carried out to see that he did not have mental issues. He wants to prove that his death was deliberate, that his action was willful, but he does not provide arguments to justify either one or the other. The crisis of purpose suppresses the value of life, which becomes identical to the objects displayed in the mall. This is how we can understand the recurrence of the same gesture in two different scenes: in the first, one of the youths who had a famous brand shown on his t-shirt comes across a similar one worn by the mannequin and looks at him curiously, perhaps

reflecting, as if facing a mirror, on the equivalence of value between the living and the inanimate body, both subordinated to the abstract value of a brand, and not to the concrete value of life. In the other scene, Greg removes the tie from a mannequin that was dressed just like him, as if trying to transfer the tie's symbolic value to himself. If we want to add a third scene of equal metaphorical content, there is the moment when Mika, the youngest of all, wears a mask whose inexpressiveness highlights the amorphous character of his motivations.

The values conveyed in the film – hedonism, consumerism, the spectacle of images, the right of the State to exterminate – overlap the value of life that no longer finds any rational justification. This lack of purpose in action spreads throughout the contemporary world (economic, ethical, social) and is one of the facets of nihilism.

### **Three Billboards outside Ebbing: 'I think we can decide on the way'**

Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormand) is a 50-year-old woman who, in order to pressure the police to investigate the murder of her daughter, advertises on three billboards the following messages: "Raped while dying", "And no arrests yet?", "How can you, Chief Willoughby?" Although the billboards are on an off-the-beaten-path road, they make a big impact in the small town, which raises its voice in support of the Police Chief Willoughby (Woody Harrelson) seeking to dissuade her from the decision to keep the ads.

The impunity for the crime against Angela, which took place seven months before exactly where the billboards are, bothers the local authorities less than the mother's demand for an investigation that, from her point of view, has not been carried out as it should have. The film, however, is not centered on the investigation of the crime but precisely on its consequences and on the tensions of Ebbing's everyday life, this fictional small town in Missouri, United States, whose certain inhabitants' conservatism and prejudice clash with the claim for justice undertaken by Angela's mother.

Over the course of the film, Mildred is advised to give up billboards by several characters such as Father Montgomery, who places himself as the city's spokesperson saying that he is sympathetic to her pain, but not to the billboards. Not only she does not fall under the pressure; she also feeds her obstinacy with these annoyances. To the priest, she replies that he participates in an institution comparable to a gang that does not punish religious pedophiles, and that's why he is also guilty and therefore has no right to interfere in her life. Her son's schoolmates, who ridicules her over the situation, she physically attacks them as well as the dentist who treats her with hostility; nor does she spare her ex-husband who left her for a 19-year-old girlfriend, whom she mocks for working with animals. The fact, however, is that not even his son supports his initiative, whose objective, according to his own

words, is to keep the case in evidence in order to increase the chances of getting the responsible.

In all these conversations what stands out is the asymmetry in power, something that she seeks to compensate with aggressive tenacity. There is an effort on the part of the police, of the church, of the dentist, of the ex-husband, etc., to remove her from her company. These are not mere personal stands or opinions, but the use of social status to shame her. Officer Dixon (Sam Rockwell), for instance, arrests her friend Denise for possessing two marijuana cigarettes as a way of putting pressure on her.

Also interesting is the conversation she has with Willoughby, who defends himself by saying that he did everything he could, such as having tested the DNA of people already arrested. Mildred suggests that blood be collected from all the men in the country, but he replies that it is not compatible with civil rights. The conundrum of Angela's case serves, then, for setting up a broader, ethically based debate on the right to privacy. A DNA database could, in this case, prevent impunity, but how much risk would there be in having the genetic sequencing of the entire population?

The film does not answer this question, just as it does not position itself regarding the advertisements, maintaining an ambivalent position yet in relation to the main character. From a stylistic point of view, however, no matter how ambiguous or open the script may be, in the sense of not giving in to Manicheism or resolving contradictions, the camera records and editing follow the naturalist tradition, with narrative in three acts and scenes classically delimited.

After the death of Willoughby who commits suicide to avoid the final stages of pancreatic cancer, the plot takes on new contours with the arrival of a black Police Chief and the expulsion of Dixon from the corporation. To the apparent antagonist, a policeman who represses his own homosexuality, submissive to an authoritarian and racist mother, there are reflections that make him sympathize with Mildred, who, in turn, start to boil an increasingly out of control resentment. Firstly, she explodes the Police Station, then she humiliates the dwarf character who had forged an alibi to protect her, all this amidst memories that exposes her guilt: on the night the crime happened she had argued with her daughter and cursed her, anticipating, in her desire, the crime that now consumes her so much. Elucidating it seems to be the only way to deal with her ghosts and grieve.

Upon discovering a possible suspect of Angela's death, Dixon gives Mildred hope, but the DNA test shatters the expectation. In any case, Dixon is convinced – from the account of the ex-soldier who was, presumably, in Iraq, where numerous rape allegations came from – that he is a criminal, although not responsible for the murder of Angela. Mildred teams up with Dixon and both go after the suspect, eager for revenge. We don't know what they will actually do, as the film ends with Mildred answering to the question that have been haunting them about what they should do: "I think we can decide on the way".

This final ambiguity invites the spectator to reflect: why does the population prefer to forget the crime and demand that the police, and consequently the State, carry out its effective investigation? Is Mildred really driven by the desire for justice or is the wish for the punishment of the guilty a means of expunging her own feel of guilt? Did Dixon really sympathize with Mildred, or did his so-called heroism seek to make sense of his own resentments?

These questions, not answered by the film, in one of its possible interpretations, point to the ongoing crisis of totality. There are values that, it is assumed, are or should be universal, such as justice. But what *Three Billboards outside Ebbing* equates is the crisis of the representation of justice itself. Is it fair to blame the Chief of Police, diagnosed with an incurable cancer, for the impunity of the crime? Is it fair to burn down a Police Station and exonerate yourself under a false alibi? Would it be fair to murder someone for allegedly committing a crime?

The desire for punishment claimed by Mildred shatters the unity of justice by manifesting an ever-growing resentment. And here, I believe that Baltasar Gracián's (1993, p. 138-144) apology on the process that the Crow and other birds sue against the Peacock because of the exuberance of its tail. Called to settle the dispute, the sagacious Fox says that it would be an impossible violence to grant the Peacock beauty but deny him the fuss, recognizing that the real motivation of the Crow was none other than envy. Schiffter (2003, p. 27) interprets the fable by differentiating hate and resentment:

One experiences hatred against another one for having suffered real pain inflicted by him – deportation, spoliation, torture, rape, etc. – and, as a general rule, as soon as revenge is obtained, by force or by any other means, the hatred is attenuated or even extinguished. As Spinoza would say, this sad idea disappears along with its cause, which was obsessively thought about. But the resentful, unlike the one who hates, is an eternal imaginary victim in search of an executioner. Harshly experiencing the *fact* of being *who he is* – disadvantaged or ungraceful –, he *imagines* suffering serious prejudice from anyone or anything, and he does not stop persecuting him to accuse him of mistreating him. “Give me back the beautiful appearance I never had and which, because of you, I cannot have!”, cries the crow to the peacock, demanding reparation for an offense and damage that does not exist, and which can only generate an endless chase – which is why resentment is a much fearsome passion than hatred, as it never weakens, and affects any object.

Wouldn't that be the case at hand? Not only Mildred's hatred seems to be justified, as well as her desire for revenge, but her actions are driven by a passion that spreads to all the relationships she got involved into. Isn't blaming the Chief of Police, the priest, the ex-husband, in short, the whole city, a way of extending one's own guilt? If, in fact, what drives Mildred is resentment, wherever she sets her gaze she will

find injustice, which justifies the shift in her desire for revenge from her daughter's murderer to the alleged rapist soldier.

This crack in the idea of justice is one of the facets of nihilism. Values have not disappeared, but they are unstructured, disorganized, fragmented, incapable of referring to any idea of unity or totality. Another facet of nihilism is the mixture of *disgust* and *compassion* that permeates the characters in the narrative. It is from this marriage that emerges something that, in Nietzsche's words (1998, p. 111), is monstrous: "the will to nothingness, nihilism"<sup>4</sup>.

The resentful person is, therefore, the one who combines repulsion and sympathy, disgust and pity, a mixture of feelings that affects, if not all, most of the characters in the film. According to Rosset (2000, p. 78), the resentful person is not capable of action, "but only of reaction; it must be added that every reaction of which he is capable is impotent to constitute itself as an act, and that in this impotence lies his main reason for suffering and hatred". Therefore, isn't Mildred, when she blows up the Police Station and then volunteers to murder a suspect of raping, taking a step towards action? In other words, the very initiative of attacking, through advertisements, the hypocrisy and resentment of the citizens of Ebbing, would not be putting into action the consummation of her hatred, a way of restoring her will for affirmation, even if it would be the affirmation of their own pain?

These questions are beyond what the hermeneutic study can conclude, precisely because the film's purposeful ambivalences. Nonetheless, the various indications of the unease that radiates from the characters point to a picture of nihilism whose most evident category is the crisis of totality, of unity, i.e., of a meaning for the suffering.

At the end of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche concludes that the problem is not suffering, but the absence of an answer to the question: why suffering? In search of a meaning for suffering, the *ascetic ideal* was created as a possibility to interpret suffering:

The interpretation – without a doubt – brought new suffering with it, deeper, more internal, more poisonous suffering, suffering that gnawed away more intensely at life: it brought all suffering within the perspective of guilt . . . But in spite of all that – man was saved, he had a meaning, from now on he was no longer like a leaf in the breeze, the plaything of the absurd, of 'non-sense'; from now on he could will something, – no matter what, why and how he did it at first, the will itself was saved. It is absolutely impossible for us to conceal what was actually expressed by that whole willing that derives its direction from the ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more of the animalistic, even more of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from appearance, transience, growth, death, wishing, longing itself – all that means, let us dare to grasp it, a will to nothingness, an aversion to life (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 149).

### **The house that Jack built: ‘the noble putrefaction’**

Lars Von Trier’s film follows twelve years in the life of Jack, an engineer with aspirations to be an architect who turns into a serial killer with artistic ambitions. The diegetic space in which the story unfolds is punctuated by the extradiegetic dialogue between Jack and Virgil, so that the images illustrate what is narrated orally. Instead of chapters, as is often the case in Trier’s films, we are presented with five incidents and an epilogue. The incidents show Jack’s evolution and serve as a justification for his crimes, understood as an aesthetic process of transforming matter (in this case, bodies) into art (the house of frozen corpses). The epilogue is a pastiche of the Divine Comedy and puts Jack and Virgil on a stroll throughout Hell, when Jack will meet his end.

The film raises controversial and delicate questions by asking, through its protagonist, whether it is possible to consider serial murder an artistic process. Hence, when considering that wines are made because of the decomposition of grape, Jack proposes the creation of an artwork through the decomposition of corpses, which are preserved for years in a refrigerator until they are transformed into a house, the house that Jack built. The protagonist’s intention is to defend an aesthetics of decomposition. Death would initiate an artistic process of transformation of matter, prolonged by the freezing of bodies. Building a house with bodies is another sense of this transformation of matter. Thus, Jack initially tries to build his brick house, but he is not satisfied with the result because the material was not suitable. He then moves on, after destroying it, to build a wooden house, on which he also gives up. Finally, he is satisfied with his house of corpses, as he would have found the appropriate material for his work, which coincides with the end of his life.

If the premise that Jack strives to demonstrate were accepted, a series of questions would become possible, including one about the function of architecture and engineering. What is a house? Does it define itself by its function? Because its symbolic weight? Because of subjective, unconscious, affective relationships? What is Jack’s house? What does he want to enclose in his house? Are Lars Von Trier’s films the elements of a house? What would Lars Von Trier’s house enclose?

In addition to these questions, we can observe another process developing in the film. Jack is initially cold and methodical; more than that: he suffers from OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder), which lends him an air of macabre comedy: when he murders his second victim, he returns to the house once, twice, three times and meticulously checks every corner that he thinks could contain traces of blood, cleaning them repeatedly. In one of the times he returns, a policeman approaches him, and he improvises a justification for being there; when he finally manages to leave, he does so leaving a trail of blood on the road; he is not busted only because it starts to rain. As the film progresses and his body collection grows, his disorder fades away; rather, it is replaced by another ritual, illustrated by the image of a man walking between



light poles. The streetlight shining directly over Jack is the pinnacle of his pleasure, the moment of the murder. As he walks the light starts to focus diametrically. It is the moment when pleasure begins to give way to the suffering of abstention, which will only be satisfied with a new murder. Analogous to addiction, this obsession of Jack seems to suggest a behavior similar to that of the artist whose creation process would take place compulsively between pleasure and pain.

Although the film is largely conducive to psychoanalytic approaches, as it involves discussions about psychopathy, obsessive-compulsive disorder, sublimation or the therapeutic value of art, there is also a strong philosophical weight as it unfolds as a fanciful discourse on the value of life and art, with nihilistic implications that entail the crisis of truth and the dissolution of the metaphysical world.

Lars Von Trier's cinema is built from the protagonist's perspective. Images, speeches, actions and thoughts do not appear in his films in a naturalistic way, nor do they result from an omniscient narrator, but are materialized from a point of view that is constantly confronted by evidence that problematizes, contradicts, disavows the protagonist. *Antichrist* (2009) is a good example of that procedure. The woman is constantly described, manipulated, and judged by the husband who presents his point of view on the narrated episodes (the death of the child, the madness of the wife, the femicide).

In *The House that Jack Built* the same procedure prompts us to question the way in which the protagonist narrates his story to Virgil. The camera's instability, which oscillates all the time, the change of focus, the abrupt movements and the constant enlargements and dwindles stylistically reproduce Jack's inner state, destabilizing his speech, his attempt to give aesthetic and rational meaning to his actions.

The first victim, who he calls an incident, is murdered after asking for help fixing the car's jack. It is interesting to note that in English this tool is called *jack*. After the woman suggests that he might be a *serial killer*, harassing him for not being able to help her solve her problem, Jack kills her by hitting her head with the jack. Subject and object, here, are equivalent in the (dis)accountability for the crime – which the protagonist calls art, comparing his action to a play by Glenn Gould or the construction of a Gothic cathedral. For him, the material makes the work, since the matter would have a will of its own that should be followed by the artist, suggesting that the jack had a will to kill.

The second incident is described by Jack as a release, a blessing, a connection to his personality, which he recognizes as a psychopath's. Egotism, vulgarity, rudeness, impulsiveness, narcissism, intelligence, irrationality, manipulation, mood swings, verbal superiority are descriptors that appear on the cardboard that he discards, one by one, in a pastiche of Bob Dylan's famous music video for the song *Subterranean Homesick Blues*. As he advances in his crimes, his OCD diminishes, giving way to the ritual of taking a photo with the victim and dumping the body in a fridge. Jack then justifies his action by quoting William Blake's



poem *The Lamb & The Tiger*, in a distorted reference to the nature of the tiger that, by killing the sheep, would be fulfilling God's wishes, as he created both the murderer and victim. The art of killing would, in his argument, be divine.

The third incident involves comparing his murders to hunting. He kills the two children of the woman he was having a relationship with, and then kills her, in the same sequence that would follow a deer hunter. He then arranges the corpses in a graphic composition, below two series of twenty-five dead crows framed by tree branches. Virgil does not accept his argument that it was an artistic creation, because, for the Latin poet, art is linked to love and not to destruction.

The fourth incident involves his romance with a young woman he calls Simple and for whom he claims to have had more love than is usual for a psychopath. His naivety and stupidity contrast with Mr. Sophistication, as he calls himself, and they urge him to manipulate her in a way that is both seductive and violent, as in the scene in which he outlines, with her consent, the area of the breast that later, against his will, he will cut and make into a pouch, a "trophy" that he carries in his pocket. Virgil argues that Jack reduces everything human to the matter, and thus life disappears along with the art he so overvalues. He retorts by saying that Virgil kills art by imposing his moral rule upon the life he wants to free. Finally, Jack defines his concept of art in opposition to theories that see in fiction the projection of inner desires that could not be expressed in a civilized society. For him – could we say, to Lars Von Trier? – heaven and hell are one and the same. Souls belong to heaven and body to hell. The soul is reasoning, and the body is everything that is dangerous, for example, art and icons. While Jack mentions these words, we see fragments of the filmmaker's own films, which allows us to suppose that the whole of his cinematography exposes this poetics of the body as the home of hell, danger, and art.

The fifth and final incident addresses a WWII experiment that Jack wants to replicate: when they were low on ammunition, Nazi soldiers executed multiple individuals with a single bullet. Jack lines up his victims but before firing he gets killed by the Police. We then follow his *delirium mortis*, his final fantasy. Under Virgil's guidance and using wire, pliers, and the victims' bodies, Jack engenders his architectural masterpiece and disappears inside it, heading towards hell.

The epilogue, entitled *Katabasis* ('descent' in Greek), shows Jack wrapped in a red cloak, as if he were Dante himself, alongside Virgil, both in Charon's boat, surrounded by afflicted souls, as in the renowned painting by Eugène Delacroix, *The Barque of Dante*. Virgil then presents the hell to Jack because he understood by his story that Jack wanted to know all of hell. Upon discovering that there is a way out of hell, Jack tries to reach it, but falls into the abyss heading towards complete disappearance.

The end of the film is emblematic for the understanding of nihilism, as it materializes precisely the metaphysical world that, paradoxically, does not exist. Or rather it only exists as a fantasy. Jack's brutality,

cruelty, psychopathic violence, on the realm of immanence, i.e., in the concrete world, is an unjustifiable, absurd fact destituted of any meaning. Judge and punish him would require a metaphysical, transcendent instance that could condemn him for all eternity, with a load of suffering proportional to the evils he committed.

However, it is not the final damnation that Jack finds in hell, but his disappearance into the abyss. If death is the oblivion of consciousness, a *fall* into nothingness, how to justify suffering, how to punish evil, how to attribute value to life? By taking the psychopath's point of view, Jack crafts a sophisticated and fanciful argument to justify his actions and make sense of his existence. Instead of an absolute morality – good and evil, right and wrong –, arising from a metaphysical world (another reality beyond the one we live in), Jack advocates in favor of art, but shifts it from life to death. The putrefaction of the body, its decomposition, would be synonymous with art, an expression of the *matter's desire*, which is to undo itself. Through killing Jack would be working for the release of matter. There is a total metaphysical inversion here. It is not the soul that would be imprisoned in a passing body; it is the body that is confined to the passing soul. With life extinguished, matter can freely fulfill its art that is to decompose.

In this film, as well as in Lars Von Trier's other works, the desire for nothingness that characterizes nihilism is evident, as expressed in the clash between Earth and a fictional planet, in *Melancholia* (2011). The particularity of *The House that Jack Built* takes place in the presentification of an absent metaphysical world, the Dantesque hell nostalgically evoked to show that morality has no foundation and truth has no place in this world infected by fantasies and perversions. It is not just disbelief in the metaphysical world, but also the opposite, the disbelief in our concrete world, as Virgil's disdain for Jack's nihilistic discourse has well demonstrated.

## **Educational outspread of nihilism**

If the hypothesis in question is correct and these three films, among other possible ones, are dialogues with the nihilistic imaginary prevailing in our days – shattering of the values of finality, totality, and truth, embodied by protagonists who feel powerless, resentful, and incredulous – it is appropriate asking how to educate in this scenario: is there any future possibility of confronting nihilism?

In other words, nihilism reaches the values of a civilizing, emancipatory and rationalist education, as idealized on the Enlightenment, which was very clear about the purpose of education: “to produce morality”; to lead the human species to a “better state, possible in the future”; “submit nature to norms”; “discipline”; “become [man] cultured”, “prudent”, and teach him “think” (Kant, 1999, p. 20-27). What nihilism makes possible to diagnose is not only the crisis or dissolution of these values – which would presuppose a possibility of rehabilitating them by a correction in the path – but that they have never been more than fiction, an unrealizable invention of humanity.

Therefore, an education that overcomes nihilism is not to be confused with the renewal of values that have been disaggregated but goes through active nihilism, through complete nihilism, which involves the denial of the will for nothingness and the process of creating new values that empower the life and rehabilitate the will. No wonder, in the *Zarathustra* it is the figure of the child that represents the spirit that conquered nihilism: “Innocence is the child, and oblivion, a beginning-again, a game, a wheel turning by itself, a first movement. , a sacred saying yes. Yes, for the game of creating, my brothers, it is necessary to say a sacred yes” (Nietzsche, 1983, p. 230)<sup>5</sup>.

The affirmation of life takes place, in this perspective, as creation, and creation is a game, a game that requires innocence and oblivion, hence the child, who is in constant becoming, embodies the creative power so well. The child symbolizes innocence (against Jack’s incredulity), oblivion (against Mildred’s resentment) and the power of yes (against the impotence of *Nocturama*’s young hedonists).

The ‘yes to life’ as the supreme expression of existence is identified with the creative action. Therefore, when Nietzsche relates art to life, he does not hesitate to affirm that art is ‘the true task of life, art as the metaphysical activity of life, art as the great stimulant of life’ (GD/CI, Raids of an Untimely 24, KSA 6,127, and Nachlass/FP 1887, 9 [119], KSA 12,404). With these propositions he emphasizes that art is like a *function of life* and that the transfigurative process is nothing other than the passage from a ‘will for truth’ to a ‘will for creation’ (Gueivós, 2018, p. 22).

Yet according to Gueivós (2018) art has an anti-nihilist function, as it opposes, with its affirmative force, to the reactive aspect of philosophers and moralists. What justifies existence, for Nietzsche, is not the rational choice or the set of superior values that emerge from the supersensible world, but the aesthetic bound to the concrete world, a joy for existence, which for Rosset (1989b, p. 127) manifests itself as a non-rational, non-interpretable data, as a thought that “invest each moment of life with the characteristics of the party, the game, and the joy”. This joy is what Nietzsche (1983, p. 374) called *amor fati*: “not wanting anything in a different way, neither forward nor backward nor in all eternity. Not merely to bear what is necessary, even less to concealing it [...], but to love...”.

Neither conformism, nor resignation, nor passive submission: *love*; nor law nor cause nor end: *fatum*. Agreeing without restrictions to everything that happens, admitting without reservation everything that happens, accepting each moment as it is, is to lovingly accept what comes; it is joyfully affirming the chance and the necessity at the same time; it is saying yes to life (Marton, 1997, p. 13-14).

Such a change of attitude is the basis of an anti-nihilistic education that is carried out through a pedagogy of choice, in three move-

ments: suspension of belief, experimentation of the world, and organization of life experiences in (self)formation narratives (Almeida, 2015). Suspension of belief is a way of questioning nihilism, both the one that affirms supreme values and the one that says that nothing has value: the first step towards experiencing the world as a game, with the child's "innocence" and "forgetfulness". These stages foster the construction of itineraries of (self) formation through which values are created and life affirmed in its creative power.

The result of this pedagogy of choice is a creative attitude towards life: the "overcoming of nihilism must be crafted through the art understood as this transformative impulse necessary for things to be different [...] as man's self-creation, and as a path that converts man into a *work of art*" (Guervos, 2018, p. 17).

The self that matters is the one that is always beyond what is usually taken as a subject: it is not to discover, but to invent; not to accomplish, but to conquer; not by exploring, but by creating in the same way that an artist creates a work. To become what you are, you must be your own artist (Larrosa, 2009, p. 65).

This is the educational foundation of Nietzsche's tragic philosophy, expressed by the resumption of Pindar's motto, which urges us to become what we are. Such a transformation is only possible through (self) formative itineraries that pass through the power of becoming and an education of sensitivity, which makes the cultivation of experience, especially the creative ones, of paramount importance for overcoming nihilism.

## Final considerations

The hermeneutic study of the films *Nocturama* (2016), *Three Billboards outside Ebbing* (2017), and *The house that Jack built* (2018) presented characters dealing with impotence, resentment, and incredulity in the face of a scenario of crisis of finality, totality, and truth for interpreting the contemporary world. It is about the nihilistic imaginary that, although not unique or homogeneous – furthermore, if nihilism were a totality, there would be no crisis of totality –, it empties the meaning of life, the reasons for living it, the belief in its potency and come-to-be.

This will for nothingness does not confuse itself with the nothingness of will – the annulment of desire, as in Buddhism or Schopenhauer, for example – but is expressed through actions that lead to destruction, such as the terrorist actions of the young people and the police force of the State that slaughters them; like Mildred and Dixon's desire for revenge; finally, in the frightening hypothesis of justifying more than sixty murders as artistic expression. All these cases, although fictional, dialogue with the contemporary situation in which some groups – Wendy Brown identifies them as "white men" –, when losing their dominance over democracy and the planet, choose to destroy them, either

through speeches or actions, which exude impotence, resentment, and incredulity.

Nihilism, however, is not reduced to the destruction, whether of values or of life itself, but also appears in the strategy of attributing an external value to life, which would make it assessable from other values such as the ascetic ideal or the patriotic sentiment. These supreme values, when evaluating life, make it small and despicable. One way of overcoming nihilism, i.e., of using it as a territory of passage is the unconditional affirmation of life, a tragic affirmation, which does not ignore what is strange in life, which does not deny suffering, but approves of it as an integral part of life, a statement that is not a set of ideas or assumptions, nor even a theory, but the expression of what Nietzsche called *amor fati*, a feeling of loving adherence to life.

We are therefore faced with two antagonistic and complementary imaginaries, since *amor fati* does not dispense nihilism, which is constituted as a stage to be surpassed. Overcoming nihilism – and education is the main way for that – makes possible passing to the approval of life, which then becomes the supreme value.

The educational developments of this philosophical perspective suggest the abandonment of the Enlightenment project of formation, motivated by the notions of totality, finality, and truth (metaphysics), which today are illusory and unsustainable; returning to them is not an option in the face of established nihilism; at best, it escalates already existing tensions, generating more impotency, resentment, and incredulity. An anti-nihilistic education requires the recognition of the aesthetic game, the creative power of art, and the affirmation of life, which can be pedagogically expressed through the perspective of choice, i.e., the adoption of three complementary movements aimed at the suspension of belief (abandonment of notions of totality, finality and truth), to the aesthetic experimentation of the world and the search for formative itineraries open to becoming, as a way of cultivation and self-expression, the “become what you are” that Nietzsche rescued from Pindar and the Greek ideal of a (self)formation that does not abolish becoming, but takes place precisely as the come-to-be and the sense of duty, therefore entailing the idea that choices foster (trans)formation, creating new values.

Therefore, if contemporary education aims to educate for the approval of life and the overcoming of nihilism, it will have to get rid of its own supreme values (finality, totality and truth) to affirm the human creative power, capable of generating new values, values that do not depreciate life, but infuse it with power. This is not a program or project, but a challenge.

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## Notes

- 1 This research received regular support from FAPESP and CNPq.
- 2 The documentary *American Dharma* (2018), by Errol Morris, gives voice to Steve Bannon, political strategist for Donald Trump's 2016 campaign, who supports this type of thinking, which he calls "dharma", i.e., the need to fulfill a duty, a purpose, and a destiny for the nation, even if it involves destruction, which he reckons necessary for a radical restructuring. It does not differ from the movements that defend military intervention, dictatorial regime, etc.
- 3 Genealogy of Morality, Third Dissertation, §1, emphasis added. The expression "to will nothingness than not will..." returns at the end of the work, in the same dissertation, 28, p. 149.
- 4 Third Dissertation, §14.
- 5 Thus Spoke Zarathustra, First Part, On the three transmutations.

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