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A European Fantasy in Crisis:
On Filmic Fantastic and the Deadlock of Post-Democracy
in *Il était une seconde fois* (2019)

1. Introduction

The French television series *Il était une seconde fois* (2019), which is currently available on Netflix, originally premiered in August 2019 on Arte and was written and directed by Guillaume Nicloux.[1] The French director is known foremost for his film about and with the (in-)famous author Michel Houellebecq, but he has also produced some remarkable crime mystery films. The miniseries *Il était une seconde fois* is quintessentially about the French protagonist's incapability to overcome his break-up with his Franco-British girlfriend Louise Arron (Freya Mavor). One night, suffering from insomnia and an implied overuse of pharmaceutical drugs and alcohol, said protagonist, Vincent Dauda (Gaspard Ulliel), decides to go down into his cellar where he finds a wooden cube among the packages brought to him the day before by his coloured postman (Jonathan Manzambi). On close examination he realizes that by traversing the empty cube he travels nine months back into his pre-break-up past. Henceforth Vincent abandons his ordinary life and spends most of his time within the cube – thus in the past – in order to prevent his break-up with Louise which is set to happen on Valentine's Day. Subsequently, the diegesis is split in two, namely the narrated world within the cube and the one outside of it. In order to distinguish between these two narrative levels, Nicloux applies two different film formats. While the plot within the cube is depicted employing the format 4:3, the format 16:9 is used for the plot in the 'real' world. However, due to the abuse of drugs, the effects of insomnia, and Vincent's extensive grief, the ontological status of the plot within the cube remains unclear. While Vincent's activities in the past could form part of a dream or a drug induced hallucination since the time travel never seems to work when other characters are present, the cube might just as well facilitate access to his pre-break-up past. The

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1 Guillaume Nicloux: *Il était une seconde fois*, France 2019, in: netflix.com (22.02.2023)

predominant narrative structure of the series is thus genuinely fantastic in terms of the structuralist concept of the genre outlined by Tzvetan Todorov since the (implicit) spectator hesitates between two alternative explanations for the event of the time travel, namely a natural *(l'étrange)* and a supernatural *(le merveilleux)* explanation.[2]

However, while the hesitation between these two readings persists until the end of the plot, there is a striking difference between the contemporary television series and the 19th century texts analysed by Todorov. Within the latter the event or the phenomenon at the root of the fantastic hesitation is typically of an uncanny nature disrupting the routine of everyday life. The series in contrast seems to invert this notion. The cube and the time travel are to be grasped rather as appeasing than disturbing elements within the series. On the contrary, it is diegetical 'reality' itself outside of the cube which becomes increasingly uncanny. This is marked foremost by narratological differences between the two diegetical levels: While the plot within the cube is relatively linear, the use of specific filmic audio-visual narrative devices renders the plot outside of the cube fragmentary, opaque, and even cyclical. On the visual level, almost unperceivable jump cuts resulting in significant ellipses, prolepses disguised as *mindscreens* or unmarked prolepses generate a subtle but no less uncanny effect linked to a certain notion of achronicity while simultaneously the plot maintains nonetheless a rather linear appearance. On the auditory level, inexplicable sounds that could either be grasped as being part of the narrated world or as something alien emanating from the Off, invade otherwise completely ordinary events. In this regard, Vincent's first encounter with his postman constitutes a paradigmatic instance of such a cinematographic form of the fantastic, since an almost unfathomable jump cut leads to the eruption of an even more disturbing sound, which – as I will argue – is tied to the frequently introduced images of the wind turbines. Consequently, I would argue that the series is fantastic in a twofold way. While it complies structurally with the Todorovian definition, these audio-visual narrative devices are part of a genuine cinematographic fantastic which has emerged in the last decades and I would argue that the emergence of this genuine cinematographic fantastic could be grasped as a symptom of a democratic crisis. Hence, in order to examine this rather general notion within an analysis of a particular text, this article sets out to illustrate how the

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2 Cf. Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris 1970, p. 36f.

distinctly fantastic audio-visual narrative devices in *Il était une seconde fois* (2019) point to a specific political crisis in contemporary France, namely the yellow vest protests. However, since the series' plot never explicitly reveals the semantic function of the uncanny buzzing sounds or the fragmented time of the diegesis, how are these audio-visual traces to be read? How can we facilitate a *political* reading of the apparently unreadable? Or to recapitulate Rosemary Jackson's proposition, how can we extend the analysis of (this new variant of) the fantastic from an investigation of its poetics "into one aware of the *politics* of its form"[3]?

Based on the notion of political allegory outlined by Doris Sommer I will propose at the outset to read Vincent's relationship with Louise within the cube as an allegorical search for a European identity for France. I will argue that the series' unconventional love story, which in a way transcends traditional monogamy, points towards an imagined community which transcends the nation-state and establishes what I will call a European fantasy. Subsequently, I will analyse the curious correspondence of the shape of the cube, the film format 4:3 used for the allegorical love story within the cube, and Kazimir Malevich's famous painting *Black Square* (1915) which is positioned next to the protagonist at the beginning of the series. I will argue that Malevich's painting works like a gap or fissure in diegetical 'reality' outside of the cube which renders said 'reality' unstable and is thus at the root of the fragmented, opaque, and even cyclical narration. Due to its similarity in shape with the *Black Square*, I will suggest to grasp the film format 4:3 and thus the allegorical love story as a 'fantasy window' which seeks to cover up this fissure in diegetical 'reality'. The transnational love story, which seems to negotiate a European identity, works hence as a fantasy projection in order to cover up a (political) fissure. I will illustrate how this fissure is linked to the yellow vest protests which are accordingly to be grasped as the kernel of the political crisis which shines through the surface of the rather trivial love story. The specifically fantastic narrative devices, such as the uncanny buzzing sounds or the unmarked prolepses, are consequently to be read as symptoms of this crisis and call for closer examination. The last two parts of this article will thus focus on an analysis of two examples of these audio-visual devices. Firstly, I will examine the indeterminate buzzing sound audible during Vincent's first encounter with his postman, which

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3 Rosemary Jackson: *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion*, London/New York 1988, p. 6.

seems to mark a subtle antagonism between the two characters and which, as I will show, points towards the internal contradictions of the yellow vest protests. Secondly, I will facilitate a reading of the uncanny noise of a train when Louise is first introduced, in order to grasp Louise's traumatic past in terms of a deadlock of what Chantal Mouffe would call post-democracy.[4] In short, the primary aim of this article is to demonstrate how an in-depth analysis of the narrative structure typical for the fantastic genre enables an understanding of the social contradictions and antagonisms which underlie the contemporary post-political societies and keep on haunting Western Europe up-to-date.

2. What's love got to do with it: Eros, Polis, and Political Allegory

Since the primary objective of this article will be to facilitate a reading of the political dimension of Nicloux's series, it seems to me that there is no better way to begin the analysis than with a reference to a relatively recent political event. In November 2021, the French public and the French media respectively realized that Macron's government had changed the colour of the French flag.[5] In 1976, the former president of France, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, had adjusted the nuance of blue to match the European flag.[6] The slight change made by Macron was thus merely a return to the original French *tricolore* and a portrayal of French Sovereignty in contrast to Macron's own Europe friendly politics. Even though many French journals underscore July 13th, 2020[7] as the date Macron decided to cease to use the flag proposed by the European d'Estaing/*destin*[8], it was, in fact, already for his New Year's Eve address to the nation on December 31st 2018 that Macron had first opted for the variant with a darker shade of blue. Given the date, I would argue that it is almost impossible to not read this change as an immediate response to the national crisis posed by the outburst of the *Mouvement des gilets jaunes,* known as the yellow vest protests which began on November 17th, 2018 and lasted over several months. Sparked by

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4 Chantal Mouffe: *On the Political*, London 2005, p. 29.
5 Cf. Arnaud Truchet: "Emmanuel Macron a fait changer la couleur du drapeau français", in: *La Nouvelle République*, 15.12.2021, bit.ly/3YpYqcU (22.02.2023).
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Due to a curious coincidence, the former president's last name invokes – via homophony with the French word *destin* – the question of a European destiny for France.

a widespread discontent over a tax rise on petrol and diesel – a reformato-ry measure intended to put forward an ecological energy transition – the protests formed a genuine dysphoric moment for what Slavoj Žižek called "the Macron dream" or the "enthusiasm about Macron […] provid[ing] a new vision of progressive European identity" for France.[9] In this sense, the change of the national emblem can be read as an ideological *strategy of containment*[10], which allows Macron to suppress those social contradic-tions brought to light by the protests threatening the European fantasy of what Étienne Balibar calls neoliberal Macronism.[11]

However, as the brief summary of the series at the outset of this article has shown, *Il était une seconde fois* (2019) centres foremost on the private love story of Vincent and Louise and some readers might rightfully con-test that throughout the series there is no direct depiction of any political crisis to be found. At this point, we might resort to Fredric Jameson's in-sight that history in its radical dimension as "an absent cause […] cannot be directly or immediately conceptualised"[12]. Nonetheless the following question remains: how is this mere private love story to be grasped in the light of this political crisis? An answer to this might be provided by anoth-er question made famous by an American text, namely "what's love got to do with [it]"[13]. Naturally, it is not Tina Turner's love song but rather Doris Sommer's *Foundational Fiction* (1991) we need to turn to. In her monumental work on Latin American romances, Sommer explores "*why* eroticism and nationalism become figures of each other […] and […] *how* the rhetorical relationship between heterosexual passion and hegemonic states functions as a mutual allegory, as if each discourse were grounded in the allegedly stable other"[14]. Yet, even though Tina Turner would tell us that love is just a second hand emotion or, as Fredric Jameson might

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9   Slavoj Žižek: "The yellow vest protesters revolting against centrism mean well – but their left wing populism won't change French politics", in: *Independent*, 17.12.2018, bit.ly/3JYjjrc (22.02.2023).

10   Cf. Fredric Jameson: *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca 1981, p. 38. Jameson's notion of cultural artefacts as strategies of containment of class antagonisms can best "be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradictions", p. 77.

11   Cf. Étienne Balibar: "Gilets jaunes: le sens du face à face", in: *Mediapart*, 18.12.2018, bit.ly/2DuWIyE (22.02.2023).

12   Jameson: *The Political Unconscious*, p. 62.

13   Doris Sommer: *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, Berkeley 1991, p. 30.

14   Sommer: *Foundational Fictions*, p. 31.

put it; romance is merely the placeholder for a national allegory[15], we should insist on Sommer's insight not to give priority to either register, but to understand "that Eros and Polis are the effects of each other's performance"[16]. Grasped dialectically, it becomes clear how "one libidinal investment", e.g. the libidinal investment into an imagined community like the nation, "ups the ante for the other"[17], in this context being gender identity and heterosexual passion.

1 Il était une seconde fois (2019): Louise and Vincent represent an inverted tricolore.

Thus, it seems hardly surprising that most reviews on the series have two things in common. They all seem to praise the utmost authenticity of the love story, especially Louise's proposal of an open relationship *(un ménage à quatre)* and her lack of emotional commitment. Yet additionally and more importantly, they all have equally chosen a very peculiar *still* as their heading.[18] Here, Louise wears a red blouse and Vincent a blue

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15 For a more detailed account on the relationship of romance and national allegory according to Jameson see: Fredric Jameson: "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", in *Social Text* 15 (1986).

16 Sommer: *Foundational Fictions*, p. 47.

17 Ibid., p. 48.

18 Cf. Daniel Hart: "Twice Upon a Time Season 1 Review: Flitting Between Times For Love", in: *Ready Steady Cut*, 16.12.2019, bit.ly/3YKkRZV (22.02.2023).

shirt (*still* 1). Due to the white sand between them, I would argue that the colour composition of this *still* (*still* 1) represents an inverted *tricolore*. The blocking of this scene and the following keeps Louise (red) on the left and Vincent (blue) on the right side of the frame underscoring thus the intentionality of this arrangement. Given that an inverted flag is the symbol for a nation in crisis, I would argue that the status of their relationship is linked to a specific political imaginary. The *mise-en-scène* at the beach showcases an inverted *tricolore*, since Louise is proposing a *ménage à quatre* between her British ex-partner James, Vincent's French ex-wife, and the two of them. Accordingly, the blocking in another scene within the cube (*still* 2 and 3) plays with this connotation, inverting the flag according to the status of their relationship. As long as they get along the flag remains inverted, with Louise (blue) on the right and Vincent (red) on the left (*still* 2). Yet, as soon as they have an argument the flag switches back to the ordinary arrangement of the colours of the French *tricolore* (*still* 3). Interestingly, the success of the relationship is linked to the imagery of a national crisis. Thus, unlike the national romances analysed by Sommer, where the success of a monogamous heterosexual relationship would be tantamount to a national utopia, the erotic model transcending the heterosexual norms of monogamy – as proposed by Louise – apparently stands in opposition to the nation. Therefore, I would argue that the inversion of the *tricolore* suggests that the series' unconventional love story, which in a way transcends traditional monogamy, points towards an imagined community which transcends the nation-state.

2–3 Il était une seconde fois (2019): The National tricolore according to the status of their relationship (blue jacket and red shirt)

In order to further determine this transnational imagined community evoked by the private love story we need to turn firstly to the character Louise. Born to a rich British father and a French mother, Louise belongs to a transnational European bourgeois elite. Throughout the series she

resides in Paris, London, and Reykjavik, which emphasizes her European cosmopolitanism. Additionally, we need to consider that Vincent's obsession with Louise leads to the negligence of his son and his French ex-wife Nadège (Claire Sermonne). The first observation leads me to propose that the series' love story is to be read as an allegorical negotiation in search for Europe as a transnational imagined community. Furthermore, I would argue that Vincent's desire for this European imagined community by means of an erotic alliance with Louise is at the root of the national crisis evoked by the imagery of the inverted *tricolore.* After all, this desire is the reason why he neglects his son who could be grasped as the genealogical future of a French nation based on the French-French alliance with Nadège. Interestingly, the latter is remarried to the Muslim Stephan who in turn is introduced to the viewer by his monologue in defence of the militant Islamist group Daesh commonly known as the Islamic State. The portrayal of Stephan as being incapable of satisfying Nadège's sexual needs and her subsequent, yet unanswered desire for her French ex-husband clearly alludes to the ongoing discourse on French identity (supposedly 'endangered' by Islamic influence) – a discourse perpetuated not only by right-wing politicians in France. The allegorical outset of the series' love story is thus rather simple: The French lower middle class subject's desire for a European identity for France (or, in Sommer's terms, his desire for a transnational imagined community Europe) suppresses a nationalist (and islamophobic) alternative. This opposition at the heart of the series' allegorical outset – the opposition between an identification with a European transnational elite (Louise) on the one hand and a potential resurgence of a nationalist movement (Nadège) on the other – clearly mirrors the alternative French citizens (Vincent) were faced with during the second round of the French presidential election in 2017, namely the choice between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, leading to the former's presidency. In other words, I would claim that it is precisely neoliberal Macronism that the political allegory in *Il était une seconde fois* (2019) primarily revolves around.

However, despite the claim of some reviews that this (allegorical) love story would have worked out better without the time travel theme, with a more linear narration, and naturally a more satisfying ending[19], it is precisely the dysphoric moment keeping the text from closure that is of

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19 Cf. Paul Levinson: "Twice upon a Time: After Sunset", in: *Paul Levingson's Infinit Regress*, 12.05.2020, bit.ly/3Ih94fh (22.02.2023).

interest here since the series' particular narrative structure adds a further level of meaning to this allegorical narrative. While Vincent's European fantasy (of a committed relationship with Louise) provokes the imagery of a national crisis, the European fantasy, which is only accessible to the protagonist within the cube, is itself always already initiated by its own impossibility, namely the break-up. As the series' title already suggests, the European fairy-tale love story is already an empty repetition. Hence, it turns out that the European fantasy is itself in crisis. In this context, I would propose to consider Stephan Leopold's elaboration on Sommer's notion of political allegories. For Leopold suggests that, due to the subject's libidinal investment in its imagined community, allegorical narration as a way of traumatic repetition is the subject's response to its dysphorically experienced imagined community.[20] For example, he grasps the terrorist attacks from 9/11 as a dysphoric moment for the imagined community of the USA and outlines how subsequent Hollywood blockbusters such as *Alexander* (2004), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), and *Troy* (2004) work as allegorical repetitions with the purpose to surmount the historical trauma and reconstitute the US's self-perception.[21] In regard to the series in question, I would argue that the yellow vest protests need to be understood precisely as such a dysphoric moment which threatened the imagined community established under Macronism, which in turn provided a European identity for France. The series *Il était une seconde fois* (2019) is hence to be read as a traumatic allegorical repetition which seeks to reconstitute a European fantasy within the cube. However, unlike the symbolic act of the change of blue of the French *drapeau tricolore* ordered by Macron, which, as a strategy of containment, intends to cover up the social contradictions, the series rather functions as a critique of said fantasy. Yet, to grasp the position of the yellow vest protests within the series' allegorical narrative, we need to further examine the narrative function of the diegetical split and the role of the audio-visual devices which produce a genuine cinematographic fantastic.

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20 Stephan Leopold: *Liebe im Ancien Régime: Eros und Polis von Corneille bis Sade*, Paderborn 2014, p. 56.
21 Ibid., p. 57.

3. The Fantastic and the *Black Square,* or Always Trouble with the European *truc*

Allegorical narratives which make use of new sexual alliances transcending heterosexual monogamy to produce imagined communities which transcend the nation-state – and vice versa –, seem to be a recent phaenomenon and can be found in several contemporary melodramas.[22] However, it is precisely the fantastic narrative structure of the series *Il était une seconde fois* (2019) which grants a fuller understanding of the social antagonisms underlying these political fantasies.

While Nicloux's series is most often labelled either as a drama or as science fiction, its dominant narrative structure clearly displays the major characteristics of the fantastic genre as outlined by Todorov, namely doubt (hesitation). As Todorov himself puts it: *"L'hésitation du lecteur* est donc la première condition du fantastique. […] Il faut que le texte oblige le lecteur à considérer le monde des personnages comme un monde de personnes vivantes et à hésiter entre une explication naturelle et une explication surnaturelle des évènements évoqués"[23]. While Vincent never doubts the ontological status of the world within the cube – which would be Todorov's second but merely optional condition of the fantastic[24] – the structure of the series creates doubt for the implicit viewer. For example, when Vincent tells his cousin Thibaut, a pharmacist, about the cube, the latter answers, „Si ça se trouve, t'as des cristaux de ‚kéta' dans les sinus." [25], and adds „T'as besoin d'une aide extérieure, pas d'un cousin qui te dépanne en médocs" [26]. Ketamine – the substance in question – is a pharmaceutical drug which can produce strong hallucinations and immediately before Vincent finds the cube, he fumbles with some tablets on his bedside table, implying the use of these drugs which his cousin constantly provides him with. Furthermore, characters repeatedly point to Vincent's apparent drinking problem since he always seems to smell of alcohol: "C'est pour ça que tu pues l'alcool dès le matin?"[27]. Hence, the protagonist, to whom the camera is always bound during the episodes within the cube is destabilized. Therefore, as Claudia Pinkas has suggested

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22 In fact, I would reckon this accounts for the utmost success of many Netflix series such as e.g. the Mexican production *Quien mató a Sara?* (2021).
23 Todorov: *Introduction*, p. 36f.
24 Cf. ibid.
25 Nicloux: Ep. 1, 00:27:40.
26 Ibid., 00:29:19.
27 Ibid., Ep. 2, 00:42:06.

for fantastic films, the ontological status of the scenes themselves might be unclear. Either it is an objective non-focalized camera depicting the events or it might as well be an unmarked subjective *mindscreen* of the protagonist.[28] So while the naturalness of Vincent's double life pulls the series towards *le merveilleux*, Vincent's abuse of drugs, his insurmountable grief, and other devices employed mark the plot within the cube potentially as a dream or a hallucination, thus pulling the series back towards *l'étrange*. Yet, the metaphorical door of doubt, outlined by Todorov[29], is never fully closed.

Nonetheless, as Todorov himself remarked, the transgressions of and the differences in regard to the structural norm of a genre are what distinguishes art from mass culture and it is this difference which is the most revealing.[30] At this point, we may dare to read Todorov with Caillois, which is not farfetched since the latter constitutes the theoretical outset of the former's elaborations.[31] From this angle, Todorov's notion of the hesitation concerning the ontological status of a phenomenon stems from a fissure in the diegetic reality. Or as Roger Caillois points out : „[l]e fantastique est rupture de l'ordre reconnu, irruption de l'inadmissible au sein de l'inaltérable légalité quotidienne"[32]. Yet, unlike fantastic texts of the 19th century, the phenomenon whose ontological status is in doubt in Nicloux's series does not produce a fissure in the diegetic reality. I would argue, on the contrary, that the scenes within the cube literally cover up an already existing fissure. We merely need to reconsider the film format 4:3 (exemplified in *still* 4) used to represent the plot within the cube. This format clearly mimics the shape of the cube itself (*still* 5). Yet, there is a third element repeating the very same shape, namely Kazimir Malevich's painting *Black Square* which is positioned over the protagonist's right shoulder (*still* 6) at the beginning of the series. Nicloux underscores the relevancy of this scene by a slow fade-in of the protagonist's name (*still* 7). The fact that this positioning of the painting is by no means of a purely aesthetic nature, but rather emphasizes the central role of the *Black Square* in the series, is further underscored by a scientific radio transmission on

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28 Cf. Claudia Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film: instabile Narrationen und die Narration der Instabilität*, Berlin 2010, p. 135.
29 Cf. Todorov: *Introduction*, p. 30.
30 Cf. Todorov: *Introduction*, p. 11ff.
31 Ibid., p. 31.
32 Roger Caillois: *Au cœur du fantastique*, Paris 1965, p. 61

4–7 Iᴌ ÉTAIT UNE SECONDE FOIS (2019): Coinciding Shapes: The Film Format 4:3, the Cube, and Kazimir Malevich's Black Square.

black holes in the universe changing the perception of time and reality which is heard throughout the previous scene. Due to the painting's resemblance with a black hole, I would argue that this notion of the change of time and perception is hereby linked to the painting. Hence, I would read the *Black Square* as a fissure or gap in diegetical 'reality', which in turn is to be grasped as the cause of the uncanny, fragmented, and elliptical narrative structure of the plot outside of the cube. Accordingly, I would claim that – due to their identity in shape – the cube and the film format 4:3 serve to cover up this fissure in diegetic reality, providing a more linear narration.

In psychoanalytical terms, the cube could then be read as being "essentially a fantasy window"[33]. The subsequent split of the diegesis would thus function similar to the cinematographic narration in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, where Hitchcock's protagonist Jeff, incapacitated due to a broken leg, "puts off indefinitely the (sexual) act"[34] with Grace Kelly inside his apartment. Whereas his rear window offers a phantasmatic screen or a fantasy window onto which he projects all "fantasy figurations of what

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33 Slavoj Žižek: *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge 1991, p. 92.
34 Ibid.

could happen to him and Grace Kelly"[35]. In the series in question the two sides of the fantasy window consist in the side of the fantasy itself within the cube – with all the fantasy figurations of Vincent and Louise in her bourgeois luxury apartment – and the very place from which it is looked at – the desolate and melancholic lower middle class suburb. The transnational fantasy of a European relationship with Louise within the cube is to be understood, as I will argue below, as all the possible configurations of a neoliberal promise to the lower middle class subject that it may join the European elite in their luxury apartment of excessive enjoyment. By means of the diegetical split in form of a fantasy window, Nicloux exemplifies how this European fantasy within the cube offers an imaginary solution to – or a Macronian *strategy of containment* of – an actual impasse of 'reality' outside of the cube which is visualized by Malevich's *Black Square*[36]. Yet, in order to grasp a further dimension of the fantasy window and thus to determine the precise semantic function of this fissure in diegetical 'reality', it is necessary to consider the Lacanian notion of fantasy. According to Lacan, the scenes played on a fantasy screen operate like "a frozen image on a cinema screen; just as the film may be stopped at a certain point in order to avoid showing a traumatic scene which follows"[37]. The primary function of the European fantasy, that is of the scenes within the cube, is hence the avoidance of another scene. In this sense, I would propose examining the establishing scene of the series since the radio transmission on the black hole connects the latter with Malevich's painting.

The establishing scene of the series literally begins *in media res:* While a medium close-up shot depicts Vincent and a red-haired woman during coitus having a simultaneous orgasm, the blocking of the following shot positions the protagonist next to a painting of the *Nursing Madonna* (*still* 8) and subsequently traces his transition from the bedroom to a bourgeois lounge stocked with luxury décor, where an excessive party is taking place. The depiction of the ecstatic orgasm and the subsequent positioning of the protagonist next to the painting of Virgin Mary breastfeeding baby Jesus – the representation of the mother-child dyad *par excellence* (still 8) – already suggest the pre-oedipal logic of the establishing scene. Additionally, the fragmentary bits of dialog within the scene turn exclusively

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35 Ibid.
36 Cf. ibid., p. 93.
37 Ibid.

8 Il était une seconde fois (2019): Nursing Madonna: The Pre-Oedipal Dyad

around 'the Thing': "le truc"[38]. Even though the characters seem to use the word as a reference to a party drug, I would argue that the general isotopy of excessive enjoyment produced by the orgasm and the excess of the party as well as the logic of the mother-child-dyad evoked by the painting favour a secondary reading of *le truc* in psychoanalytical terms, namely as the notion of *das Ding*.[39] The concept of *das Ding* refers to the pre-symbolic/pre-oedipal, maternal thing as the incarnation of an impossible *jouissance* (enjoyment). It is basically the subject's retroactive imagination of an uncorrupted enjoyment in symbiosis with the mother before the castrative intervention of the father. The point is of course that the "symbolic prohibition of enjoyment in the Oedipus complex (the incest taboo) is […], paradoxically, the prohibition of something which is already impossible"[40]. However, why does the series so firmly emphasize the pre-oedipal logic of its establishing scene? How could the painting of the Madonna and Jesus be connected to the *Black Square* – the fissure in diegetic 'reality' – or even to the yellow vest protest? In order to fully grasp the function of sex, enjoyment, and the painting in the opening scene, I

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38 Nicloux: *Il était une seconde fois*, Ep. 1, 00:02:14–00:02:30.
39 Cf. Slavoj Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London 1989, p. 146. For Lacan's elaboration of the term see: Jacques Lacan: "L'Éthique de la psychanalyse" (1959–1960), in: Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.): *Le séminaire, livre VII*, Paris 1986, p. 71–85.
40 Dylan Evans: *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London 2006, p. 94.

would argue that it is necessary to contemplate two further aspects. Firstly, we need to consider the tremendous contrast between the depiction of enjoyment in the establishing scene and the general melancholic atmosphere of loss that dominates throughout the rest of the series (at least outside of the cube). Secondly, the ontological status of the opening scene itself needs to be examined. I would propose starting out with the latter.

The whole series is framed by two wild parties comprising of exactly the same people pertaining to the protagonist's lower middle class milieu. The obvious difference between those two parties is their location. While the party of the establishing scene takes place in a bourgeois lounge resembling Louise's flat, the second at the end of the series is located in Vincent's living room in a run-down middle class suburb. This change of location clearly points towards a socioeconomic dimension of the series' development. Yet, to read this transition as a linear socioeconomic decline of the lower middle class subject throughout the series would miss the essential point since the crucial (and easily missed) difference between the two concerns the uncertainty of the ontological status of the first party analysed above. When asked by his cousin Thibault about the red-haired woman immediately after the first party, the protagonist's *mind screen* produces a rather peculiar effect. Instead of serving as the portrayal of a memory, it functions as an unmarked prolepsis portraying a scene with the anonymous red-haired woman from the second party at the end of the series. The cyclical notion of the series produced by this doubled narrative device – consisting of a *mind screen* and a prolepsis – emphasises the phantasmatic status of the first party. The first party is, hence, constituted as an always already impossible moment of completeness situated somewhere before (or even outside of) the diegesis. This is precisely why any interpretations of the change of location of the parties as a consecutive socioeconomic decline would fall short since the depiction of the sexual and financial completeness of the lower middle class subject (Vincent) within the party of the opening scene is an always already impossible projection. In other words, the establishing scene is the retroactive imagination – which is subsequently constructed as the lost object around which the series revolves. In this regard, the second aspect, namely the contrast between the opening depiction of completeness and the general atmosphere of loss, seems even more of importance.

The essential point here is that the establishing scene of the party of excessive enjoyment ends with a massively hard cut, while the following scene's depiction of the protagonist in his car unmistakably conveys an

atmosphere of melancholia and loss. Since the radio transmission heard in his car revolves around the nature of black holes in the universe, which already foreshadows the *Black Square* (as indicated in *still 7*), I would argue that this cut could be read as the dysphoric disruption of the retroactive imagination of this party of *jouissance*. The cut hence functions like the castrative intervention of the father in the pre-oedipal mother/child dyad evoked by the imagery of the establishing scene. Consequently, it is precisely this cut (of castration) which both produces the fissure in diegetical 'reality' – visualized by the *Black Square* – and the general melancholic feeling of loss throughout the series. The lost object is then nothing less than the ominous *truc* – the pre-oedipal, maternal thing.

The originality of the cut is further underscored by the fact that the camera man of the production (Yves Capes) also plays the nameless terrorist who blows up the wind turbines at the end of the series. As a metonymy of the camera movement, the doubled figure *character/ cameraman* is the actual agent of the cut (of castration). Given that wind turbines are the symbol of the energy transition *par excellence* and since the measures taken by Macron in accordance with a European energy transition were the primary target of the yellow vest protests, I would claim that this cut functions precisely as the allegorical repetition of the dysphoric moment which the yellow vest protests posed for "the Macron dream" or the "enthusiasm about Macron […] provid[ing] a new vision of a progressive European identity" for France.[41]

In a way, the establishing scene then turns out to be like a neoliberal promise to the lower middle class subject that it may join the European elite in their luxury apartment of excessive enjoyment. The actual impossibility of this notion, however, is precisely the traumatic kernel the European fantasy seeks to avoid. The *truc* grasped as the Lacanian notion of *das Ding* is then a paradoxical object[42]: On the one hand, Vincent

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41 Žižek: "The yellow vest protesters".

42 I would conceptualize *le truc* here as the European *Ding* which provides the coordinates for Vincent's cognitive mapping of his being-in-the-world. In the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, Fredric Jameson had already suggested that the cognitive mapping of the subject would be "organized around the categories of a new triumvirate of superstates (the US, Europe and Japan)". In other words, while the world was essentially divided into the West and the (communist) East during the Cold war period, the fall of the Soviet Union left a vacuum and new coordinates for a geopolitical mapping were needed. Albeit this is not the place to discuss the actual existence of such superstates, we might, nonetheless, conclude that Louise/*le truc* – as the object of Vincent's European fantasy – functions precisely along these lines since she provides Vincent, the French member of the lower middle

desires it as the object once lost. On the other hand, he must maintain a certain distance to it in order to veil its actual impossibility and thus keep the desire alive. The cube as a window for the European fantasy functions accordingly: Vincent's desire for Louise is based on the illusion that if Louise just finally committed to a monogamous relationship, he would once again find himself in the enjoyment of the establishing scene. Allegorically speaking, the lower middle class subject's desire for a European identity is based on the illusion that if Europe fully committed to France's needs – in a monogamous relationship –, the neoliberal promise would be fulfilled. Yet, this promise is itself an impossible object – an illusion. The erotic model of the *ménage à quatre*, on the contrary, makes sure to maintain the necessary distance to the promise and thus veils its inherent impossibility. The most dominant narratological feature of the series, however, is the narrative split, which is – as I have argued – produced by the cut (of castration) grasped allegorically as the yellow vest protests. For the dysphoric dimension of the eruption of the protests in France consists precisely in the fact that they exposed the neoliberal promise of the European fantasy as an impossible illusion: Macron's Europe friendly politics are, as the protests suggest, played out on the back of the lower middle class subject and only favour the European elite. In this regard, I would read the plot within the cube as a dysphoric repetition of Vincent's neoliberal European fantasy which seeks to (re-)contain the social contradiction rendered visible by the yellow vest protests. It is a constant attempt to save Louise from sudden death – to save Europe from disruption. Yet, the plot outside of the cube tells a different story. The Cailloisian fissure in diegetical 'reality' – materialised by Malevich's *Black Square* – produces, as I will argue, a subtle eruption in form of several audio-visual devices which I read as constitutive elements of a cinematographic fantastic. In the following, I will analyse the uncanny buzzing sound hovering between Vincent and his postman in order to

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class, with the coordinates for his progressive European identity. In this sense, neither the EU as an actually existing superstate nor Europe as an imagined community under the signifier of neoliberalism give consistency to Vincent's being-in-the-world, but precisely the impossibility of both, namely Europe as the impossible *truc/Ding*. For a more detailed outline of the notion of a transnational *Ding* as the kernel of a geopolitical aesthetic see: Pádraic Wilson: "Der Genuss jenseits der Nation: Zur geopolitischen Ästhetik unbestimmter Bildsprache in *La region salvaje* (2016)", in: Heinz-Peter Preusser/Sabine Schlickers (eds.): *Bestimmte Unbestimmtheit*, Marburg 2023. Also see: Fredric Jameson: *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington 1991, p. 3.

illustrate how these narrative devices point towards the political crisis outlined above and render the social contradiction visible.

9 *Il était une seconde fois* (2019): The Postman and the Fourth Square.

### 4. *»Je suis pas un voleur«:* The Postman and the Yellow Vests

Immediately after the fade-in of the protagonist's name in the second scene and the introduction of the *Black Square*, the plot passes over to the next morning when a coloured postman rings the doorbell. A medium long shot, functioning as an establishing shot of the sequence, positions the two men in direct opposition, with Vincent located inside and the postman, visible only through the window, outside of the house. The post-man repeatedly addresses the protagonist by his name and leaves. A subtle, almost imperceptible jump cut leads to an abrupt change of position of the protagonist. Interestingly, this jump cut coincides with the sudden initiation of a disturbing buzzing sound whose ontological status seems unclear. A hard cut transports the plot into the protagonist's cellar, where the postman places various packages on the floor – erroneously among them the cube. At the end of the scene the postman returns Vincent's pen claiming jokingly: "Je suis pas un voleur"[43]. In the following, I would

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43   Nicloux: *Il était une seconde fois*, Ep. 1, 00:07:30.

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like to consider two major aspects of this scene, namely this ominous last
claim and the strange buzzing sound. First of all, I would argue that the
postman's repetition of the protagonist's name alludes directly to the slow
fade-in of the name in the previous scene. Since this fade-in is immediately
linked to the *Black Square*, I would add that this encounter with the post-
man serves as an instant answer to the problem of the fissure in diegetical
'reality'. Naturally, in this very scene the postman provides Vincent with
the cube – the fantasy window covering up the *Black Square*. Yet, there
seems to be more to it. In order to grasp the particular role of the postman
in the series, I would propose considering briefly a shot from Vincent's
second encounter with him. While again the same unfathomable buzzing
sound is clearly audible during the scene, a medium long shot positions
the two characters in direct opposition to each other (*still* 9). The framing
of the shot as well as the frame of the glass door place the postman within
a square. The similarity in shape to Malevich's painting, the cube and
the film format 4:3 suggests that this is not a coincidence. The role of
the postman in the diegesis outside of the cube seems rather to be the
equivalent of the role of Louise within the cube (compare *still* 4). While
Louise is the allegory of the European fantasy, the postman seems to be
linked to an ideological fantasy construction without the cube.

It is in this context that we need to consider the postman's claim *Je
suis pas un voleur* at the end of the scene of their first encounter, because
in the latter encounter the postman actually tries to steal the cube back
from Vincent in order to save his job. Naturally, this poses a threat to
Vincent's connection with Louise since he only meets her within the
cube. As the provider of the cube and its potential thief, the postman
is of course a paradoxical figure, resembling the fundamental matrix of
racism according to Žižek.[44] For the Slovenian philosopher, racism is not
based on the intolerance of the other's value system. The radical kernel
of racism, for Žižek, rather resides in the impossibility of our own (full)
enjoyment, namely in the fact that the access to *le truc/das Ding* is inher-
ently impossible since it is always already a retroactive imagination. The
inherent impossibility to ever reach the European *truc* is thus transferred
to an external agent, namely the coloured postman. This works according
to the following notion: The only reason why I am unable to fully enjoy
my alliance with Louise (the European bourgeois elite) and return to the

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44   Cf. Slavoj Žižek: *Mehr-Genießen*, Wien 1997, p. 93.
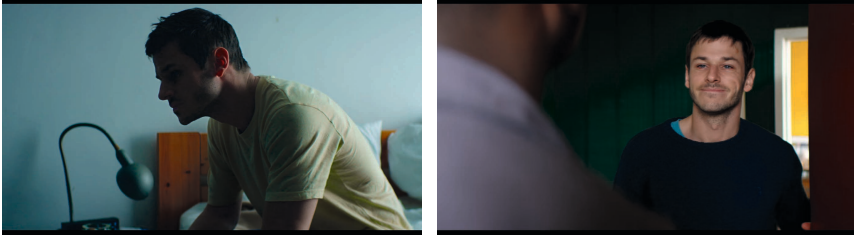
10–11 Il était une seconde fois (2019): Yellow Trouble: A Glimpse of the Yellow Kitchen Wall (left) and Vincent's Yellow shirt (right).

moment of excessive enjoyment of the European *truc* in the establishing scene, is because the coloured postman tries to steal *my* cube. Or as Žižek himself puts it: „Was wir verschleiern, indem wir dem Anderen den Diebstahl des Genießens zur Last legen, ist der traumatische Umstand, daß wir das, was uns angeblich gestohlen wurde, niemals besessen haben"[45]. In short, the social antagonism between Vincent and his postman with migration background is essentially just another way for the French lower middle class subject to defend itself against the lack in the Other – the fissure in diegetical 'reality' – and maintain the necessary distance to the impossible European *truc*. At first sight, this might suggest that without the cube – without the European fantasy – the only option for the lower middle class subject is the nationalist alternative allegorically offered in the series by means of his potential erotic alliance with his French ex-wife Nadège. It is, however, not as simple as this, as we need yet to consider the decisive element of both postman scenes: the buzzing sound invading both encounters.

In order to suggest the provenance of the disturbing buzzing sound, I would like to return to the wind turbines which are repeatedly shown throughout the series without any tangible reason. Due to their destruction by the redoubled *character/cameraman* (Yves Cape), I have proposed earlier to read them as a symbol *par excellence* of the energy transition and their destruction consequently as a dysphoric repetition of the yellow vest protests. The following analysis will further support this claim. For, a fade-in of a name reveals that these wind turbines are the *éoliennes de Naujac* – a park of wind turbines which was actually never built in real

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45   Ibid.

life because of an outburst of protest against the energy transition.[46] The striking similarity between the buzzing and the noise produced by wind turbines leads me to argue that these wind turbines generate precisely the sound which uncannily invades several scenes. Therefore, it seems that the buzzing sound already links the subtle antagonism between Vincent and his coloured postman to the wind turbines as a symbol *par excellence* of the energy transition and to the general notion of protests against it. Yet, we still need to connect this notion to the yellow vest movement itself. The scene of Vincent's first encounter with his postman ends with an alternating series of OTS- and reverse shots emphasising the dual relationship between the two characters. The last reverse shot of this series right before the postman's essential claim, *Je suis pas un voleur*, seems of particular interest (*still 10*) since it introduces into this particular social antagonism a glimpse of Vincent's yellow kitchen wall, which is quite intentionally never fully seen up to a particular moment in the series. Naturally, despite the evocation of a general notion of protests against the energy transition by the buzzing sound, a mere glimpse of a yellow wall paper does not suffice to draw a waterproof connection to the yellow vest protests. But to emphasis the non-arbitrary nature of the colour of the wall, I would propose considering a shot portraying Vincent with a yellow shirt (*still* 11). This shot sticks out of the plot since the scene from the second episode this shot was taken from, additionally forms part of a sequence of scenes set chronologically at the end of the series. It is thus an unmarked prolepsis. Even though the unmarked transition from this scene into the next implies continuity, the change of clothes, namely the shirt, produces a subtle uneasiness in regard to the achronicity or non-linearity of the diegesis outside of the cube. Additionally, it turns the spectator's attention to Vincent's shirts which up to this point had been either blue, white, or red. Given the allegorical dimension of the series as outlined above, the colours clearly point to the French *tricolore*. Therefore, I would argue that this change of clothes is of significance, which in turn is additionally emphasised by the following, at first sight nonsensical, claim of Vincent's schizophrenic brother Alexis: "Je mettrai plus jamais de tee-shirt jaune."[47]. The point is of course that Alexis despises André and the redoubled *character/cameraman* (Yves Cape) for their hatred of the wind turbines. Again,

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46 Cf. América Lopez: "Naujac (33): un projet de 16 éoliennes retoqué par la prefecture", in: *France Info*, 17.07.2015, bit.ly/3YJp6Vv (22.02.2023).

47 Nicloux: *Il était une seconde fois*, Ep. 2, 00:41:28.

like the buzzing sound, the insertion of this uncanny prolepsis points thus to the destruction of the wind turbines, which in fact, as mentioned above have never existed due to protests against the energy transition.

12 Il était une seconde fois (2019): More Yellow Trouble

In order to finally illustrate the precise function of these uncanny audio-visual narrative devices, I suggest turning to the scene the yellow shirt actually belongs to and thus the shot displaying the yellow kitchen wall in its entirety for the first time (*still* 12). The date outlined by the clock on the wall is November 13th. For the French spectator this cannot but evoke the terrorist attacks in Paris on this very date in 2015 – including the attack on Bataclan – committed by the Islamic State. Interestingly, the latter is precisely the militant Islamist group defended by Nadège's new husband Stephan. Additionally, we may notice that the date shown on the clock is not mimetic, because November 13th 2017 was not a Sunday but a Monday. However, in the series Monday is the day of Vincent and his ex-wife Nadège or as she herself puts it, "On est Lundi […] c'est notre jour"[48]. In this context, the allegorical dimension of this French-French erotic alliance couldn't be more obvious. The red colour of Sunday, thus, obtains a rather alarming dimension being the day right before Monday – the day of the nationalist alternative. Naturally, the decisive point in

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48   Ibid., 00:42:55.

regard to this date resides in the time travel theme. The general premise of the series is Vincent's attempt to prevent his break-up with Louise on Valentine's Day (February 14th). Due to the nine-month difference in time Vincent's attempt to save the European fantasy within the cube is equally a struggle to avoid the day after November 13th and thus the nationalist alternative. Furthermore, I would argue that the predominance of the colour yellow in the scene produces yet another connotation of the date, namely November 17th – the day of the outburst of the yellow vest protests in 2018. At this point, we may consider the Freudian notion of the uncanny as the return of the repressed[49]: the uncanny audio-visual narrative devices – the buzzing sound and the unmarked prolepsis – are, in fact, the return of the repressed cut (of castration). What is repressed, is the fact that the yellow vest protests have subverted the European fantasy – the Macron dream established through the believe in *L'homme providentiel* – and have exposed the impossibility of the neoliberal 'promise' of the enjoyment of the European *truc*.

Yet, far from being a simple celebration of the emergence of the yellow vest movement as, according to Chantal Mouffe, the only way to politically participate in a post-democratic era, established by thirty years of neoliberal hegemony[50], if anything the series' argument seems closer to the insight articulated by Éwanjé-Epée that the movement is a floating signifier in danger of being appropriated by racist and nationalist discourses[51]. But I would argue that Nicloux goes even further in demonstrating how the signifier – the yellow vest – is always already caught in an ideological field. The yellow vest protests do not go beyond the national double bind of the French election in 2017 but are caught up in it. In other words, we need to resort to Alain Badiou's insight concerning the yellow vest movement, captured by the old phrase "tout ce qui bouge n'est pas rouge" and acknowledge that in the yellow vest movement as well as in Nicloux's series, "aside from yellow", the predominate colour is "the tricolour".[52] *Il était une seconde fois,* therefore, illustrates how the yellow vest protests, as

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49 Cf. Sigmund Freud: "Das Unheimliche" (1919) in: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XII. Werke aus den Jahren 1917–1920, S. 227–268, p. 263.
50 Chantal Mouffe: "Gilets jaunes: 'Une réaction à l'explosion des inégalités entre les super riches et les classes moyennes'", in: *Libération*, 03.12.2018, bit.ly/3E2X3IS (22.02.2023).
51 Félix Boggio Éwanjé-Épée: "Le gilet jaune comme signifiant flottant", in: *Contretemps*, 22.11.2018, bit.ly/3RS5Pz7 (02.02.2023).
52 Alain Badiou: "Lessons of the Yellow Vest Movement", in: *Verso*, 20.05. 2019, bit.ly/3RUsjzo (22.02.2023).

13 Il était une seconde fois (2019): Louise looking in the Mirror.

well as, according to Badiou, movements and protests with a similar fate across Europe such as *Los indignados* (Spain), *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Italy), and *Nuit debout*[53], are symptoms of a fundamental European deadlock and are consequently always already caught in an ideological field. In order to further specify this European deadlock, its relation to post-democratic discourse, and ultimately its connection to the emergence of a certain cinematographic fantastic as a contemporary narrative form throughout the last decades, I would argue that it is necessary to consider the other half of the dialectical couple, namely the transnational European character Louise.

5. Louise vs Karl, or Marx as the Symptom of Post-Democracy

Since the introductory scene with the fade-in of the protagonist's name turned out to be central for the analysis, I would argue that the analogous scene of Louise must be of similar importance. A frontal medium close up shot (*still* 13), slightly tilted to the right, depicts Louise staring almost self-loathingly at herself in the mirror. While the distant noise of a moving train becomes increasingly audible, Louise's name is slowly faded in. As

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53   Cf. ibid.

Lacan has argued in his famous essay on the mirror stage and the forma-
tion of the ego, the mirror is essential to the construction of the subject's
identity. However, while Lacan observed a jubilatory effect when the child
identifies both with the image in the mirror and with its corresponding
imaginary completeness in contrast to its actual *corps morcelé*[54], Louise,
on the contrary, lacks a comparable emotion. It seems as if the mirror
image is always already undermined by a "stain, whose inert presence
[…] prevents [her] from achieving [her] own self-identity"[55]. This notion
of the stain, as conceived here by Žižek, can of course also be found in
Lacan himself, namely in form of the gaze of the mother the child turns
to immediately after the jubilatory effect.[56] I would thus argue that the
juxtaposition of the sound and the image suggests that the noise of the
train is somehow connected to Louise's incapability of identification and
ultimately – as I will illustrate – to her lack of erotic commitment. It is
hence the uncanny noise of the train we need to turn our attention to
since its ontological status, analogous to the sound of the wind turbines, is
unclear. It could belong to an actual train passing by, but, given Louise's
traumatic past, it could equally pertain to a suppressed traumatic moment
haunting her.

The motif of the train is repeated throughout the series at tellingly
peculiar moments. It is first mentioned during Vincent's receipt of the
cube, when the postman argues within a strangely unfathomable mono-
logue that the solution to an unspecified European problem would be a
"locomotive"[57]. However, it is the second appearance of the train motif I
would like to focus on, since the second time it is mentioned is connected
to the moment when the cube is supposedly lost in the fire at Vincent's
house. I would hence argue that the reappearance of the motif is somehow
connected to the outage of the *strategy of containment* inside of the cube.
At the end of the third episode of the series, Vincent and Stanley collect
Alexis, the protagonist's brother, from a mental hospital. Just before they

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54 Cf. Jacques Lacan: "Das Spiegelstadium als Bildner der Ichfunktion" (1949), in: Norbert
    Haas (ed.): *Schriften I*, Olten 1973, p. 61–70, p. 64ff.
55 Žižek: *Looking Awry*, p. 126.
56 Cf. Jacques Lacan: (1964/65), *Les problèmes cruciaux de la psychanalyse*, **unpublished**,
    p. 140. In his seminar *Les problèmes cruciaux de la psychanalyse* from 1964/65, Lacan adds
    to his classic elaboration of the mirror stage an essential aspect: "le premier geste de
    l'enfant, dans cette assomption jubilatoire, ai-je dit, de son image dans le miroir, est très
    souvent coordonné avec ce retour de la tête vers l'autre, l'autre réel ".
57 Nicloux: *Il était une seconde fois*, Ep. 1, 00:05:50–00:06:12.

get into the car to drive to Vincent's house, the song *The Locomotive* (2017) by the British singer King Krule is played:

> KING KRULE: No object in motion
> A subject to smoking
> The platform sighs:
> 'My empty emotion
> [inaudible because of Stanley's conversation with Alexis in the car]
> [The car pulls over into Vincent's street, which is blocked by a police car and a fire engine]
> [the volume of the song increases drastically as Vincent gets out of the car]
> Waiting for the train
> In the dead of night, I howl
> [inaudible shouting of a police man as Vincent tries to enter the building in flames]
> I wish I was equal:
> If only that simple[58]

The superimposition of the song on the intra-diegetic soundscape and the subsequent oscillating focus between these two levels emphasize certain fragments of the song, most eminently the line *Waiting for the train*. The motif of the train, thus, returns precisely at the moment when the cube seems lost in the fire. Yet, the song seems to further specify the function of the loco-'motif'. The first three lines of the song evoke the image of a subject on a desolated station platform. The lack of spatial motion due to the absence of the train seems connotatively extended to the temporal dimension of the series in form of utter stagnation. Given the insertion of the song right at the moment when the cube and consequently the European fantasy are seemingly lost, I would argue that these lines capture the primary effect of one of the central aspects of the series, namely the uncanny sensation of scattered and circular temporality outside of the cube. The originality of the series consists in its ability to leave the viewer in doubt about the linearity of the development of the story (*l'histoire*): While the illusion of *continuity editing* is more or less maintained for the plot within the cube, the use of narrative devices such as the unmarked prolepsis disguised as a *mind screen* during Vincent's dialogue with his cousin Thibault about the red-haired woman or the unmarked prolepsis of Vincent already wearing the yellow shirt repeatedly undermine this illusion without, however, fully committing to fragmentary narration. In this regard, it seems interesting to consider one of the major points of

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58   Ibid., Ep. 3, 00:40:30–00:41:30.

criticism raised by most of the reviews, namely that the series is a so-called *slow burn*.[59] I would suggest that the slow progression and the unmarked non-linearity of the plot go hand in hand since they both produce an atmosphere identical to the desolated station platform detailed by the lyrics of the song. Due to the absence of the train, no linear progress, no temporal/teleological movement seems possible and the actually existing movement is primarily circular. In other words, the illusion of a linear progression (and of continuity editing) within the cube and by extension the European fantasy is shown to veil utter stagnation and temporal fragmentation, without celebrating the latter. The series' play with non-linear narration becomes rather readable as an attack on a central aspect of the neoliberal discourse, namely the notion of constant reformative progress, by unveiling the lack of progression of the progressive European identity, at least for the lower middle class subject Vincent. However, Nicloux seems to go even further by suggesting the root of this utter historical stagnation, which is, how could it be otherwise, expressed in form of Louise's traumatic past. For this scene takes up the image of the desolated station platform and stages the motif of the train – by way of a specific use of montage – as the fundamental kernel of the series. Yet, to grasp the full dimension of the station platform scene and thus of Louise's traumatic past, it is necessary to outline the antagonism between Louise and a more phantasmatic character, namely Kate.

Similar to the opposition of Vincent and his postman outlined above, the first episode introduces the antagonism between Louise and a dead woman named Kate Bradbury. The latter had committed suicide after having discovered her husband's affair with Louise. Faced with Louise on a station platform she threw herself in front of an incoming train. Unlike the other characters of the series, who, as I have argued, seem to work according to the logic of a straightforward (trans-)national allegory, the secondary meaning of the character Kate is added on a subtler level, which is, nonetheless, highly prominent from the very moment of her introduction. Shortly after Vincent's first examination of the cube, the camera follows Louise jogging on the grounds of Highgate Cemetery in London. Subsequently a medium shot shows Louise walking past the grave of Karl Marx until she stops in front of another grave stone, which in turn is not immediately shown to the viewer (*still* 14). Instead, the

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59 Greg Wheeler: "Twice Upon A Time – Netflix Full Season 1 Review", in: *The Review Geek*, 19.12.2019, bit.ly/3YpAmqD (22.02.2023).
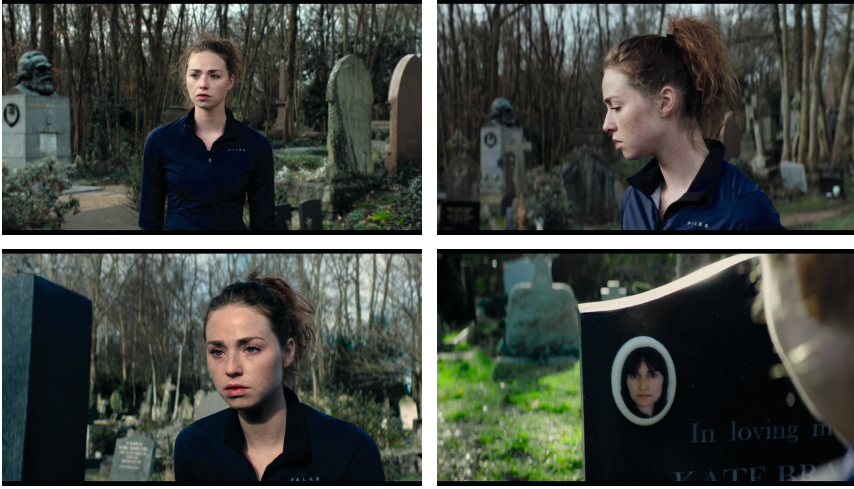
14–17 Il était une seconde fois (2019): Louise and the Bust of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery, London.

following sequence of shots resembles the montage of the introduction of the postman. It is composed of a shot positioning Louise and the bust of Karl Marx in direct opposition and a subsequent succession of OTS- and reverse shots. However, while the first shot of this sequence depicts Louise's staring contest with Marx (*still* 15), the OTS-shots switch to Kate's grave in front of Louise (*still* 16 and 17). I would, thus, argue that the montage conflates Marx and Kate – the latter becoming a metaphor for the former – and it is from this perspective that we need to read the allegorical value of the traumatic scene on the station platform, where the notion of the train elaborated so far and this spectral appearance of Marx meet.

The *mise-en-scene* of this scene is held rather plain as the image of a desolated station platform evoked by the song analysed above would suggest. Louise and Kate stand on two opposing platforms of the London underground. The high frequency of alternating subject-point-of-view shots – resembling the montage of an old western – adds an almost unbearable tension to the scene which seems thus to convey an insurmountable antagonism between the two women. The notion of (still) moving trains, passing in opposite directions, emphasizes additionally the utter incommensurateness of the two antagonistic positions. From a narratological point of view, the scene holds a curious status within the series, since it is

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the only scene using the format 4:3 despite depicting an event outside of the cube. While the format is usually bound to the protagonist's subjective experience of the events inside of the cube, here, on the contrary, it frames Louise's traumatic past before she even met the protagonist. However, the montage suggests, nonetheless, a connection to Vincent and the cube. For the previous scene consists in a repetition of Vincent's attempt to destroy the cube. But each time the hammer is about to hit the cube a cut leads to a repetition of the previously seen. Finally, right at the instance when the spectator ought to see the destruction of the cube, the series passes over to the scene of Louise's traumatic past. Yet, due to the seamless continuation of the melody played throughout the previous scene, it seems as if Louise's traumatic past was the very thing that was hiding behind the cube all along. I would hence claim that the scene portraits the fundamental kernel of the impossibility of their relationship and thus constitutes the very centre of the series.

Despite the manifest centrality of the scene as suggested by the filmic discourse, very little information concerning its relation to the other events is given. I would hence argue that the scene needs to be read in light of the metaphorical function of Kate as introduced in the cemetery. The actual antagonism conveyed by the scene – albeit in a displaced manner – would then consist in Louise and Karl Marx. Why, then, should Nicloux stage such an antagonism? The answer – I would reckon – is to be found in the motif of the train: At the end of the scene, the metaphorically doubled character Kate/Marx jumps in front of the train and thus brings the movement of the trains passing in opposite direction – the representation *par excellence* of the incommensurateness of social antagonism itself – to a full stop. The death of Kate/Marx, which stops the movement of the trains, is, thus, at the heart of the circular temporality and the notion of a teleological standstill as both outlined by the song by King Krule and the series' disrupted temporality outside of the cube. The coincidence of the stop of temporal movement and the death of Marx leads me to read this scene in light of Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of *The End of History* – the end of social antagonism due to the "unabashed victory of political and economic [neo-]liberalism" and "[t]he triumph of the West"[60] after the fall of the Soviet Union.

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60   Francis Fukuyama: "The End of History", in: *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, p. 1.

Since I would argue that Nicloux stages precisely the results of the generalisation of Fukuyama's notion in contemporary political discourse, namely, what Chantal Mouffe calls the post-political dimension of a post-democratic era.

In her work *On the Political*, Mouffe "examine[s] the consequences of the negation of antagonism […], both in theory and politics"[61]. She analyses notions in contemporary political theory such as *cosmopolitan democracy* or *global civic society* and outlines how they "all partake of a common anti-political vision which refuses to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension constitutive of 'the political'"[62] and fundamental to the existence of human society[63]. Mouffe's notion of *the political* is of course based on her and Ernesto Laclau's elaborations on hegemonic formations. According to Laclau and Mouffe, any hegemonic formation quintessentially constitutes itself via a process similar to the Lacanian concept of foreclosure.[64] The colonial hegemony, for example, works on the foreclosure of the colonized.[65] In other words, the constitution of any social hegemony is based on the foreclosure[66] of a certain element and thus produces a social antagonism which is inherent to the foundation of the social hegemony itself. This substance as social antagonism is what Mouffe grasps by the term *the political*. Historically, she grasps the tendency towards a post-political vision as a consequence of the collapse of the Soviet model and the "unchallenged hegemony of neo-liberalism with its claim that there is no alternative to the existing order"[67] and their "triumphalist claims about the disappearance of antagonism"[68]. In short, Mouffe outlines how the fall of the Soviet Union entails the foreclosure of social antagonism within the neoliberal hegemony. On the immediate level of politics, the consequences of this foreclosure was probably best expressed by Margret Thatcher, the first major proponent of neoliberal politics in Europe, who, when asked at a dinner in 2002 what her greatest

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61 Chantal Mouffe: *On the Political*, London 2005, p. 2.
62 Ibid.
63 Cf. ibid., p. 119.
64 Ernesto Laclau/Chantal Mouffe: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London 2014, p. 114.
65 Ibid.
66 "Lacan identifies *Verwerfung* as the specific mechanism […], in which an element is rejected outside the symbolic order just as if it had never existed", Evans, p. 65.
67 Mouffe: *On the Political*, p. 31.
68 Ibid.

achievement was, replied coldly: "Tony Blair and New Labour [the oppositional social democratic party in Britain]"[69]. In other words, the slight movement of the European socialist democratic parties "to the right, redefining themselves as 'centre-left'"[70] is nothing less than their integration into the neoliberal hegemonic order. However, to grasp the extent of this change in the political field, we need to consider the radical kernel of democracy outlined by Laclau and Mouffe, namely as Žižek puts it: "[A] 'democratic society' could be understood as a society whose institutional structure includes, as a part of its 'normal', 'regular' reproduction, the moment of dissolution of the socio-symbolic bond, the moment of the irruption of the Real: elections"[71]. However, if all eligible parties pertain to and work within the neoliberal social order, this radical moment of elections and thereby the radical kernel of democracy itself is eradicated. The basic paradox here is of course that precisely in the moment of the 'victory' of (neo-)liberal democracy over its totalitarian communist Other, it forecloses the democratic moment of democracy as such in a radical sense. In other words, the difference between any hegemonic formation and the neoliberal hegemonic order structuring contemporary Western societies is that what it forecloses as its constitutive feature, which returns in the real as social antagonism, is nothing less than social antagonism itself, which is precisely the definition of post-democracy, namely the erasure of the antagonistic dimension "which provides democratic politics with its dynamics"[72]. From this perspective, I would argue that it is precisely in this context in which Nicloux's insertion of the spectral return of Marx haunting the double bind of the European fantasy and its nationalist other becomes readable. The spectral appearance of Marx and the motif of the train, which returns in the *real* of sound, become readable as the uncanny return of the foreclosure of social antagonisms itself by the post-democratic hegemony under the signifier of neoliberal Macronism. Now, if we apply the Lacanian proposition "what was foreclosed from the Symbolic returns in the Real of the symptom"[73], Marx plays out as the symptom of Louise's foreclosure of social antagonism itself. It is essential

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69 Conor Burns: "Margret Thatcher's greatest achievement: New Labour", in: *Conservative Home*, 11.04.2008, https://bit.ly/2xPK4aR (22.02.2023).

70 Mouffe: *On the Political*, p. 31.

71 Žižek: *The Sublime Object*, p. 166f.

72 Mouffe: *On the Political*, p. 9.

73 Žižek: *The Sublime Object*, p. 78f.

to underscore that the spectral appearance of Marx does hence not serve as a representative of Marxism but as the foreclosed possibility of a political alternative constitutive of neoliberal discourse as preached by Fukuyama. In other words, the spectral appearance of Marx in Nicloux' *Il était une seconde fois* is to be grasped as the symptom of post-democracy and thus as the traumatic kernel of the contemporary ideological double bind in contemporary France.

At this point it is of utmost importance to insist on the fundamental asymmetry between Louise – the European elite – and Vincent – the lower middle class subject – as analysed throughout this article. While Vincent's European fantasy represses – as a *strategy of containment* – the social contradiction which become apparent within diegetical 'reality' outside of the cube, namely the co-dependency of neoliberal and nationalist discourse within a national double bind of France, Louise's relationship to the spectral appearance of Marx functions rather according to the Lacanian notion of foreclosure. In contrast to the mechanism of repression, "the foreclosed element is not buried in the unconscious but expelled from the unconscious"[74] itself. In other words, it is expelled from the symbolic order. Yet, this foreclosure – "proper to the order of signifier"[75] and thus constitutive of the symbolic order of a given hegemony[76] – equally sets the stage and hence also the limits of what the subjects of said hegemony can desire. In other words, the foreclosure of antagonist thought – of what Mouffe calls *the political* – establishes the back drop for the European fantasy and thus the frame and limit of the lower middle class subject's desire and capability of expression. Given the spectral appearance of Marx[77] as a symptom of post-democracy and thus of the foreclosure of antagonist thought as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union points, I would like to close this article by underscoring the coincidence of the historical onset of post-democratic hegemony and the emergence of a genuinely cinematographic fantastic in the 1990s with David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) or Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre los ojos* (1997). For I would argue in a final step that the emergence of the contemporary cinematographic

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74 Evans, p. 66.
75 Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* p. 78.
76 Cf. ibid.
77 The notion of a spectral appearance of Marx might be reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's book *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1993). Even though a reference is, for my part, not intended, this coincidence emerges surely from a shared critique of Fukuyama's notion of the 'End of History'.

fantastic of the last decades has to be grasped as an expression of political anxiety which stems from the democratic crisis within post-democratic hegemony. The narrative devices – constitutive of such a filmic fantastic – as e.g. the buzzing sound of the wind turbines or the noise of the train, whose ontological status remains unclear throughout the entire series, point towards those social antagonisms that cannot be expressed within neoliberal discourse. For this is precisely Lacan's definition of foreclosure, namely the exclusion from the symbolic order and thus language itself.[78] The fantastic insertion of ontologically unfathomable elements which render the diegesis unstable serves, I would hence claim, as a highly paradigmatic und fragmentary attempt to go beyond syntagmatic language – an attempt which seeks to speak the unspeakable. In this sense, I would argue that the cinematographic fantastic as a contemporary narrative form constitutes nothing less than the return of *the political* in post-political and post-democratic hegemony.

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78   Evans, p. 65.

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