

The Abortive Superman

Übermensch as monster in the work of Panos Cosmatos

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Introduction

The film and television work of Panos Cosmatos (1974–present) is characterized by a distinctive auteur cinematic aesthetic; this includes: repeated reference to, and influence from, the cinema of the 1980s, the blending of art-film visuals with popular horror and science fiction themes, and reference to abjection and monstrosity. Cosmatos has received much praise for his stylistic mastery, the distinctive visuals he employs do allow for differentiation of the director from the tasteful realism favoured by Oscar panels, or the glossy, and generic, popular action blockbusters that, with the aforementioned, make up the normative duality of our current period. However, this visual approach, which to my mind is, after all cinematic, has more to offer than the pure novelty of its presentation, which is sometimes contextualized as nostalgia for retro special effects and colouration. It is precisely because of this highly stylized visual approach that the concurrent themes and preoccupations which recur constitute a critique, albeit an ambivalent one, that addresses the political and psychological anxieties of a mass North American audience, as well as those attuned, and effected by those anxieties further afield. In this article I will be analysing Cosmatos's oeuvre to date, comprising: the two feature films, *Beyond the Black Rainbow* (*BTBR*) (Cosmatos 2010) and *Mandy* (Cosmatos 2018), and the episode 'The Viewing' from the Netflix series *Guillermo del Toro's Cabinet of Curiosities* (2022).

I argue that three key figures in Cosmatos's output are examples of what I term the *abortive superman*, those being, the antagonists: Dr Barry Nyle (Michael Rogers), an institutional coordinator; Jerimiah Sand (Linus Roache), the failed rock star and would be messiah; and Lionel Lassiter (Peter Weller), the wealthy businessman and collector. To an extent, although sympathetic, the protagonist Red (Nicolas Cage) from *Mandy* could be considered a fourth: these men represent consecutively, monstrous incarnations of the dominant forces in society: the conservative organizer, the celebrity icon and the titan of industry. If we include Red we have a portrait of the suicidal, and wounded heterosexual ego, robbed of its stabilizing object (woman). However, while Red has many of the same traits: violent rampage, use of drugs, exposure to trauma, self-delusion, he has no project or vision for a new world, he is not a megalomaniac, a key aspect of the *abortive superman*, and so he is simply a victim in the active, though fated, mode of revenge. To understand the implications of Cosmatos's films, the trauma that is depicted in each one, as well as to clearly outline the *abortive superman*, I will draw on psychoanalytic terminology. In particular, the interplay of the ego, superego, and the id from Freud's 'structural model' of the psyche (1933). Additionally, Herman Nunberg, a protégé of Freud's, is useful as he explored the weak and

fracturing ego. A cursory understanding will be useful to the reader: the ego is the aspect of the subject, which having developed from the id, the locus of impulses and instincts, acts as an arbitrator between reality and the instincts: the 'outer and inner world' (Nunberg 1942: 32). Ego has the role of a mediator, referred to as the ego's 'synthetic function' (1942: 30).

The superego, which develops last, represents the moral standards of a subject, linked to impressions made by authority figures. Nunberg emphasizes the father (1942: 33); but also 'the social milieu, racial, national and family tradition' (1942: 229). To 'master' the instincts, Nunberg points to the ego's ability to retain 'tension' (1942: 26) and to 'equilibrium between [...] psychic systems' (1954: 7). The failure to retain tension, or equilibrium, is the result of a weak, or fracturing ego (Nunberg 1942: 39, 1954: 3); since, as Freud explained, 'repression proceeds from the ego [...] [which] accomplishes the exclusion from consciousness [...] the idea which was the carrier of the unwelcome impulse' (1935: 620). A weak and fracturing ego 'cuts off reality [and is] overrun by the instincts of the id' (Nunberg 1942: 31) resulting in the release of 'aggression' (1942: 39).

Cosmatos can be considered a profoundly psychoanalytic filmmaker, not because of any claims made by him to that discourse, but in his creative process and themes: referencing the use of the unconscious, and intuition in his ideation (Lazic 2018), responding to his dreams to make decisions (Rahman 2018; Thomas 2018; Lazik 2018), references to ego-delusion (Allen 2018; Lewis 2018), and engaging in therapy: which he likens to filmmaking (Brown 2012). Furthermore, Cosmatos refers to *BTBR* and *Mandy* as concerned with 'suppressed emotion' and 'volcanic eruption', respectively (Brown 2012), linking those psychic states to his parent's death, and likening his films generally to 'imagined artefact[s] from the past' (Brown 2012): placing them, at least for their director, firmly in the territory of the return of the repressed. Freud explains 'impressions [...] which have been sunk into the id by repression [...] [as] virtually immortal' (Freud 1933: 74); further clarifying 'what is forgotten is not extinguished but only "repressed"; its memory-traces are present in all their freshness' (Freud 1939: 94).

The things we repress are uncomfortable, and the process is naturally both societal and individual 'civilization is based on the repressions effected by former generations, and that each fresh generation is required to maintain this civilisation by effecting the same repressions' (Freud 1914: 57). As the film critic Robin Wood observed 'what is repressed must always strive to return' (Wood 1978: 27). Reflecting on the unpalatable facts of our civilization, and what the horror genre can give form to – the real of consumerism – Wood refers to 'basic (though unstated) tenet[s] of capitalism, that people have the right to live off other people' (1978: 32). That violence, as well as gendered authority, and narcissistic self-delusion are constituents of our functioning society, which in Cosmatos, return as nightmares that are irredeemably seen for what they are. There is also an ambivalent relationship to the enjoyment of the genre films of his father, director George P. Cosmatos (1941– 2005), which in his treatment of action film tropes, primarily in *Mandy*, become piteous and abject. For example, think of the strange feeling of watching the victorious Red (Nicolas Cage) sitting in his car as he drives away from the burning hell-church, he looks at what, in his deranged state, he thinks is his lover Mandy in the seat next to him before riding

away into the landscape, and the credits. A standard action film might have ended there: but we see the reality, he is staring directly at the viewer (placed in the empty chair). Red is utterly deranged, bloodied, grinning manically, still drugged, and totally traumatized. Red has achieved two positive things, of which the well-being of his subjectivity is not one. Firstly, the release of the young woman Sister Lucy (Line Pillet) from the cult; and secondly the destruction of the church itself, its legacy. This notion of escape, particularly by young women from geometric/modernist structures, is also a repeated motif of Cosmatos's oeuvre. Wood comments on the significance of the terrible house: '[It] signifies [...] the dead weight of the past crushing the life of the younger generation' (Wood 1978: 31). In general, an important dynamic mentioned repeatedly by Cosmatos is that of his mother and father (Thomas 2018; Brown 2012; Lewis 2018): working on *BTBR*, in the wake of his father's death, the film (analysed in detail later) contains powerful oedipal subtexts. Firstly, Elena (Eva Allan) must struggle and escape her symbolic (bad) parents represented by Nyle (Michael Rogers) and his unfeeling employee, the nurse Margo (Rondel Reynoldson); while in flashback we realize that Nyle himself was never able to fully escape the influence of Dr Mercurio Arboria (Scott Hylands) and his wife Anna (Sara Stockstad): which ultimately led to his trauma and subsequent half-life. The other examples of Cosmatos's works explored here also contain similar negative iterations of symbolic parents: in *Mandy*, Jeremiah Sand (Linus Roache), and Mother Marlane (Olwen Fouéré); in 'The Viewing' (2022), represented by Lionel Lassiter (Peter Weller) and Dr Zahra (Sofia Boutella). This motif, speaks of what we inherit and what we need to confront, reflecting on Freud's comment above, it strikes me that change is only possible if we 'effect' new repressions and excise old ones. Some commentators have asserted that Cosmatos's arresting style can be explained as a combination of 'George's popular, spectacular thrillers and Birgiita's abstract conjurations' (Heath 2018: n.pag.): although certainly influential, that reduction does not do justice to the societal criticism implicit in his oedipal pairings.

The three examples I give of the *abortive superman* are all subjects with weak egos who have ceased to be rational actors, and instead have given way to phantasies of omnipotence and megalomania. 'The form of this weakness, however, changes according to the topography of the conflict, that is, whether the ego yields to the demands of reality, of the id, or of the superego' (Nunberg 1942: 30): in the case of the *abortive superman*, due to the grandiose pronouncements of the examples, I suggest that it's the id and superego combined that come to direct the subject whose ego 'tries to escape, severs relations with reality, and, finally, gives up' (Nunberg 1942: 30). Superego can be a problematic agency, when the ego disintegrates or is weak, describing 'the excessively strong super-ego' as one defined by 'sadism' towards the ego 'a pure culture of the death instinct' which could destroy the ego if it is unable to 'fend off its tyrant' (Freud 1974: 43). The superego, as Nunberg explained above, is linked to the values of society and models of authority, a way that a background culture forms an aspect of the foreground subject: we will see that this is an important aspect of Cosmatos's critique, implicating the culture at large in the negative behaviour of his characters.

Constituting an *abortive superman*

I define the *abortive superman* as a subject who has weakened their ego in the pursuit of assuming an unobtainable superior position, to the extent that their activity results in a violent breakdown, directed out, at those considered inferior. In these instances, it is the appetites and impulses of the id, and the unethical terror, of a too harsh superego, which remains to direct their actions. Additionally, the *abortive superman* is monstrous not only in behaviour but in appearance: monstrosity is key to the way that the *abortive superman* is differentiated from their own (previous) ego defined personas, and from those around them. This strategy, to make the figures grotesque, acts as an authorial critique of the characters self-assumed superiority. Finally, to be credibly considered an *abortive superman*, and not just a depiction of a general psychotic breakdown, some link to Nietzsche or to self-overcoming generally, in order to usher in a new age, or establish a hierarchy which will replace existing values and structures of society is necessary.

Modern explorations of monstrosity are useful in understanding the role of dehumanization in Cosmatos's display of masculinity. Kristeva exploring the 'power' of horror explains that 'the abject confronts us [...] with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal [...] imagined as representatives of sex and murder' (Kristeva 1982: 12–13). Cosmatos shows us that his antagonist's attempts to embody a superior state of being are atavistic, in the most regressive sense, often resulting in various zoomorphisms: reductions to predators and prey. Nyle (*BTBR*) is seen to snarl and smell the air, sniffing and tasting one hapless victim, as well as indulging in cannibalism. Sand's animality is slightly more nuanced: he is in possession of 'the horn of Abraxas' (Cosmatos 2018: n.pag.) 'Abraxas (the cock-headed anguipede)' (Veiga 2007: 141), an anguipede is a divinity with snakes for legs, this object allows 'The Children of the New Dawn', Sand's malign cult, to summon a demonic biker gang, themselves snarling and animalistic. Additionally, Sand keeps a live scorpion in a jar of opiates and uses its sting, infused with the drugs, as kind of hypodermic delivery for altered states. Finally, in stunning outbursts towards his subordinates, first mother Marlene, and secondly the assembled cult, he growls gutturally as they avert their gaze from him like primates. Lassiter's zoomorphism ('The Viewing' 2022), like Nyle's, is very direct: he literally becomes a tentacled beast, roaring in anger, at the climax of the episode.

Monster scholar, Jeffery Jerome Cohen, regarding the Arcadian king Lycaon, who in myth betrayed Jupiter, and is punished by being transformed into a wolf, asserts 'the horribly fascinating loss of Lycaon's humanity merely reifies his previous moral state; the king's body is rendered all transparency, instantly and insistently readable' (Cohen 1996: 13). As Cohen's example highlights, the monstrosity of the ancient world is useful, to aid in an understanding of the combined piteous and authoritative aspects of the *abortive superman*, as it is expressed in the work of Cosmatos. However, I suggest that the figures of: Nyle, Sand and Lassiter can be understood as a conflation of the Minotaur with King Minos, which I will justify later in relation to labyrinthine spaces, and the phenomenon of the cuckhold. Beyond the initial description of Lycaon above, which has helped me highlight Cosmatos's authorial intervention in his antagonist's portrayal, the trajectory of the werewolf is another matter.

Commentary on Cosmatos

Various expositions and interviews offer a source of Cosmatos's own thoughts, while academic treatment of his work has been more limited with sources such as Marcks (2018) concentrating on cinematography and visual handling, especially in relation to cinematographer Benjamin Loeb's relationship with the director while filming *Mandy*. Oisín O Murchu (2018) criticizes Cosmatos for a regressive treatment of class in his depiction of 'backwoods evil' contributing to a 'fundamentally bourgeois neurosis' regarding the locus of negativity in society. That critique centres on *Mandy* and the representation of Jerimiah Sand's followers, 'hillbillies, hicks, yokels, and a witch' (Murchu 2018: n.pag.). However, this reading ignores the explicitly middle-class backstory of Sand 'my father a hedge fund manager, my mother a wannabe actress' (see Sand 2018; Bloom 2020), as well as the aforementioned figure of Dr Barry Nyle. The billionaire Lionel Lassiter was conceived after Murchu's text, nevertheless the reading of Murchu remains at a surface level, and refuses to engage with the various, and explicit, critiques of consumerism present in *Mandy*.

Valero contextualizes Cosmatos with exponents of Giallo film (2019: 312, 329) mainly due to a stylistic use of colour and aestheticized violence. Giallo is defined in Koven (2006) as a form of 'vernacular' cinema that developed out of popular genre literature: thrillers, mystery, horror and erotica, often blending features with strong violence. Furthermore, Koven acknowledges the influence of particular directors whereby a number of films are "'in the vein of" [...] Mario Brava and Dario Argento' (2006: 15). This corresponds to Valero's examples, Dario Argento and other Giallo influenced contemporary filmmakers: Gasper Noe, and Nicolas Winding Refn. Valero likens Cosmatos's camerawork and visual texture to 'horror cinema of the 80's' (2019: 330) but particularly with Argento in the use of 'colour as a narrative element' (2019: 329).

Cosmatos uses the same colour code in light as Argento, attributing and associating, mainly, purple to scenes where the supernatural transcends, red to danger, and gold to death. In the transition scenes, the orange and green ones appear, or a more balanced colour temperature. Sometimes saturation in the low scene to create a stronger feeling in the following one (Valero 2019: 329).

Cosmatos is said to create a tension between 'supernatural – remembering' and baser 'human passions of mainstream revenge movies' (Valero 2019: 329) the latter is an aspect of the 'vernacular discourses' that Koven refers to, explaining the use of 'gore, sex and violence' (2006: 40), which engenders a sense of immediacy, while as we shall see, the political and philosophical themes address 'concerns of vernacular culture' (2006: 16) which I assert the *abortive superman* is an example.

Valero's insight, that in art history, particularly in painting, the 'foundation of the codes' (2019: 313) that communicate and probe our fears were developed, has been influential on my method of contextualizing Cosmatos with a contemporary painter, Dexter Dalwood. Dalwood is also influenced by the 1980s 'a decade informed by the rise and fall of historical illusions. Whether it was a B-movie star elected to the US presidency [...] the 1980s swung between seductive myths and perilous realities' (Anfam 2010: n.pag.). Valero mentions

Cubism generally, Goya, Gericault and Delacroix as adding to ‘the collective visual culture in which we unconsciously identify and translate the codes that we have assimilated’ (2019: 333). This foundation, and the general presentation of layered iconic imagery in Cosmatos, rather than a focus on narrative character arcs, which prompted one reviewer to title their article ‘Narrative Is Dead! Welcome to the Rise of the Neon Films’ (Williamson 2022), means that understanding Cosmatos films via painting is particularly insightful for what is at stake in his oeuvre. It is also useful in identifying the ways that Cosmatos does not simply combine but surpass his parents influence, and the milieu of his formative decade, the 1980s.

David Anfam’s discussion of Dalwood for the *Tate Magazine* (2010) emphasizes the 1980s as a decade defined by ‘the rise and fall of historical illusions’ prompting from Dalwood a ‘disturbingly mixed pictorial language’, a preoccupation with ‘irony, style and melodramatic moments’ (Anfam 2010: n.pag.), and I would add, a desire to probe the ‘concerns of vernacular culture’ (Koven 2006: 16) with imagery that is broadly readable and relevant to mass audiences. For example, we might talk of Dalwood as a Giallo painter, at least in as much as Cosmatos is a Giallo filmmaker, both artists add value to pop-cultural themes and sensationalism by way of political critique and psychological intrigue. Staff in *Painting, History and Meaning: Sites of Time* sees Dalwood’s painting as an example whereby ‘two points on a chronological timeline are pulled together until they meet’ (2021: 3–4), or as Anfam (2010: n.pag.) puts it ‘history has collapsed into the present’. We will see that this meeting of significant dates is an important way in which Cosmatos builds layers of meaning into his film and television work. Dalwood in his book chapter ‘What Is the History in Contemporary History Painting?’ stresses the use of embedded references: ‘that allude to subtle and inventive meanings that go beyond the image being presented’ (2017: 204). Dalwood highlights ‘restaging’ (2017: 213), ‘literary illusion’, ‘collage’ and ‘thinking about painting’s own history of depiction’ to activate ‘the viewer’s memory to bring the viewer’s experience of looking into a conscious moment of recognition’ (2017: 214). These techniques are also utilized by Cosmatos who makes intertextual links to various other works, both literature, painting and film throughout his output.

Nietzsche and the Übermensch

As I am proposing that Cosmatos contributes a key category to a vernacular understanding of the superman, or Übermensch in its original German, as conceived by Nietzsche it will be important to the reader to have an overview of this concept. The Übermensch is introduced by Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1997) written between 1883 and 1885. For a brief description of the immediate influences on Nietzsche in developing his Übermensch, which includes: Lucian of Samosata, Goethe, Emerson and Byron’s Manfred, see Lyons (2021: 130). Zarathustra is a prophet who explains that the Übermensch is a possible future state of humanity, a being, capable of ultimate self-direction, flexibility of morals and spirit, in short: a superior being to contemporary man, who is left clinging to ideas that are symbolically spent, or dead. ‘What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal’ (Nietzsche 1997: 8). In contrast, the Übermensch can transcend ideas of good and evil ‘break values into pieces’ (1997: 113) and will new values, and projects into being: and is therefore ‘essential to the evolution of humanity’ (Lyons 2021: 130). There is a clear notion of unsentimental

psychic violence directed to the self, which Nietzsche makes clear is necessary in order for a subject to change for the better: '[R]eady must thou be to burn thyself in thine own flame; how couldst thou become new if thou have not first become ashes?' (1997: 61). While it's clear that 'for Nietzsche, the superman is the only hope for overcoming the banality of bourgeois life' (Gillespie 2005), and that banality is defined as a striving for stability which results in even, the 'wisest ones', creating 'a world before which ye can bow the knee' (Nietzsche 1997: 111); there is a lack of clarity as to whether a person can become an Übermensch, by adopting a radical attitude and taking action to overcome their moral and social habits, or if that 'self-surpassing' (1997: 111–13) and revaluation allows the development of the Übermensch to occur incrementally over time. Nietzsche's own conception is 'inconclusive and shifting' (Lyons 2021: 129).

Siobhan Lyons (2021) offers examples of the uptake of the Übermensch in pop culture which are categorized by her as 'tyrannical', where there is a preoccupation with violence and the domination of others; or 'idealistic', iterations where the best of humanity can be taken forward and integrated into a new being and society (2021: 128). Lyons's principle examples of the tyrannical iteration are: Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) from *Fight Club* (1999) and Dolores Abernethy (Evan Rachel Wood) from the *Westworld* (2016–22) television series. Examples of the idealistic iteration include: David Bowie's persona Ziggy Stardust, Stevie Nicks's character Rhiannon, from a song of the same name, and Maeve Millay (Thandiwe Newton) also from *Westworld*. Nevertheless, though Lyons's examples are well defined and differentiated, they are in the media they come from, presented as figures we might sympathize with, look up to, or aspire to be like, inclusive of those tyrannical iterations. The figure of Dolores for example, is idealistically attractive; her nudity and romantic status are frequently key motifs in the series; she is heroically resourceful and wilful; those qualities make her a particularly easy tyrant to sympathize with: she provokes a libidinal investment. These things can also be said of Durden. A tyrant is still a figure that might elicit genuine admiration, even awe, along with fear. This phenomenon, identification with a tyrannical, or otherwise corrupt figure, because they live uncompromising lives, are beautiful, and satisfy their appetites, so we, the audience, can live through them vicariously, is a phenomenon I encountered in a lecture of Žižek (2008), in a description of Gordan Gekko (Michael Douglas), from the Oliver Stone film *Wall Street* (1987). Žižek called Gekko a 'libidinal master' one who seems to live fully; explaining, that despite the critical thrust of the film, as anti-capitalist, its figures such as Gekko, in this case a ruthless businessman, who with their potency, and commitment to living according to their own values: elicit our investment. For Lyons, in a separate article, discussing iterations of narcissism, 'Gekko's self-interest was evidence of a fierce, unapologetic ambition, not of a need to be accepted. For Gekko, being loved by others was *not* his concern' (Lyons 2018: n.pag., original emphasis). Taking this into account I am adding to Lyons's examples by looking to Cosmatos where the primary reaction elicited is disgust, his *abortive supermen* are first grotesque, piteous and otherwise abhorrent figures, and as such, they undermine the emergence of the 'libidinal master' phenomenon. I will argue that the *abortive superman* is a distinct category and should be understood as separate from 'tyrannical' or 'idealistic' iterations of the Übermensch. In Cosmatos's oeuvre he shows us rather than a self-creation via overcoming; the *abortive superman* voids the ego, and

becomes as a result, an extreme expression of the worst aspects of the cultural background, filtered into the subject via the superego and combined there with the violent and sexual drives of the id.

Beyond the Black Rainbow

BTBR is a science fiction horror set in 1983, centring on the activity of Dr Barry Nyle (Michael Rogers), the coordinator of the Arboria Institute; a research facility founded by the idealistic Dr Mercurio Arboria (Scott Hylands). The purpose of the institute is to foster a new dawning of human consciousness, through a combination of spirituality and technology, inspired by the new age ideas of the 1960s. Nyle has taken over from his mentor Arboria, now an infirm old man perpetually drugged, and is primarily concerned with Arboria's daughter Elena (Eva Allan); who has extrasensory abilities and is held at the institute, undergoing tense observations from Nyle. The narrative follows Nyle's disintegrating sanity, his obsession with Elena, and Elena's attempt to escape the institute.

The consumption, dependence and destructive properties of drug taking, especially related to failed notions of personal transcendence, are present in all of Cosmatos's films to date. In *BTBR* this is of particular relevance, linked to the notion of self-overcoming and the specific cultural moment of the 1960s. Drug usage is shown in its full range, from the legal and mundane uses of anti-depressants and marijuana, to dependency on opiates, and extreme experimental acid, administered to induce self-overcoming. Rosemary Nyle (Marilyn Norry), Nyle's wife, is seen to be in a semi-sedated state, Nyle himself, subject to Arboria's fated acid trip, is also on multiple daily pills, while Arboria is medicated with heroin, and Elena is controlled by a combination of strange energy emitting prisms, and drugs, administered by the institutes security, cyborg-like automatons 'Sentionauts' (Roy Campsall). The critique of counterculture is made clear in the dialogue of Arboria, and in the flashback to 1966 (discussed later). Ramaeker (2012) identifies the 1960s American counterculture as specifically concerned with 'transcendence' and the use of psychedelics to 'sacrifice [...] the ego' mentioning the influence of the writers, and public intellectuals, Aldous Huxley and Ken Kesey. Elcock (2013: 299) referring to Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (Huxley 1954) asserts that Huxley's view of psychedelics, as potentially overcoming the mind's 'reducing valve' function, resulting in an expanded mind, had a superman goal 'as Nietzsche would speculate, could lead to the race of supermen (Übermensch)' (2013: 301). Later, referring to pro-psychedelics author Ken Kesey, the anti-ego aspect of psychedelic transformation is vividly communicated, Elcock describes Kesey's view 'that the psychedelic experience was a way of erasing established patterns of behaviour by letting the ego melt under its influence' (2013: 303). Furthermore, Elcock quoting Jay Stevens (1988) is clear that in his promoting of psychedelics Kesey identified himself, and his 'eccentric friends' saw themselves as, 'psychedelic superheroes'. Moreover, that psychedelics was a 'way of realising a Nietzschean parable' (2013: 303). I would like to stress the violence of a melting ego, this would be a catastrophic event for the coordination of the individual in a given situation.

The 'ego' refers to the certainty of experience. It is I myself: living, functioning on my own, unified and coherent, delineated by a boundary open for communication in an afferent direction, self-identical through the course of life and in various situations (Scharfetter 1981: 275).

The allusion of a melting ego could be taken as the gradual dissolving of mental barriers allowing for expansion. However, in *Cosmatos*, the unsubtle but highly effective visual symbol of melting heads is a recurring motif, the so-called seat of reason (or centre of mental agency), the head, and the face, the primary communicating interface with other egos, is brutally destroyed at moments of trauma: especially where direct efforts to transcend the human are attempted via psychedelic drugs. For example, at a pivotal moment in *BTBR* we see via a flashback to 1966 a younger Barry Nyle encouraged by Dr Arboria and his wife Anna to take a powerful drug and enter a sensory deprivation chamber, which is a large container full of thick opaque liquid. As Barry enters the chamber, we see he is adorned with a third eye symbol: hinting at the expansion of consciousness, and Arboria states in anticipation 'bring home the mother lode Barry'. What ensues upon entering the tank is an overwhelming hallucinatory vision that juxtaposes apocalyptic backgrounds: tumultuous rushing forces; with various static iterations of Nyle's head which variously melts, breaks up and disintegrates. Following this experience, Nyle emerges from the tank covered entirely in the black liquid, he vomits and, struggling to find words, is seen to scream and sob. Anna attempts to comfort him unsuccessfully. Nyle then sexually assaults Anna before killing her, by biting into her neck as she turns away. Arboria returns holding his daughter, the baby Elena, finding Nyle in his traumatized state Arboria is shocked to see Anna dead, but does not appear to blame Nyle. This combined with his statement above, regarding bringing back a 'mother lode', and his appearance with his baby daughter, hint at the possible motivation to sacrifice Nyle in order to bring about a new age via Elena. Arboria states that his wife's death will not be wasted: '[while holding baby Elena and before submerging her into the black liquid] you will be the dawning of a new era for the human race [...] and the human soul. Let the new age of enlightenment begin!' (Cosmatos 2010: n.pag.). This memory of trauma immediately precedes Nyle's transformation (discussed later) and the subsequent murders he commits. We can make sense of this by taking account of the vivid and distinct way the sequence is filmed and layered with other motifs, those being: the confrontation between Nyle and his wife Rosemary, the intersected speech of Ronald Reagan from 1983 (2016) playing on a television in Nyle's home, and the seemingly odd inclusion of an oil-black leather jacket that references Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, a key aspect of Nyle's monstrous persona. That combination addresses 'the rise and fall of historical illusions' by way of a 'disturbingly mixed pictorial language', as Anfam (2010: n.pag.) described regarding Dalwood above. In Dalwood's output, as a painter working with a visually static medium, this dynamism is rendered in symbolically loaded objects and interiors in the picture frame, often inclusive of a vista onto the outside. The painting *Nietzsche's Chalet* (2001) is an apt example dealing with the philosopher's duality: the confrontation of a bourgeois perspective, indicated by the trappings of the chalet with its well-organized and luxury components, is loomed over by the Eiger's north face, reflected in the chalet's mirror, an image of 'an insuperable challenge, [and] for time's implacable march' (Anfam 2010: n.pag.).

Perhaps also it is a depiction of the philosopher's fragility, those various vessels and paraphernalia around the washbasin bring to mind Stefan Zweig's sympathetic but iconoclastic descriptions of Nietzsche, which undermine 'theatrical' and 'melodramatic' imaginings.

Innumerable bottles, flasks and tinctures: for headaches [...] stomach cramps, spasmodic vomiting, intestinal weakness, and above all, those terrible medicaments to control insomnia – chloral and veronal. A horrifying arsenal of poisons and narcotics – the only help that he can call on in this empty silence of the foreign room (Zweig 2013: 11).

Working in a time-based media, *Cosmatos* uses the succession of scenes to suggest, like a collage, a broader meaning that has implications for the subject, and for society, inferences we can only grasp by way of appreciating what they mean as a succession of loaded referents taken together: beyond the chronology of the characters stories. Returning to the way the section is filmed, *Cosmatos* singles out Nyle's memory from the rest of the film by showing it to us in extreme high contrast, to the point that the bodies of Nyle, Arboria and Anna appear as almost totally white, like the background, with only their eyes, hair and minimal features indicating form. In contrast the psychoactive liquid appears dark black, and the hallucinogenic vision appears in dramatic colour. When Nyle emerges, we see the isolation chamber from above: it forms a perfect circle of black against the white background, it is from this clearly distinct black centre that Nyle emerges spreading the liquid into the white space (vomiting and dripping everywhere); while simultaneously embodying an intimidating and pathetic monstrous figure. In his *Introducing Slavoj Žižek* Christopher Kul-Want (2011: 119) discusses Žižek's reading of Mark Rothko's late paintings as they pertain to the breakdown of the subject, its 'own fictional status', resulting in 'tragic consequences'. Kul-Want explains that Rothko's famous works are based on Kasimir Malevich's *The Naked Unframed Icon of My Time* (1915): which is a black square, with clear distinct outlines, on a white background.

The black square is a symbol of the void that is the unconscious, the excess that exists within representation but which can never be directly known or accessed. While the white background is an open space in which 'reality' in the form of the symbolic order can appear (Kul-Want 2011: 119).

For Žižek, writing in *Looking Awry*,

all late Rothko paintings are manifestations of a struggle to save the central black square from overflowing the entire field. If the square occupies the whole field, if the difference between the figure and its background is lost, a psychic autism is produced (1995: 19).

In *Cosmatos*'s film the background is loaded with our symbolic fictions, inclusive of the forces the film implies are predominant in the 1980s: lies, corruption and representations of delusional, self-aggrandizing violence. What we get from *Cosmatos* is the collapse of the polite facades of social interaction and politics; alongside the collapse of the subject that operated on that level. As Kul-Want explains, the

attempt to access the void [...] ultimately means to evacuate language and representation altogether [...] [resulting in] [...] psychic breakdown since language and representation bind together the subject [...] without some artificial system of symbolic order by which to organize 'reality', the individual ceases to exist (2011: 121).

Cosmatos stages the horror of the subject's confrontation with its own emptiness, in Nyle's traumatic vision, using his painterly style of filmmaking, but he presents this existential spectacle as a highly politicized one, critiquing 1980s ideology. This includes both the right-wing republican propaganda of the 1980s; and the legacy of countercultural delusions about superior states of consciousness. The background in *BTBR* rushes in to fill the voided ego when the membrane separating the subject from reality breaks down. Cosmatos poses the question, what would a person be like who is defined by our cultural background's dominant forces? Furthermore, as we are in the realm of horror, his answer speculates about the worst-case scenario. As Staff observed regarding Dalwood's work 'two points on a chronological timeline are pulled together until they meet' (2021: 3–4), this is the case with the dates explicitly indicated in the film, of 1966 and 1983, the failed and questionable aspects of the countercultural project and its legacy represented by Arboria, and the Reagan-era conservative rhetoric, are pulled together with Manuel Noriega as supplier of narcotics and taboo-truth of American morality. Noriega was a right-wing dictator of Panama from 1983 to 1989 involved in cooperating with the CIA and US government generally to suppress left-wing movements and uprisings. In return for that cooperation the United States ignored Noriega's smuggling of drugs into America. Noriega was alleged to have a role in the Iran-Contra affair, which concerned the United States secretly selling arms to Iran which was under embargo (Scranton 1991: 11–13). These events took place during Reagan's presidency and direct administration, contradicting his didactic moralistic stance discussed below.

1983 and 1966 collapsed into the present

The significance of conflating these years in a 2010 film is not simply an exercise in retro nostalgia, it is a statement about the dominant forces, inclusive of failed projects, that have shaped our present. The Baby Boomers generation who were informed by the late 1960s, and came into their prime in the 1980s are still a dominant force in our culture. Cosmatos is subjecting the framing of our modern myths, fears and aspirations to critique.

On 9 March 1983, then President of America Ronald Reagan gave a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals. This is sometimes referred to as 'The Evil Empire Speech' in this address Reagan took a particularly moral tone, describing America and the Soviet Union in binary terms 'of good and of evil' (Reagan 2016: n.pag.). Reagan praised traditional values, the role of praying, and of church, condemning Americans 'who have turned to a modern-day secularism' and 'hard drugs'. In the speech he also criticizes abortion generally and the use of birth control drugs for young women, without the knowledge of their parents, a situation in which his government intervened by ordering 'clinics receiving federal funds to notify the parents'. Given the control exerted over Elena by her father (Arboria), and later by Nyle who is obsessed with her potential promiscuity – manically accusing an unawares casual drinker of having 'fucked her' repeatedly before murdering him out of paranoia at the

films climax – the inclusion of Reagan’s speech attests to how much of this gendered control pervades in reality.

It is clear that Cosmatos is critical of Arboria, who is emblematic of a delusional strand of the counter culture, which became narcissistically fascinated with self-overcoming, as opposed to improvements to society through political struggle.

I look at Arboria as kind of naïve. He had the best of intentions of wanting to expand human consciousness, but I think his ego got in the way of that, and ultimately it turned into a poisonous, destructive thing [...] it stops being about their humanity and becomes about an unattainable goal (Cosmatos cited in Valencia 2014: n.pag.).

As a real-world example of that naïve generational position we can return to Kesey.

In 1960, California-based writer Ken Kesey volunteered for one of the CIA’s LSD experiments at a hospital. He subsequently obtained a job working on the psychiatric wing, an experience which prompted him to write the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. In 1964, he gathered a group of followers, known as the Merry Pranksters, and began a cross-country road trip in a painted bus to distribute LSD to people who were interested in trying it. After returning to California, Kesey began hosting a series of LSD-based parties, known as the ‘Acid Tests’. The Acid Tests were held in public places and incorporated psychedelic music from bands such as The Grateful Dead (Mosel 2022: n.pag.).

Most of these events occurred in 1966, the same year that the state of California outlawed LSD, and the year that Kesey was arrested (for use of marijuana), this may be the inspiration for 1966 as an emblematic year of countercultural inward turning and fatedness represented in Nyle’s flashback, in effect by 1966 the party was over. Jacobs (2015) observes that the motivation for the group to bring about a new way of living, akin to a religion was rather ‘escapism’ (2015: 133) that the group existed in a ‘milieu of unreality’ (2015: 135) and were guilty of ‘myopia’ (2015: 145).

Kesey and his Merry Band of Pranksters only succeed in isolating themselves from the ‘real world’ [...] Thus when the palpable, often harsh developments of actuality infringe upon the ‘current fantasy’, we find the Pranksters retreating further into the fantasy, often to the point of delusion (Jacobs 2015: 139).

Dr Arboria’s death (he is overdosed by Nyle) is an illustration of just such a retreat, in his room at the institute he once headed, he is willingly medicated with recreational drugs while watching a television that shows utopian images of nature and cityscapes.

Speaking of the author and journalist Tom Wolfe’s efforts to accurately portray Kesey and the Pranksters, Jacobs informs us,

The escapist ethos Wolfe confronts positions being human as an obstacle, something to get around or move beyond. If left unmitigated, such could only enhance the divide between reader and subject. Indeed, so much of the Prankster ethos trivializes what it means to be human. Such is revealed in the near-constant fantasizing of

becoming superheroes – metahumans who can transcend the ‘lag’ of earthy existence and go where no earthbound creature has gone before. Ultimately, humanity becomes a ‘predicament’ to Kesey, something to overcome (2015: 146).

Jacobs’s article makes an explicit point about the group’s relationship with authority, specifically the police, which speaks to a broader fated duality present in Cosmatos’s film. For Jacobs that relationship is one defined by dependence, beginning with performative disruption and provocation, to the point where ‘[the police’s] attendance is an “integral part of the fantasy”’ resulting in the group becoming ‘willing participants’ in the established paradigms of American culture (2015: 146). Cosmatos’s *BTBR*, in bringing the dates 1983 and 1966 together, asks us to consider: not the opposition represented by the dreams of the progressive Dr Arboria and the conservative Ronald Reagan, but the duality they create as different iterations of patrician authority. Regarding that duality, Ronald Reagan became the governor of California in 1966, having campaigned on law and order, and specifically promising to ‘clean up the mess at Berkeley’ (Kerr 2001: 288) a reference to the University of California and the countercultural movement which the university was a centre for (2001: 103, 118, 149). Specifically, Reagan had in mind the protests of 1965 (see De Groot [1995] for a detailed account of those events), at which Kesey was in attendance (De Groot 1995: 114; Shark 2009). Reagan felt the protesters should ‘be tried for treason’, and that they gave him the opportunity to undermine his centrist opponents to gain power (De Groot 1995: 112).

Dr Barry Nyle’s transformation into an *abortive superman*

As aforementioned, when Nyle surfaces from the black goo he is naked and fully covered in the psychoactive substance appearing entirely black. Cosmatos has linked this scene to Edmund Elias Merhige’s film *Begotten* (1989) (Simpson 2012) which itself is influenced heavily by Nietzsche, as Merhige states in an interview with Essman (2009). *Begotten* contains no dialogue and is filmed in high-contrast black and white. The most relevant visual metaphor that relates to Nietzsche (and to Cosmatos’s film) is the inclusion early in the film of ‘god killing himself’, by disembowelling, resulting in the emergence, from his entrails, of a woman who then brings the dead god to arousal and uses his semen to impregnate herself: giving birth to a son. This odd and shocking occurrence presents a tripartite self-overcoming. Nyle, on emergence from the psychoactive substance, appears to have regressed to an animal state, he is dehumanized: unable to speak, and acting on violent sexual and murderous appetites. Nyle is entirely monstrous and was unable to make a success of his ‘great journey’ as Arboria refers to his experience (which prompts Elena’s submergence). Nyle’s subsequent failure to enact his plans, glimpsed in detailed notes and images: to rape, consume and otherwise make use of Elena’s body to bring about his version of a new world, is a failure in the allegorical sense set out in *Begotten* (1989). Nyle, as self-absorbed narcissistic subject, begets nothing. The interim period from Nyle’s trauma to his breakdown is defined by his institutional self: the respectable Dr Barry Nyle who, has taken over the institute and married a docile, supportive woman. Dr Nyle wears prosthesis to hide the physical evidence of his trauma: exploded irises, making his eyes appear black, and total hairlessness. The second (and total) occurrence of Nyle’s monstrosity comes when his

already weak ego, under pressure from being found out by the nurse Margo as inappropriately obsessed with Elena, fractures. This leaves his violently hierarchical superego ideals, and his id-driven sexual appetite to direct his actions.

His transformation takes place at home highlighting the contrast with the institutional bourgeois-self. Following a look of disgust at his sleeping wife, a call back to previous frustration with her general malaise, and while the Reagan speech plays in the background, we see Nyle from behind in close-up removing his hair, eyebrows and contact lenses. Those 'appliances', as Rosemary refers to them, are materialisations of the remnants of his, albeit inadequate, semi-functional ego; presumably what is left over following his submergence and acid trip in the isolation chamber. The vibrating and continuous music, which intermittently pulsates, as he does this is accompanied by his, at first pained and then pleasurable, low moaning: indicative of his turbulent mental state. With his administrative identity now fully usurped, Nyle is seen to carefully select a leather jacket with the words 'Noriega' on the covering, which he caresses, along with black Jackboots. While applying these, a point is made of watching as he slowly pushes his left hand, which is singularly gloved in black leather, through the arm until the hand emerges and splays out of the jacket. This act of undressing and dressing is somewhat ceremonial, but also has the effect of suggesting an insect carapace and an emergence from a chrysalis, especially when combined with the removal of his prosthesis. Finally, with gasps of awe, Nyle opens a box and takes out a ceremonial dagger which appears to be ergonomically designed to fit his hand. He is now entirely hairless, with black exploded irises and clad in black leather.

Concerning Nyle's Übermensch aspirations: firstly, and most obviously, this is evident in his participation, and later taking over of, Arboria's project to bring about a new world order. Secondly, a disturbing encounter with his wife Rosemary indicates the dynamic of that world to be, in Nyle's hands. Rosemary discovers Nyle, and is slow to react to his disturbing appearance, her initial dialog, as she attempts to comfort Nyle is indicative of her role as ballast in his life. At this point he seems to want to be comforted, expressing that he does not want to wear his prosthesis anymore. His tone and body language are pathetic, but following Rosemary's questions, about his attire and state of mind, he explains 'I went to another world Rosemary. I see what others cannot see. [...] I looked into the eye of the god, it looked back through me [...] it was so beautiful, like a black rainbow [...] it choose me' then recalling his disgust he states 'you're nothing, less than nothing, just spit in the wind' (Cosmatos 2010: n.pag.). Nyle, then appearing to have extraordinary strength, crushes Rosemary's skull, stating that he is setting her free.

The reaction to a disintegration of the ego, as described by Scharfetter, follows Nyle's trajectory in *BTBR*, and typically includes 'mannerism (odd, stylized, artificial, non-spontaneous behaviour)' (Scharfetter 1981: 277). That description fits Dr Barry Nyle, the institutional coordinator and unhappy husband. Additionally, following his transformation, which includes the brandishing of a stylized knife, which he refers to as 'the Devil's teardrop', and his declarations of superiority: his behaviour corresponds to what Scharfetter calls cognitive-affective overcompensation: that being the 'creation of private symbols, signs, language. [...] Megalomaniac self-elevation. [...] Delusions of omniscience, omnipotence'

(1981: 277). Despite the lofty utopian claims of Arboria we can say that what he, with Nyle, achieves is the effective violent breakdown of Nyle's personality, resultant murders, and the prolonged subjection of his own daughter. As an allegory for Cosmatos's America we can infer that the failed dreams and unresolved conflicts of the counterculture clashes with conservative America, represented by Arboria and Reagan, give rise to the dominant and ultimately corrupt conservatism of capitalist America in the 1980s, and beyond. In one disturbing scene we see the monstrous Nyle driving to commit atrocities, ultimately doomed and misguided, he looks across and sees himself as his composed bourgeois self, who states encouragingly 'you are doing so good', this split Nyle could well be the representatives of Reagan's government talking to Noriega: the respectable face, smiling glibly, at the doomed strongman: useful only for a time.

Mandy

Mandy is an existential revenge horror, where reclusive couple, Red (Nicolas Cage), a recovering alcoholic logger, and Mandy (Andrea Riseborough) a gas station cashier and illustrator, have their quiet life at Crystal Lake interrupted by a cult referred to as 'The Children of the New Dawn'; that epithet ironically recalls the real voice of president Reagan on Red's radio as he drives home, announcing 'a great spiritual awakening in America' (Cosmatos 2018: n.pag.). The 'Children' are the result of that awakening, a community in thrall to (failed) celebrity, and kept in check by drugs, violence and promises of ascension. The cult is led by the anti-Christ figure of Jeremiah Sand (Linus Roache), whose persona is reminiscent of murderer and cult leader Charles Manson, indicating a more nihilistic real-life cultural reference from Cosmatos, contrasting the flawed idealism of Arboria (Cosmatos 2010). Manson is a reference often made when contextualizing Sand (see Bloom 2020; Stine 2022). The comparison is born out in various turns of phrase used by Sand and his followers, referring to outsiders as 'pigs' for example. Furthermore, as Harrison points out, Manson worshiped both 'Christ and Satan' referring to 'acid fascism' as a 'celebration of Nietzsche's injunction to move "beyond good and evil"' (2015: 42): Sand refers to himself as a 'special one', as the centre of the universe, and inheritor of the world, while also having dealings with the satanic Black Skulls. Additionally, 'Manson spelled out his "Nietzchen line" [...]: "I think Christianity itself is self-destructive because it's based on weakness"' (Udo 2012: n.pag.); Sand has a similar problem, explaining to Red 'you know what Jesus's big mistake was?'. he goes on to suggest that self-sacrifice should be replaced by sacrificing others.

Sand decides he wants Mandy as a concubine, and has her kidnapped by the demonic biker gang, the Black Skulls, with a view to seduce and assimilate her to the cult. However, when this spectacularly fails due to Mandy's mocking of Sand's arrogance, he cruelly burns her alive in front of Red leaving him for dead. The remainder of the film follows a traumatized Red as he tracks down the Black Skulls and The Children of the New Dawn, to kill them.

Sand's megalomania, and abortive status, is fully realized in the confrontation with Mandy, even in a position of being a prisoner, under duress, she is able to dramatically undermine his status. He presents himself as a superior being, in front of his assembled followers he disrobes in an act of self-aggrandizing revelation, with a view to rape Mandy. In the background a song written and performed by Sand is playing, its lyrics praising Sand's own nature

and person. Mandy does not submit, even though her life clearly depends on that, instead she laughs at the absurdity, growing more aggressive as Sand protests. Sand's confusion and humiliation in the face of this unexpected reaction reduces him to a pathetic sight: aggressively masturbating in a desperate attempt to regain potency. Referring to *BTBR* and *Mandy*, Cosmatos stated 'I find the idea of delusional self-image very interesting, so that turns up in both of these films [...] that stripping away of that delusional self-image can be a dangerous thing when it comes to certain men' (Lazic 2018: n.pag.). Sand's extreme aggression, and increased phantasies of omnipotence follow the encounter with Mandy, as a terminal defence mechanism, when we see him commune with God, staring into a mirror to ask for advice, he is entirely self-consumed viewing others as 'just meat' (Cosmatos 2018: n.pag.).

Along with the sanctimonious and patrician Reagan speech (discussed above) culture at large is problematized when Mandy is seen to use money as a bookmark while reading about evil in her fantasy novel at the gas station, conflating the economic background, with Sand as failed celebrity wannabe, and the fantastical imagery of the serpent and warlock. Later as Red searches for the Black Skulls we see one hulking biker watching pornography on the television, upstairs a dead naked couple are lying in positions reminiscent of those scenes. The superegoic nature of the injunctions of Reagan's voice, and the image of George Washington, the first president of the United States, on the dollar bill are contrasted to the id-driven sexual violence of the pornographic imagery. These are forces dominating the weak and brittle *abortive superman* Jeremiah Sand. Later having dispatched the Black Skulls and The Children of the New Dawn, while responding to Sand's megalomaniac raving, Red states '[the] psychotic drowns where the mystic swims' a reference to the mythologist Joseph Campbell (see Grof 2000: 136), himself heavily influenced by Nietzsche. To my mind, this is a direct comparison that Cosmatos via Red is drawing between Mandy and Sand. Mandy, who is seen to literally swim in Crystal Lake, and who has experienced childhood trauma, is nevertheless a creative, intelligent and curious person: capable of contemplating the destabilizing flux of the cosmos and making that a part of her and Red's casual intimacy. Alternatively, Sand is brittle and deluded, constantly seeking affirmation that will see him fixed in the position of god, leader, and, centre of the universe.

'The Viewing'

'The Viewing' (2022) is set in 1979 and begins with an invitation for a select group of people to examine a rare and mysterious object, at the impressive home of a reclusive billionaire, and collector, Lionel Lassiter (Peter Weller). The guests are esteemed practitioners in their respective disciplines and comprise representatives of the arts and sciences: Randall Roth (Eric Andre), a musician and record producer, Charlotte Xie (Charlyne Yi), an astrophysicist, Guy Landon (Steve Agee), a novelist, and Targ Reinhardt (Michael Therriault), a famous psychic, with a knowledge of art history. Also present at Lassiter's gathering are Dr Zahra (Sofia Boutella) a researcher, haematologist and Lassiter's physician, and Hector (Saad Siddiqui) Lassiter's driver and bodyguard. After an initial journey from a city carpark where Hector brings the guests to the 'Sandpiper House', a bespoke mansion, the story unfolds in two distinct spaces therein, an elaborate lounge area, with a central sunken seating space;

and the 'obelisk chamber', a secure enclosed viewing space with a central plinth and circular opening above, where the object is displayed. The architecture and interior design, as well as being an expression of the wealth, taste and elitism that Lassiter, as curator-host, is portraying, is also an indicator of his interest in self-overcoming, described by him as: seeking an 'innate transcendence'. Transcendence is also the goal of the music and soundscapes that accompany the building, and with the use and development of various drugs administered by Zahra: '[Zahra to the assembled guests] I'm furthering exploration in the pursuit of human enhancement' ('The Viewing' 2022: n.pag.). Heroin, cocaine and marijuana are all consumed during the episode, as well as alcohol, tea and a soft drink. Lassiter's elaborate description of a rare Japanese whisky's journey to the guests' table presents a blatant celebration of 'commodity fetishism', discussed by Marx in volume one of *Capital* (1990: 163). Dino Felluga explains,

[a] commodity remains simple as long as it is tied to its use-value. [...] However, as soon as the table 'emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness' [...]. People in a capitalist society thus begin to treat commodities as if value inhered in the objects themselves, rather than in the amount of real labor expended to produce the object (Marx cited in Felluga 2011: n.pag.).

Fetishism for material things, references to taste, and rarity abound in 'The Viewing' indicating that we are no longer in the territory of patriarchal ideas around mass transcendence, such as Arboria represented (Cosmatos 2010); while Lassiter's reach, wealth and power, mean that he is a less marginal figure than Sand (Cosmatos 2018). Lassiter is an unapologetic capitalist, not 'naïve [with the] best of intentions' (Cosmatos regarding Arboria in Valencia 2014: n.pag.). Lassiter's new world would be a highly controlled, and elitist one. Lassiter is a businessman that made his fortune 'stockpiling uranium', his preference for cocaine to marijuana 'I don't touch that hippie shit', is a comment on the ruthlessness of what 1979 was anticipating: the coke fuelled confidence of the Thatcher/Reagan 1980s.

'The Viewing' is concerned with the co-opting of the individuals and the disciplines they represent, into the control of money. This is indicated by: the scenario overall, an elite gathering organized by a billionaire, by the offers of Lassiter to fund the guests' careers, and most obviously, by a scene in which each guest is met with their favourite drink. Capitalism is a system that controls by desire, it teaches one what to desire, and then provides, in ways which never satisfy, just enough to maintain, and perpetuate the dynamic. 'Capitalism's resilience "derives from its relationship to the psyche" [...] the human psyche is construed in terms of desire' (Hurst 2020: 289). Hurst, reflecting on Todd McGowan's psychoanalytic analysis of capitalism's resilience, emphasizes the ways capitalism panders to the 'banal micro-desires of "end-users" (consumers)' (2020: 289): the various drinks, drugs, assurances and luxurious interior design of the surroundings in 'The Viewing' are wonderful banalities, full of promise that is not delivered, and ends very badly.

The background in 'The Viewing' (2022), set in 1979, is no less political than that of *BTBR* or *Mandy*: primarily coming through the enigmatic Dr Zahra's recollection of working for the Libyan dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, de facto leader of Libya from 1969 to 2011.

I can't tell you about an image you already have in your mind. Did you know he preached for liberty? He's even charming, he told me he didn't like doctors and thought of me as an artist, and he'd give me anything I wanted. As his physician I saw his blood, I saw his tears, can you believe that sometimes for no reason at all he would cry like a lost child, I almost felt sorry for him. I also saw with my own eyes that the tiniest mistake or word he didn't like, he would burst into the most brutal violence. He kills people. What's he really like? Sometimes, when no one is watching he dresses up like a fucking deranged rock star from the future [laughs] ('The Viewing' 2022: n.pag.).

Furthermore, Hector (Saad Siddiqui), Lassiter's driver and guard, is literally seen to stand in the background during most of the central conversation, he is a symbol of physical male power and aestheticized violence, linked directly to the golden AK-47s that adorn the walls. Lassiter states, when asked about the guns, that it is Hector's story to tell, but interrupts a distressed seeming Hector before he can say anything, stating that 'the most important thing is that we put them on display to render these killing machines harmless' ('The Viewing' 2022: n.pag.). Hector's distress, holding back tears at Lassiter's explanation, is a sign that muscle too, like the creative and mental abilities of the guests, can be bought. As symbols, the guns and Hector are linked to infamous accounts of gold-plated weaponry in the possession of dangerous and destructive men. For example, the character's name appears to be inspired by Héctor Gamboa, a Mexican drug trafficker sometimes referred to as El Karis, at his death in 2009, in a battle with the Mexican police, and other drug organizations, a member of his personal bodyguard was found dead with a golden AK-47 (see Grayson 2012: 10; Comunicación e Información 2009). It is also well known that Saddam Hussein who became president of Iraq in 1979, the year 'The Viewing' (2022) is set, had many gold-plated weapons, most of which were given to personal guards (see *Gold Plated AK104 Assault Rifle* 2022). Gaddafi too possessed a prized gold-plated gun (see Gatehouse 2016); these decorated, and phallic objects speak to the inflated narcissism of their owners, their delusions of grandeur, and their actual wealth and power. But from our position in the present, knowing the ignominious ends of these people, Cosmatos is reminding us of the ways this masculinity played into the manipulation and political gamesmanship of western powers, represented by Lassiter: the capitalist who sees himself above politics 'voting. Yikes [mockingly]' ('The Viewing' 2022: n.pag.). Lassiter though, like the people he co-opts and the things he possesses, is only a vessel himself, through which the forces of capitalism represented in the ultimate commodity, acquired at 'the greatest expense': the alien form, can progress. That form, acquired with the 'upmost difficulty', is an object that emanates power, the power which Lassiter, as connoisseur and collector, believes he has: to possess, value, order and direct the actions of whatever comes into its orbit.

The highly controlled form of reified consumption that Lassiter favours is contrasted in a key exchange between him and Randall, a recovering addict, whose appetites are reluctantly rekindled via peer pressure and the free, bespoke, narcotics. Randall represents a destabilizing force that later will trigger the transformation of Lassiter from capitalist-curator to rampant force. In response to Lassiter's question, 'what is it you really want?' Randall responds,

Randall: I don't want anything, I want something that doesn't exist. [...] There's a void inside of me, you, everyone. An endless abyss, and everything you collect, every success, everything you take to shrink that void down, none of it works, it's like err [is interrupted].

Charlotte: like a black hole?

Randall: Everyone has a black hole inside of them, all I want is for mine to stop eating everything up all the time ('The Viewing' 2022: n.pag.).

The black hole that Randall describes being inside him, and wanting to overcome is the 'desire not just for things, but self-actualization or wholeness' (Hurst 2020: 297); something that the promises of Lassiter, and rampant capitalism can't provide. Charlotte's ability to make sense of the statement contrasts Lassiter's non-pulsed dismissal, he plays canned laughter, and sardonically states 'you are really harshing my mellow man' ('The Viewing' 2022: n.pag.).

The group move to the viewing chamber where they are confronted with an object described as a rock, meteorite and by Targ as 'an ancient power totem' ('The Viewing' 2022: n.pag.). It has an insectoid quality, black metallic surface reminiscent of an armoured beetle or cocoon, with aggressive protrusions, smooth surfaces and ridged segments. After a discussion regarding its imperviousness to analysis and penetration, the group react differently to the object: Randall, and Charlotte are intrigued, while Guy is dismissive, and Targ is apprehensive, stating 'you think you're looking at it, but it's looking at you'. The object is not only the ultimate 'item' of the collector, but as del Toro described in his hitchcockian introduction to the episode, it is 'a will, a hunger, far greater than his own' a symbol of pure, limitless consumption: 'the Other's desire remains unfathomable. Encountering it is thrilling, unnerving, overwhelming or even revolting. It threatens to engulf the fragile self' (Hurst 2020: 296). In a seemingly comic moment, Randall nervously, and repeatedly, smokes marijuana in the viewing chamber to Lassiter's polite protests, suddenly the object appears to inhale residual smoke, and it brakes apart revealing a fleshy interior. Emitting a paralysing energy, the form holds the group in thrall and then, consecutively melts and explodes Targ's and Guy's heads. The shock of the violence breaks the hold over Charlotte and Randall who escape thanks to Charlotte's wherewithal. Leaving Lassiter and Zhara transfixed. The *abortive superman* is manifested when Lassiter becomes one with that power, and is hideously dehumanized by it. The emergent amorphous alien produces tentacles that hold the form of cuckold horns. This was foreshadowed in the episodes introduction where del Toro places a likeness of the episodes director, described as a 'totem' (Bojalad 2022: n.pag.), or 'statuette' (Landekic 2022: n.pag.) on a table as he introduces the story. Cosmatos's totem shows the director with horns protruding from his forehead giving him the appearance of a fawn. 'The symbol universally associated with cuckolding was a pair of ram's horns. Strength, power and supremacy, along with procreative vigor have always been associated with horns, which are used when the animal fights its rival in the mating season' (Swift 2017: n.pag.). These protrusions can be seen in close-up, very clearly at 00:47:47 into the episode, they are undoubtedly modelled on horns, consisting of interlinked annulus segments: like horns, and despite the amorphous appearance of the

alien are defined as such by visual effects supervisor for the series Dennis Berardi, who describes the emergent form as 'the horned blob creature' (Greene 2022: n.pag.). In support of the psychosexual element, regarding the cuckold, the alluring and flirtatious Dr Zahra, the bad mother of 'The Viewing' in Cosmatos's oedipal pairings, is the only person to react sexually to the emergent form. Zahra caresses the protrusions and moans in pleasure as she is gradually destroyed by the interaction. Lassiter, is left slumped on the floor as the amorphous gloopy form covers his body, and finally his face, infusing itself with him. When he rises, he has become a hulking beast-like entity, reduced features: flattened nose and animal grimace. The creature, snarling and roaring, still sports the hornlike tentacles on its back, before it's attacked by Hector it pathetically pleads 'help me'; later, having disintegrated Hector, it contemplates its reflection in some water and screams in disgust, it then disappears into the sewer emerging in a vast modernist storm drain near a city.

The cuckold, zoomorphism and the Übermensch

Animalism is a contested and unclear aspect of Nietzsche's thought around the Übermensch, which can be viewed in opposition to superman status: Zarathustra criticizes those who 'would rather go back to the beast than surpass man?' (Nietzsche 1997: 6) later implying a clear hierarchy 'man is a rope stretched between the animal and the superman – a rope over an abyss' (1997: 8). However, as Wirth (2001) points out 'Nietzsche's self-overcoming of the nihilism that emerges in the wake of the death of God dares to transvalue [re-evaluate] the animal-human as the [...] Übermensch', linking this insight to Nietzsche's statements in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) regarding his ideas giving birth to centaurs. Wirth takes this insight further, citing the example of Nietzsche's famous breakdown, in which the philosopher witnessed a horse being whipped by a coachman, flung his arms around the animal and wept. For Wirth this has 'broad implications' claiming that Nietzsche was trying to apologize to the horse for Descartes (Wirth 2001): that is for the human ego, Descartes the philosopher of cogito, ergo sum, from *Discourse on Method* (1637). Notwithstanding, Nietzsche's own preference for the Minotaur, to the 'minotaur of conscience' as Alfano explains for Nietzsche 'the greatest threat to the curious person is not the external but the internal, not the Minotaur but the "minotaur of conscience"' (2013: 782). The minotaur of conscience is a reference to Theseus 'who seeks the truth only to do good' (2013: 782) and thus finds nothing but the maintenance of a position.

The Minotaur in Greek mythology is a monster, both human and part bull, living in the Labyrinth in Cnossus in Crete. Popular interpretations of the story concentrate on the end of the Minotaur's life: whereby he is slain by the hero Theseus. However, the origins of the Minotaur help to understand the *abortive superman*, in whom animalism is combined with grandiose authority, so much so, that I claim the *abortive superman* can be understood as a conflation of the Minotaur with King Minos; a conflation that only makes explicit the implied duality of the ancient Minotaur, as the unwanted, but adopted, son of the cuckold King Minos. In fact, the Minotaur's name, Asterion (meaning star), is the same as Minos's foster-father, emphasizing the oedipal tension in the myth. The figure's deformity, his bull's head and horns, are reminders of his illegitimate birth due to parental guilt: the defiance of Minos

to obey the gods, which results in the enchantment of his wife Pasiphaë, and her subsequent betrayal of Minos.

The Minotaur was the son of Pasiphaë, who developed an 'inhuman' lust for a white bull. Since such a lust, from the perspective of the white bull, was unrequited, Pasiphaë hired Daedalus to construct 'a false cow's shell'. Hiding inside the cow shell, Pasiphaë was brought before the white bull. In the madness of the rut, the bull mated with Pasiphaë, and the result of this inhuman copulation was the Minotaur, the child of the sanctity of humanity and the brutality of animality (Wirth 2001: n.pag.).

Regarding these origins see also Edelman (2015: 185). Cosmatos's antagonists each wield power over subordinates with the authority of a king, and inhabit outside labyrinthine spaces: the Arboria Institute's many rooms and air-vent passageways in *BTBR*, the 'abyssal lair' under the Children of the New Dawn's church in *Mandy*, where the climatic confrontation takes place, and the Sandpiper House's elaborate entrance gardens, luxurious interiors, and sewer and storm drains in 'The Viewing' (2022). These elaborate spaces, that are defined by modernist aesthetics, become prisons and tombs for their owners, in each case those 'kings' are reduced to the status of abject subhuman beasts. The fact that this reduction in status coincides with peak self-delusional superiority: heightens the grotesque and piteous spectacle of the *abortive superman*.

Regarding what the precedent of the Minotaur and Minos can teach us about the *abortive superman*: the defining monstrous characteristics of the Minotaur, his animality, are directly resultant of the background activity in which he had no agency: the guilt of his parents – Minos's blasphemy/Pasiphaë's lust – who were endowed by their culture with the authority of monarchs. Thus, society is implicated in the Minotaur's monstrosity. The weakness of the human aspect to overcome these background forces – to avoid being defined by them – is the tragedy, and personal weakness of the Minotaur. This brings me to the parallel of the Minotaur's monstrosity, with the horns of the cuckold, and the weapons in Cosmatos's oeuvre, as an 'upward displacement' the trauma or wound is transformed into a weapon, the form of which is indicative of personal monstrosity as well as collective guilt. What are golden AK47s but a horrible materialization of our culture's constitutive violence and rampant consumerism, given form by those who lack the taste to know better?

Displacement is perhaps especially apropos here, however, in that a cuckold's horns are themselves a kind of displacement, in which the horniness of the cuckold ends up manifesting itself on the brow of the insufficiently masculine cuckold. Coppélia Kahn is one of the horn's earliest glossators of recent decades, and her psychoanalytic approach takes this aspect by the horns: 'Virile animals, such as bulls, stags, and the traditionally lecherous goat have horns. [...] Horns would thus seem inappropriate for the cuckold. [...] Regarded endophysically, from the cuckold's point of view, horns are a defence formed through denial, compensation, and upward displacement' (McEachern 2008: 610).

Cuckold horns are a zoomorphism which help to understand the dehumanizing effects of the *abortive superman's* trauma; how that trauma, which is collective, is combined with the personal event, and moulded into an identity whose outcrops are the phallic weapon and grandiose persona. Those outcrops are a direct reflection of the cultural milieu, the background of abstract forces: familial, political, moral, etc., which deform the subject into a contemporary Minotaur. Phantasies of omnipotence and grandiosity evidence a modern narcissistic subject overcompensating in a mode of reactive defensiveness. That subject is defined by too harsh a superego and instinctive urges, discussing the narcissistic superego Tyson and Tyson describe a superego which 'retains a primitive aggressive' character, quoting Kernberg (1975) the subject is described as one with 'the image of a hungry, enraged, empty self, full of impotent anger [...] fearful of world which seems as hateful and revengeful as [they are]' (Tyson and Tyson 1984: 77).

Guilty backgrounds

I have discussed some of the directly political references in Cosmatos that pertain to corruption, the economy and violence. However, there is another category of motifs that are carried through each film. These are tonally very different from the references to real-world politics and violence: drawing instead from, real-world, light entertainment and mainstream advertising, they confuse a clear reading, and to my mind, they invite us to consider their influences – the everyday stream of acceptable media – as horrific, rather than, for example thinking of the horror depicted as funny. These moments include the references to cartoons and action figures in *BTBR*, to the infamous 'Cheddar Goblin' in *Mandy*, and to the canned laughter, activated by Lassiter via retro chunky analogue technology in 'The Viewing' (2022). These juxtapositions are again reminiscent of Dalwood's approach, for example *The Deluge* (2007), an Ultrachrome inkjet digital print, depicts a storm at night with an array of collaged stylistic references, pop-art mark making, photography, gestural painting, and romantic and pastoral landscape segments. There is a tension between these elements cohering in an ominous image of tumult and dread; or unravelling one another in an unpleasant 'deluge' of signs attacking the senses.

As a strategy employed by Cosmatos it can be seen to encourage questioning in an audience, by jolting us out of habitual identification when combined with the other events of the film. For example, in *Mandy*, after Mandy's protracted murder, we see a distraught and traumatized Red, reeling in pain, to punctuate this is a seemingly non-sequitur advertisement showing on Red's television for 'Cheddar Goblin' a brand of packeted macaroni and cheese pasta, which includes '60% more cheese than the next leading brand' (see Kelly 2018). The advertisement includes the appearance of a grotesque truncated green goblin who first steals the macaroni of two children, and then regurgitates it over the children as they cheer enthusiastically. There is a quality of subversive affirmation in the performances of the two children, whose crazed enthusiasm for the gloopy macaroni, and lack of fear/disgust at the goblin's appearance and actions, give the ad an uncanny quality. The visual texture of the supposedly wholesome and saccharine advert; with the goblin's video nasty aesthetic incriminate consumerism and pop culture: as poison we willingly imbibe, for the benefit of wanton forces. The appearance of Cheddar Goblin macaroni at Caruthers's

(Bill Duke) trailer, where Red goes to collect a weapon and get advice later, attests to the ubiquity of that poison in a crapulent and over-processed society.

Conclusion

The articulation of a complex subject such as the *Übermensch* into popular culture, is problematic, and as I pointed out in relation to Lyons's categories of 'tyrannical' and 'idealistic': the emergence of the 'libidinal master' undermines any potential critique by glamourizing a consummated life of sex, death and violence. However, those categories do give form to the turbulence of Nietzsche's own conception of the *Übermensch*, and these pop iterations, where various interpretations are played out, are revealing of the ways the idea finds a mass audience, addressing political and psychological anxieties of people, who may not otherwise be engaging with the philosophy directly; but who are dealing with the legacy of those ideas, in the dominant persons and movements that make claim to them.

The appearance of the *abortive superman* specifically those of Cosmatos, is a vernacular form of critique of the failed, or false *Übermensch*, in the spirit of what Wood discussing American horror generally has described as 'a civilization condemning itself, through its popular culture [...] (with the simultaneous horror/wish-fulfilment of nightmare)' (1978: 32). The *abortive superman* is a response to positive, popular and ultimately misguided uptake of Nietzsche's ideas in pop-culture, adding a key category that shows us the abject failure of voiding the ego in the name of self-overcoming.

The shortcut drugs represent as offering transcendence comes in for especial criticism in Cosmatos: the position that wants the elimination of the ego to enable self-overcoming, in actuality, simply leaves the impulses of the id, and the demands of superego to ravage the subject who disintegrates under those pressures, often in outward displays of destructive behaviour. Cosmatos does not allow us to see the *abortive superman* as exclusively a misstep of right-wing ideology; he actively incriminates the counterculture, where there is denial of the unconscious forces that act on, and from, the subject in both directions. The position denies the importance of the interrelationship of the subject with other subjects, and with society; and it represents a narcissistic inward turning and a gross underestimation of the layered subject whose ego is so important in creating beneficial relationships, and maintaining autonomy.

We see in the films discussed examples of the failed master, who is, in the end like King Minos just a cuckold of the forces of his or her social milieu. Cosmatos asks us to consider their agency as an illusion, be it institutional in nature: which ultimately oppresses its own agents into robotic and stilted behaviour, such as Nyle represents; or be it concerned with adulation, which fosters a turbulent and brittle dependence on admirers, such as Sand embodies; or even mastery, construed via economic power, the capitalist titan, whose taste is a thin vale over violent cycles of consumption that ultimately satisfy no real needs. Cosmatos draws the idealism of the counterculture, represented by the supposedly transcendent use of drugs, into a guilty relationship with right-wing strongman ideologies, represented by the acceptable, but corrupt, patrician Reagan, and the less palatable Gadhafi and Noriega. This offers us a fuller picture of the real horror that his horror films are trying

to recognize: there was no real opposition between these positions, which together form the bedrock of our current milieu, and are ready to deform our weakest into hideous monsters we can then conveniently disown, all the while ensuring, as Robin Wood observed, that emergent ideas are crushed by the freighted myths of previous generations.

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