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A Most Wanted Man By Anton Corbijn: Poetics Of Imprisonment

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SYNOPSIS:

A Most Wanted Man (A. Corbijn, 2014):

A Most Wanted Man opens in text explaining how since 9/11, when “intelligence failures and interdepartmental rivalries” allowed the man who conceived preparation for the 9/11 attacks to go on undiscovered, Hamburg has been on high alert for terrorism. Issa Karpov (Grigoriy Dobrygin) is a Chechen refugee who has been tortured in the Russian state security system. He has recently escaped prison, and illegally slips into the port of Hamburg. Gunther Bachman (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is a spy in Hamburg, who along with his team, works to find and ‘turn’ individuals who have ties to Islamist terrorist organizations into his informants. He notices Karpov and begins to monitor him.

Gunther is unkempt and displays signs of addiction and/or PTSD, though his team is elite and highly competent. It is made up of Maxi, Carl, Niki, and Rasheed, an informant and the son of a prominent Muslim scholar, Dr. Abdullah. Gunther believes Abdullah is funneling money to Al Qaeda under the cover of philanthropy. Dieter Mohr, a head German intelligence official, and Martha Sullivan (Robin Wright), an American diplomat, take an interest in Gunther’s investigations. It is revealed that Bachman had made a tragic mistake in Beirut in the past, and that this disgrace hovers along with Mohr and Sullivan, over Bachman’s head, although the details of the traumatic incident are not made explicit.

Issa contacts a social worker, Annabel Richter (Rachel McAdams), who helps him make contact with wealthy banker Tommy Grue. Grue’s father laundered millions of dollars from the Russian mafia, of which Issa’s father was a powerful member. Gunther follows Karpov around Hamburg and is able to manipulate Grue and Richter into helping him use Karpov as the “minnow to catch a barracuda...a barracuda to catch a shark.” The metaphorical shark implied to be somebody powerful in Al Qaeda, and an almost mythical figure for Bachman who is devoted to slow progress in securing sources over the years. Gunther appears not to care for punishment of these lower-level ‘pawns,’ instead putting his effort into watching, waiting, securing, and turning ever more powerful figures.

The ‘barracuda’ plan is catalyzed when Karpov makes the moral choice to donate his father’s black money to Dr. Abdullah’s charities, rather than use it for his own new life and be wracked with guilt. Mohr, Sullivan, and the international intelligence body agree to let Bachman continue his plan with their support – however, as Bachman is driving Karpov and Dr. Abdullah, undercover as a cab driver, they are ambushed by another team. Issa is seized captive by Mohr and Sullivan’s forces, leaving a betrayed Gunther, his team, and Annabel (who had been developing feelings for Issa) devastated. Gunther screams, realizing he has lost all he had worked for, again, just as in Beirut. He drives off, and the last camera shot is one left still in his backseat, while Bachman leaves the frame, presumably to self-destruct.

Systems:

- * System I: (Filmic apparatus, e.g./light & shadow, Grönemeyer soundtrack/, V.O = Voice over/, H/LAS = High/Low angle, CU = close up, XC = Cross cut shot, OTS = Over the shoulder, BEV = Bird's Eye View/ etc.)
- ** System II: Spectatorship
- *** System III: Characters
I = Issa, G = Gunther, A = Annabel, F = Dr. Faisal Abdullah, J = Jamal Abdullah, Ir = Irna Frey, M = Maxi, C = Carl, R = Rasheed, N = Niki, T = Tommy, D = Dieter, L = Leyla, Mk = Melik, Mi = Michael, Ma = Martha
- **** System IV: Subjectivity of Actors

Interdefined Narrative Programs (NPs):

- NP1 = G's steps to identify and prevent terrorism
- NP2 = I's steps to get physical, metaphysical security (\$)
- NP3 = German & international authority to get Issa to prevent terrorism
- NP4 = G's redemption from mysterious trauma in Beirut
- NP5 = I |R| A |R| T (love triangulation)

Legends for the initialisms and abbreviations that are referenced throughout the research paper.

Questions of filmic poetics and iconic recursivity

Corbijn's *A Most Wanted Man* is an exploration of the spy genre with a postmodern bent, in which the usual tropes such as escapism, exoticism, and technological and political thrill are constantly interwoven into a kind of irony in narrative programs that plays on the subject's ideas about spies and terrorism. In *A Most Wanted Man*, viewers are forced to think critically about aesthetic experience in order to find answers to the film's implied questions; I will argue that a poetics arises from recursive imagery and gives weight to the film's issues regarding a core, psychoanalytic-existential lack. This lack appears in the form of desire for control within a global power structure and addiction. Rather than giving physical violence any screen time, the film exploits alternative (or perhaps underlying) anxieties to deal with politics: ideology, sex, and addiction bloodlessly drop viewers into thriller territory, exposing the anxieties involved in what we might call 'post-terrorism.' Recursive filmic images of "arrest," or brief lapses in the action which function to anchor NPs to one another, offer certain releases from *A Most Wanted Man*'s dystopia while simultaneously developing a poetics, through patterns, rhythms, and interweaving with NPs. Recursive images of alcohol and cigarettes will be the focus in this paper, because of their obvious recursive role in the film, but also because smoking is often a universal proxy to psychological issues. During a period of significance for the poetics of recursivity, we observe a shift in Gunther's cynical, narcissistic, and self-destructive personality. I will then use this aspect of the recursive poetics to psychoanalyze the nature of subjectivity construction in film.

Types and categories of occurrence

My recursive configuration is the networking of cigarettes and alcohol to form a filmic structure based on hierarchy and vulnerability. There are 19 different occurrences of cigarettes (REC1) falling into two types: G using cigarettes to establish a psychoanalytically masculine

dominance (TYPa), or G using cigarettes to exhibit vulnerability (TYPb). Alcohol usage (12 occurrences, REC2) falls into category (CAT) 1, solitary and CAT2, social. These distinctions are only stable in that one always seems to dominate the other, for at any given moment G smokes and drinks due to suffering from the pressure of his job, especially in light of his previous disgrace in Beirut; however, he also uses his self-neglecting identity to his advantage in manipulating people. It is difficult to find the source and meaning of every instance of G's smoking and drinking, and in this sense we might say his addictions are overdetermined, and to an extent self-defining -- a favorable quality to have for a recursive image, which in its pure form ought to be separate from the narrative. The instances insert themselves into the NPs, as well as the film's Systems (such as 'actor subjectivity' -- for example, Hoffman's real life and death in relation to addiction), enabling various interpretations with respect to psychology and politics.

/REC1/ [OCC1] The film's second seq. introduces G in a CU shot from behind, but aimed at the photos of the terrorist suspects. He picks up the photo most clearly showing F, leaving his cigarette burning in the same hand (TYPa), and the spectatorship sees the terrorist's face before G's own -- a strong hint at the later deconstruction of the spy/terrorist agonistic by global beauracrats (Cohen, 1996). He is a chain-smoker; in seq. 7 he leaves F's lecture on his charities to smoke outside the building [OCC2], and cut to G driving is a CU of his lips holding a lit cigarette [OCC3]. In the former shot, G is taking a break from spying (NP4); in the latter, REC1 seems to be a limp arrow, pointing to the road and to G's perseverance in his job (NP1). TYPb is dominant in both. In seq. 9 [OCC4] G's identity as a smoker is reinforced, and it is revealed that J has hidden an SD card in the pack he gives G containing vital information on J's father's (F) links to Al-Qaeda. The significance of this OCC is found in its structure: the appearance of a psychoanalytic

'Father,' himself a fugitive of the 'Law,' in G's object of desire (cigarettes) shows the core of the film's triadic conflict: the spy-father-figure that contradicts international authority sublimates this antagonism into substance abuse – the recursive signifiers of the film (Kent, 2000). Like in OCC1, G's dependence on substances references his prior trauma (NP4), but smoking also provides a means for his focus on the job—and in this occurrence, the appearance of NP1 literally inside of REC1 indexes a nonlinear, more poetic formalism beginning to relate the five narrative programs to each other.

In seq. 11, G is smoking on the balcony [OCC5] in LAS with modern brutalist architecture fragmenting him with diagonal vectors. Shot of D's car arriving, and cut back to a closer shot of G, who flicks his cigarette in D's direction in exasperation. This is TYPa, as G uses a cigarette as a classic expression of phallic dominance against the other (Freud, 1922). A less obvious example of TYPa, however, occurs [OCC6] in seq. 19 at the club, where G casually apologizes for his smoke and lightheartedly wishes A luck with her own quitting. Masking his true intentions with friendliness, (subjecting A to his eavesdropping) the function of REC1 is again, outward identity, but this time in half-genuine vulnerability: while his presence next to A in the bar is manipulative, his smoking and interaction is not pure performance in itself -- thus we say there is a significance that belongs not solely to the spy chain of command or its addicted subject; rather, an aesthetic lacking free ethical will emerges -- a gap between subjects indicating some larger metaphysical bind.

TYPb is dominant in seq. 21; G recruits T into his scheme through a combination of blackmail and seduction via A, and after G says he's "[not threatening,] just sympathizing. You've been left to clean up the mess [of your father's black money]," T affirms solemnly, declines a cigarette, but then stares at the one G lights for himself [OCC8]. Sequence 20 is particularly interesting [OCC7], where G is seen smoking outside T and A's meeting. Ir approaches his campout, and as A passes by, G says "[A isn't my type], you are, Irna, you know that," and he continues spying by kissing Ir and keeping his eyes open. Ir's sigh of resentment afterwards indicates an important power imbalance: Ir regrets her vulnerability to G, because he justifies intimacy on a professional basis, and is furthermore a 'voyeur' (in the sense the subject's sex drive is subordinated to spying) to A, while kissing Ir (TYPa). In *A Most Wanted Man*, sex and substances are multifaceted, in that they exist in their own (traditional) right as means for pleasure, and also function as black holes characters can climb into to escape loneliness, despair (I and A and T), and of course each other (G and I). There is also the characters' practice of using the antagonisms of sexuality to manipulate each other; altogether, in the act of evading people the spies sublimate their more unconscious needs to what is acceptable in the intelligence community -- and

of course this latter superego structure is already what generates the limits of law and society itself. Transposed onto discussions of authority in real life, the spies and their world are perhaps originally a subtly attempted fantasy where we identify with heroes who are more free, yet the film instead announces itself as an intense and stressful nightmare -- more dangerous, socially encoded, and surveilled than our own realities. This progression of spy fantasy-into-nightmare illustrates how the paradoxes of desire hint at a 'traumatic core' in the psyche manifesting as prison-like limits or prohibitions (Zizek, 2009).

There are two occurrences of TYPa REC1 in seq. 25; the first [OCC9] is outside on the balcony and a replica of OCC5, but this time it is night and there is more pressure on G to secure I and F, and D walks with his team this time. OCC10 is after G has gone inside, as he lifts a pack off the desk to reveal a photo of I's father, Grigori Karpov, underneath. There is a complex power/desire/identity triangulation present in (Fosshage, 1995) G's command: "Tommy, you need to give Issa Karpov what he wants," tracable to G's compulsive need to attack and replace the paternal figure. Here, NP1 and 2 grow more indistinguishable, with NP4 overlapping. REC2, as it often does, complements REC1 in this scene, which will be elaborated on later. In another scene of psychoanalytic importance and REC pairing, Ma meets G in his "cave" (The Silbersack) in seq. 30 [OCC11] and they argue as a man hits his lover in the background, the couples' presumed love ballad playing on jukebox as G and Ma conflict ideologically (TYPa).

In seq. 31, G smokes in a park melancholically [OCC12] while A is kidnapped by the team (TYPa). [OCC13] In G's interrogation of A, he says, "Cigarette? That's right you've given up... Is that it? Is that all the fight you're going to give me?" (TYPa). The REC maintains narrative logic, and with the use of the word in this OCC, the ambiguity suggests a poetics configured across diverse filmic elements. In A's underground cell-turned bedroom, G and Ir take turns in a good cop/bad cop routine, watching each other play the role of parents concerned over their daughter's boyfriend, eventually 'approving of the relationship' once A agrees to convert I's politics. OCC13, 14, and 15 happen as G plays the verbally abusive but 'caring father' (TYPa). In contrast, A and I's love seq. in 34 find the team as voyeurs, but deep, sympathetic strings on soundtrack and their riveted expressions position G's cigarette [OCC16] as TYPb to A and I's forbidden relationship.

OCC17 is not G's cigarette, but is significant because it belongs to F's doorman, who frisks T on arrival (TYPa, seq. 36). This may serve to highlight the similarities and possible transferences between F and G, who act as father figures to I and J, and who are the most confused about Ma's betrayal in the end. In seq. 41, OCC18 is strongly TYPb: G is home in his bed, and puts out his cigarette carefully before going

to his piano to play a soft prelude, which becomes extradiegetic in the next scene to re-emphasize foreshadowing. The last cigarette [OCC19] is perhaps even more TYPb than its precedent; as G leaves the surveillance van to smoke for stress, he awkwardly makes eye contact with two male colleagues and turns around in a CU to drag in front of the spectatorship instead.

/REC2/ [OCC1] G's introduction in seq. 2 begins with an ECU of a white wine filling a wine glass, setting the tone of G's character as a sophisticated but disheveled spy [CAT1]. Sequence 10 finds G interrogating the Admiral at The Silbersack [OCC2], who is cooperative and takes, by physical use of a bottle, cash in exchange for information on I and T. We will see there is an association of money and alcohol sustained throughout *A Most Wanted Man* -- but beyond merely compelling certain social interactions in a consumer capitalist society, for the film, there is also power in the image itself, and in its position in relation to an NP 'economy' [CAT2].

In seq. 14, G is pouring a drink [OCC3] and engaging in banter with Ir, his assistant, listening to Ir's cynicism. After getting a warning phone call about Americans, and knowing Ir is uneasy about U.S. interference, G uses self-deprecating humor to restore the mood. REC2 here is a marker of G's cooperation (CAT2). Similarly, when OCC4 in seq. 19 is in combination with REC1, it helps G blend in with the rest of the club (CAT2) and behave passively, despite his intentions to spy on A, which are signified by REC1. A's meeting (CAT2) with T [OCC5] is an uncomfortable scene because of T's sexual aggressiveness, markedly more polite than their first encounter but much more explicit, especially as it relates to T's drinking of (blood) red wine. Following T until he gets home late in seq. 21, we see his wife waiting for him with scotch, but his drinking is CAT1 because she insults him for being rude, and in a LS of him angrily standing outside his colorfully lit mansion he tosses his ice in frustration [OCC6].

In seq. 25 and 27, REC2 is the top half of a clear liquor bottle—neither OCC8 nor 9 includes consumption. A LS of G against his wall entirely covered with photos, text, and labels subjects G to the claustrophobia of rising NPs 1-4 (CAT1), adding TYPb to REC1 with a tone of fear. Because REC1 and 2 do not function as oral fixations here, we may hypothesize that G's recursive 'pacifiers' are removed and he is acting on his inappropriate desires, albeit through transference. Maintaining the hypothesis of Oedipal triangulation: OCC9 is at lunch (we are back to the oral stage) spying on F's TV superego (CAT1); G chases I on his way to A's apartment, and is frustrated when he loses them in the crowded young, sexualized nightclub (hints of Freud's age taboo here).

Sequence 23 is the skyscraper cafe meeting with Ma,

when G pours whisky into his coffee as she interrogates him, trying her best to appear guiltless herself. G is not convinced, and is resentful at the American spies for intervening on his work. He leaves, both of them showing faux manners to end their 'professional' meeting. OCC7 in this sequence is still CAT2, but it's self-aware and spiteful. In another confrontation with Ma in seq. 30, G uses REC1 and 2 [OCC10, CAT2]. REC2 confirms G's identity as a regular at the Silbersack, and his 'acting out' at Ma that ensues is orchestrated by the rebellious setting, of which REC1 and 2 are important components. Their last one-on-one is in seq. 33, and this time, Ma lets G "get her drunk" [OCC11, CAT2]. The tone is reconciliatory — she sympathizes in the supermarket and reveals her fault for "Beirut,"— which is a fault yet not apologetic; her mothering tone in the scene is set by the highly quotable, "[I'm trying] to make the world a safer place."

REC2's last occurrence [OCC12] is the piano prelude in seq. 41. G is slow and melancholy, as if about to perform a farewell (CAT1). Soft yellow lighting contrasts with the harsh, green lighting used in most of the film, and the scene is all MS of G, except for one LS as he sits down to play. The cinematography, music, and recursions construct a portrait of a sensitive, intelligent G, so as to clear any confusion about who the 'good guy' is going into the climactic fall.

Aesthetics of frequency, rhythm, and combination

The high frequency and seemingly random order of RECs first appear to be simply because G is a chain-smoker. The recurrence of alcohol however, in not just G's affairs but in T's, A's, and Ma's suggests the importance of alcohol in the social realm. In addition to cigarettes and alcohol, uncomfortable sexual dynamics and advances recur. The male-spy gaze brings up voyeuristic narcissism, which can often be problematic enough to block the spectatorship off from sympathizing with characters. When we ask why G deserved his terrible fate, these social transgressions may appear as plausible justification.

Frames within the camera frame and diagonal vectors, too, are crucial iconic recursions as they emphasize the prison-like nature of every character's situation. G and other intelligence officers are caught in modern architecture, windows, while I and A get literally captured and imprisoned. The unique aspect of cigarettes and alcohol, however, lies in that they are consumable; for example, G consumes -- physically houses -- the chemicals to which he is a slave by smoking and drinking. Here a basic paradox lies at the heart of the recursive poetics: the problem of an attempted break with one's circumstances preserves the continuity.

Substances in general for *A Most Wanted Man* hold value in character mood, frame composition, etc., and therefore their recursive structure as they graft on to

each NP offers a glimpse into the aesthetics of the film as a whole. For example, the purpose of cigarettes in each occurrence distinguishes a loose rhythmic mood for G: blasé and tragic when NP1 is dominant in the first few sequences; focused and hyper-masculine as he closes in on F and I when all NPs are active; vulnerable and tragic as the climax approaches and he realizes NP4 affects him more than NPs 1 or 3. When TYPa is present, so is G's masculinity, ambition, etc., and in combination with REC2 CAT1, the presence of TYPb in REC1 only adds to the portrait of a damaged, egoistic spy. G's smoking becomes less vulnerable in the honest sense during the rising action: G uses TYPb mostly to manipulate, he exhibits dominance smoking, and he becomes more interrogative. However, after witnessing I's struggle between love and religious piety, G's smoking become less frequent and more sympathetic, and if still masculine, then in a more fatherly sense. This decrease in frequency is an important change in rhythm, especially with respect to I's sexual reticence due to character and religion; we might say that G, through identifying with I's powerlessness across the political, social, and metaphysical realms, receives a short-term replacement for his own similarly caused mental distress, as one might through self-reflective psychotherapeutic treatment. As G draws nearer to the fateful repetition of the Beirut disaster, he regresses to a kind of infantile narcissism, in which upon seeing his reflection in I on the security camera feed he gains sufficient ego fulfillment before he brings I into the hands of the international authorities. Thus, G's unconscious knowledge for the need of preparing for a great loss, and a vaguely mounting guilt, is expressed by the slowed rhythm.

Alcohol usage is varied amongst characters but its purposes remain consistent, and rhythmic structure closely resembles that of REC1. The tone of its appearance manifests as: reclusive; friendly; mixed; reclusive; mixed; friendly; reclusive. For example, seq. 2 opens with an ECU of the wine being poured emphasizing its sole, or at least personal significance. Sequences 10 and 14 have G's social drinking, and his dialogue during and up until this point has been joking and lighter than seq. 2's. G's drinking and smoking at the club to blend in and spy on A is a friendly manner layered on top of a sinister intention, and T's drinking in the next scene combines a mask of elegance barely hiding the desire to disregard boundaries. The next two REC2s are mixed but firmly headed towards spite and reclusion; seq. 25 and 27 find G reclusive and the bar-fight scene is mixed. Ma's revelation to G is superficial, but friendship triumphs for the moment; and the last REC2 appears in G's home, CAT2, as a soft foreshadowing. The aesthetic symmetries in REC and narrative structure predict a philosophy of loss, as in Le Carré's earlier novel *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, though more convoluted in keeping with the postmodern condition (Ritt, 1965).

One achievement of the postmodern film is to create

a realistic fiction self-aware enough to deconstruct itself, while still holding the power of interpolation (keeping viewers interested) and interrogation (curiosity, reflection). Recursive tracing works similar to NP study in that all the TYP/CATs and NPs have a stake in a given shot (OCC in the case of REC), and yet only one, and at most a limited few, memorable meanings are communicated. Mapping the linear appearance of signifiers, and then the multiplicities and hierarchies within each signifier (as precipitated by their interrelations) allows for illustrative and concrete interpretations. The main principle (PRINC) of combination of the recursive cigarettes and alcohol for *A Most Wanted Man* is the achievement of structural gendering in a scene, sequence, or character. The masculine/feminine binary is held together by the other iconic recursions, serving to emphasize difference and thus hierarchy in a scene; e.g. the weathered spy, G flings his cigarette in derision of oppressive, modernist architecture.

In this process, NPs are united as the associations attached to the RECs weave together a logic to maintain narrative continuity and in doing so create meanings useful to the overall aesthetic of the film. For example, the combination of REC1, 2 in G's piano scene is firstly for G to control his nerves before the climax. But his cigarette also has relevance to his identity in the immediately preceding conversation with J, in which G takes F's place as father. Moreover, before playing soft classical music, G sets his drink on the piano in a profoundly retiring moment. The transferability of artistic creation and addiction, again, appears to be due to similar processes of sublimation in the psyche. The positive and negative qualities, the essence, and the limits of both become increasingly interchangeable.

Conclusions

In tracing the recursive images in the film, and then exploring their multifaceted value to the NPs, I find that in addition to functioning as acts to further the narrative programs, the substance usage signifies a core psychoanalytic lack, which is then fixed to various political, sexual, and addictive objects or ideas. As we determine how the recursive image exerts the power of filmic arrest, we also get a sense of how certain forms of powerlessness are aesthetically pleasing in the film as a whole. Characters use manipulation on each other and themselves in order to try and transcend their problems; the underlying philosophical question in *A Most Wanted Man* lies in the questions of subjectivity -- especially because a deep conflict is misinterpretation. We regret that G fails in the end to the 'bad guys,' but we also find that the concepts of goodness and evil are too unstable to rely on in the first place; authorities confuse fear with valor, I is too naive to realize his charity funds terrorism, and G is too tired and longing for redemption to realize his good actions appear dangerous to the international intelligence body. Finding the characters trapped in their subjectivities, my research

on the recursive imagery in *The Most Wanted Man* arrives at a “poetics of imprisonment.” This poetics of recursion hinges on a tapering off near the climax, precisely when investment in characters is at maximum. Hence, manipulating, watching, and most importantly, identifying with Issa, replaces Gunther’s lack, which he otherwise replaces with addictive behavior. Gunther’s subjectivity is disrupted by means of the surveillance camera’s video feed, and thus *A Most Wanted Man* suggests that the ‘lack’ that is a painful fact of life is indispensable when it comes to our drives, mistakes, and our ability to empathize.

Finally, for this “poetics of imprisonment,” we can contextualize a certain amount of its pessimism and confusion historically: by remembering the film’s postmodernisms. If the reality that this film puts forward appears bleak or meaningless, the possibility we have again misinterpreted a fundamental irony also remains strong. To quote Lyotard (1978), communication is a “game,” in which “the [rules] only stabilize when they cease to be stakes” (1978). Our lack of freedom, physical or psychological, is one of the names for beauty -- and for viewers, critics, philosophers, and artists, to draw inspiration from their boundaries, to share the limits of their subjectivities, and to communicate their knowledge, then perhaps partly fulfills the wish contained in *A Most Wanted Man*: “to make the world a safer place...”

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Philosophy

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