

A WEEP IN THE DARK: TEARS AND THE CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE

JULIAN HANICH

Weep Impact

On 20 November 1913, the ardent moviegoer Franz Kafka jotted down a few notes that would almost become proverbial. Introducing a short paragraph written in telegraphic style, Kafka admitted to his diary, "Was at the movies. Wept."¹ Judging from the entry's matter-of-factness, weeping at the movies was not something overly astonishing to him. Still, Kafka found the tearful incident remarkable enough to devote it this day's entire entry. Weeping over the cinema's "boundless entertainment," as he calls it, seems to stand out positively from his normal course of life. Later, the literary critic Willy Haas would comment on Kafka's tears, "I can still see Kafka in front of me like that: his face averted, lest one of us observe him, wiping the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand."²

The Kafka anecdote illustrates three aspects of cinematic crying. First, all kinds of people weep at the movies—no matter if he or she is a modernist writer like Kafka, an academic like the eminent art historian Ernst H. Gombrich, who once said, "I don't recall having wept in front of a painting, though certainly at the movies...,"³ or a head of government such as the former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who admitted that he cried during the 2003 soccer melodrama *Das Wunder von Bern*.⁴ Second, watching "boundless entertainment" at the movie theater allows for an unusual, treasured, pleasurable lived-body experience that rises above the flux of everyday life. Third, at the movies we do not cry overtly. Since it carries an element of shamefulness, weeping at weepies is something hidden from others. Even if some people talk about it quite frankly in retrospect, *during* the film cinematic tears are a secretive secretion.

This essay tries to shed some light on what it means to cry inside the movie theater. I do not follow the question *how* the film makes us cry—I simply take it for granted that some films succeed in doing so. Instead,

what follows is a sketch of the tearful *experience* of weeping during a moving movie: a phenomenological description of cinematic tears.⁵ In the existential version of phenomenology favored here, the viewer's relatedness to the film cannot be uncoupled from the social situation inside the cinema, nor can it be separated from the lived-body experience. Hence the collective viewing situation as well as the embodied self will play a crucial role for my observations. Drawing on phenomenological studies by Helmuth Plessner, Jack Katz, and Hermann Schmitz, my account tries to fill a conspicuous void.⁶ It is a commonplace among researchers to comment on the general scarcity of academic literature on crying—a lack that is particularly striking when it comes to cinematic tears.⁷

Two aspects will dominate my phenomenological description. First, the *individualizing* experience of tears: Due to their potential shameful and their isolating effect, tears have a double tendency to throw us back on ourselves while simultaneously distancing us from the rest of the audience. Second, their powerful emotional and hence *bodily* experience: The radical break that comes with tears transforms our mundane disembodied existence into a highly involving state of somatic consciousness. In a final move, I will attribute compensatory value to this foregrounding of the body: Cinematic tears counter the widespread somatic restraint prevailing in our advanced modern disembodied way of life.⁸ Precisely because the body is so often kept in the shade, bringing it out into the open via tears, can be highly pleasurable.

Fears for Tears: The Threat of Shame in Weeping

But why should weeping have an individualizing effect on the viewer? There are two reasons: first, the isolating tendency of impending *shame through crying*; second, the isolating tendency of *crying through tears*.

Let us look at shame first. In Western culture, adult crying is predominantly a private phenomenon rather than a social interaction that occurs face-to-face. At home, we cry over lovesickness or our baby smiling at us; we cry over a moving novel or the torture of sustained physical pain. The public display of tears, however, is limited to few occasions, with funerals, award ceremonies, and sport events among the most prominent. Apart from these instances, public crying results in—or is, at least, threatened by—shame. In his brilliant phenomenological study *How Emotions Work* (1999), the sociologist Jack Katz has shown that the emotion of shame derives from an intersubjective awareness that one no longer belongs to a community but is—in *fact* or in *imagination*—exposed

in front of this group. As a consequence, shame is defined by an experience of *standing out*, of being *detached* from the group.⁹

The same goes for tears in the anonymous, alien crowd of the movie theater. Even if it is sometimes argued that the cinema belongs to the places that grant us a license to cry in public, this is in fact not the case. Whenever we cry at the movies, we feel potentially threatened by the isolating effect of shame. This can unmistakably be deduced from our crying behavior. Tears might literally be in the eyes of the beholder—but at the same time they can also be on display for others. If practiced too perceptibly, neither the darkness nor the soundtrack can hide the visible and audible signs of crying. As a consequence, viewers rarely sob or moan loudly. They sniffle quietly, pull out their handkerchiefs inconspicuously, and hide the moistness of their eyes by blinking back their tears. Crying discreetly, we try to avoid the attention that would make us stand out. And here it makes no big difference if we shed tears of sadness or joy. In discussions about melodramatic emotions, tears of joy are often neglected. But crying at the movies not only derives from pity and sadness but also from emphatic joy. Hence a tear-jerker is not necessarily a sad movie. Whether we weep over the death of the heroine (as in *Love Story*, 1970) or the rise of the hero (as in *Rocky*, 1976), whether we shed tears over two lovers parting at the airport (as in *Casablanca*, 1942) or over families reunited at an air base (as in *Armageddon*, 1998)—the threat of shame remains.

Particularly vital instances of impending shame occur in melodramatic films which—on a more cognitive plane—we consider ideologically questionable or intellectually cheap and which make us weep nonetheless. The tears shed over these films are the unerring proof that something has happened to us, that the movie has moved us, and that we have reacted emotionally even though it was despite ourselves. Hence these films cause a conflict. On the one hand, we *know* that the film is racist or misogynist or simply artistically inferior. On the other hand, we *feel* that it moves us anyway. The problem is that tears only signal the latter while our rational and moral disagreement remains concealed. We therefore try to hide our tears all the more desperately. Last but not least, the shameful aspect carries on even after the film has ended. Often viewers leave the auditorium quietly and discreetly, talking little, acting reclusively. Still wrapped in their own emotionality, they shun the potentially embarrassing gaze of others. The retrospective talk about tears mentioned above occurs only after the emotional tidal wave has ebbed.

So far, I have used the words “crying” and “weeping” synonymously. Arthur Koestler, however, suggests a heuristic distinction between both

terms that will help us get closer to what it means to shed tears at the movies:

Weeping has two basic reflex-characteristics which are found in all its varieties: the overflow of the tear-glands and a specific form of breathing. [...] *Crying*, on the other hand, is the emitting of sounds signaling distress, protest, or some other emotions. It may be combined with, or alternate with, weeping.¹⁰

Koestler underscores that when we have a “good cry” at the movies, we, in fact, do not cry but weep. This is the case precisely because we want to avoid shame. Weeping does not, by definition, involve sounds; it is inaudible. Since one of the movie theater’s structural characteristics is darkness, weeping is also rather invisible. Consequently, the movie theater might not belong to the places that grant us a license to *cry* in public, but it certainly allows us to *weep*.

But even in weeping the threat of shame is dangling over the viewer’s head like the sword of Damocles. First, there are other noticeable movements and sounds that come with it (even if they do not belong to weeping itself): the rummaging for a hankie, the covert wiping away of the tears, the blowing of one’s nose, etc. Second, since weeping is not a far cry from crying, we cannot let go but always have to be on the lookout. Even if we manage to escape the radical singling out of shame itself, feeling the intersubjective pressure of the potentially shameful gaze of others puts us at a distance to the rest of the audience. In weeping, we are not fused into a collective whole as in comic laughter or shocked screaming but remain wary of others. In some situations, this shame alert is so strong that we become detached from the movie: we concentrate more on fighting back our tears than paying attention to the film. Or, in order to avoid emotional involvement, we distance ourselves from the film by focusing on the technical and artistic aspects.¹¹

However, we are only threatened by shame if we are afraid of being singled out and revealed in front of the (cinematic) community in the first place. This is not the case when we feel utterly safe and securely at home inside the group as a *whole* or at least a sufficiently reassuring *part* of it. If we are thoroughly interwoven with a community of likeminded friends sitting next to us, the intersubjective pressures of the movie theater turn less effective. The friends erect a bulwark around us and protect us from the invading gaze of others—which, in turn, grants us a certain leeway in terms of our crying or weeping behavior. The strength of this bulwark varies considerably though. Some people are content with one person; others cannot let go even if surrounded by a whole group of close friends.

The degree to which a viewer can eliminate the threat of shame will determine how far weeping can become a collective rather than an individual experience. Here, women have an obvious advantage. Since in Western cultures crying and weeping are predominantly at their disposal, the intersubjective stakes are much higher for men—a fact that evidently influences their ability to weep *together*. What Sue Harper and Vincent Porter found out about postwar audiences in Britain is still valid today: “Men who found themselves on the verge of tears reported a sense of isolation from others in the audience.”¹²

The male disadvantage in the crying game is certainly one major reason why melodramas are preferred by women.¹³ In the movie theater, tearful men feel much more promptly exposed in front of the group. As a result, they cannot fully partake in what is the condition *sine qua non* for enjoying the genre: being moved to tears. Mockery and derision are frequent compensatory reactions. However, this sweeping argument holds only if we talk about the kinds of melodrama that we commonly (that is, in everyday speech) understand as emblematic for the genre: the women’s weepie and the family melodrama. Yet, Linda Williams has famously argued that the notion of “melodrama” designates less a specific genre than a pervasive mode of American cinema as a whole.¹⁴ Taking Williams’s stand-point, we would have to modify the argument about weeping men. There are a number of genres that reduce the pressure of intersubjectivity and the threat of shame. Here men can allow themselves one tear or another. I am thinking in particular about the sports film, to which former chancellor Schröder’s confession attests. But also certain war films (such as *Saving Private Ryan*, 1998) and disaster movies (such as *Armageddon*, 1998) come to mind.¹⁵ Apart from the genre, the respectability of both the director and the film mode—classical Hollywood versus art cinema, in David Bordwell’s terminology¹⁶—might grant a certain leeway to men as well. It is certainly easier for them to cry in response to the melodramatic art cinema of Lars von Trier (*Breaking the Waves*, 1996), Pedro Almodóvar (*Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999), or Wongkar wai (*In the Mood for Love*, 2000) than to a classical women’s weepie such as King Vidor’s *Stella Dallas* (1937). Hence, what we are moved by determines whether we can allow ourselves to be moved to tears or not.

Me, Myself, and Eye: The Isolating Effect of Tears

The intersubjective burden of shameful tears is not the only reason why the melodrama (in the narrower sense) tends towards the individualizing end of the genre spectrum—a spectrum that stretches from

pornography as the most individualizing to comedies as the most communalizing genre. The act of weeping itself entails a phenomenological sense of detachment from the world. This is a valid fact even when we watch the film alone. In weeping, we are not only emotionally captivated by the movie in a passive way; we also actively have to tear down our inner barriers in order to be flooded by tears. "Through [this] act of inner capitulation," Helmuth Plessner adds, "the person separates him- or herself from the situation of normal behavior in the sense of isolation. With this act, the deeply moved person partakes in the anonymous 'answer' of his or her body. Thus, the crier secludes him- or herself from the world."¹⁷ In weeping, we cut ourselves off and become self-centered, focused almost exclusively on our lived-body interaction with the film, relegating the rest of the cinematic surroundings to the fringe of experience. Obviously, this is possible only within the boundaries of inconspicuous weeping. The closer we approach the realm of overt crying, the more imminent the threat of shame, and the more we have to take into account the rest of the audience.

Weeping affects us the deeper, the more subjectively and with greater inner resonance it takes possession of us. "Here the fact that others are also moved must have an inhibitory effect," Plessner notes.¹⁸ While tears on the screen can have a highly pleasurable effect on us by making us weep in empathic mimicry, sniffing or even blatant crying in the auditorium can result in distraction.¹⁹ Hence by tacit mutual agreement the rules of behavior demand silent weeping. As a consequence, in the movie theater we not only try to avoid displaying our tears *to* others, but we also avoid, by and large, the tear display *of* others. Overt crying would not only disrupt the various personal interactions between the strongly affected, individualized viewers and the film. As an uncommon act of conduct against the backdrop of silent weeping, it would also assume a different function: crying out loud would become a means of communication, signaling distress or psychological disturbance, something that weeping precisely circumvents. In contrast to laughing, then, weeping is rarely contagious—at least in response to our co-viewers if not to the characters on the screen. Although Plessner talks about the "danger of contagion" in the "spontaneous crowd accumulations of our highly civilized mass-world," this description hardly applies to our experience at the movies.²⁰ What might be true for pop-concerts (consider the crying hysteria evoked by The Beatles or Robbie Williams), does not count with regard to the cinematic experience where we are steeped in a very individualized form of *weeping* rather than *crying*. In most cases weeping spectators do not

look for confirmation or support but bury themselves in the private pleasure of sadness or tearful joy.

The isolating tendency of tears can be further illustrated by the specific breathing patterns, body postures, and corporeal motions that come with weeping. This is especially striking if one contrasts the *inward*-directed, individualizing characteristics of weeping with the *outward*-directed, communalizing features of laughing. While the breathing pattern of weeping consists in a series of short, deep, gasping *in*-spirations, the breathing pattern of laughing is characterized by the exact opposite: bursts of *ex*-piratory puffs. While the person who weeps lets the head droop (suggesting inwardness and self-centeredness), the person who laughs tends to throw his head back (showing openness to the world). And while in weeping the muscles go flabby, the shoulders slump forward, and the whole posture reflects a bodily escape from the outer into the inner world, laughter contracts the muscles and throws the body into violent motion, thus communicating a tendency towards the exterior world.²¹ In short: dejection and faintness in the first case, elevation and an urge to move in the second.

However, this phenomenological account leaves one essential question open: Why does the potential shameful and individualizing tendency of weeping not prevent people from watching melodramas in public? Other than heterosexual pornography (a genre that has almost completely moved from the public adult movie theaters to the private TV and computer surroundings), melodramas still attract large crowds to the cinema.²² In fact, they range among the biggest box-office successes of all times—from *Gone with the Wind* (1939) to *Titanic* (1997). The discrepancy between porn and melodrama can be explained quite easily. While we can certainly escape the burden of shame and pleurably respond to the arousal of melodrama by weeping inconspicuously, we can hardly avoid a shameful situation and respond to the arousal of porn by an unnoticeable masturbation. In other words, in a public place like the movie theater, getting satisfaction from the tear-jerker is much easier than jerking-off satisfyingly.

Still, this does not explain the strong tendency to watch *melodramas* in a theater. Apart from sociological reasons like dating habits, group pressure, or media hype, an important reason is the cinema's heightened aesthetic effect. A film like *Titanic* owes parts of its success to the fact that the movie theater (and the multi- and megaplex cinema in specific) moves and stirs the emotions much more powerfully than the television or computer screen. It enables a highly attentive experience in which nothing is supposed to disturb the immersion of the viewer in the filmic world.

Therefore the pleasure of tearful sadness or joy can be experienced more fully in the cinema than in the ersatz environment of the living-room television set. We go and watch a melodrama in the theater *despite* its collective surroundings.

However, and here I come back to the exception mentioned above, there are instances in which we enjoy weeping in the movie theater *because of* its collective environment. Whenever we sense a great familiarity with other viewers and whenever the possibility of being exposed in front of an alien crowd is reduced to a minimum, the individualizing threat of shame loses momentum. This is the case when we are surrounded by friends or when the film addresses us and binds us together as a specific group, ethnicity, class, or nation. In these moments we are not only *able* to weep together but *enjoy* it as a collective experience. We share our supply of tissues or grab the hand of our partner, thus creating a physical as well as phenomenological bond that bridges the individualizing gap resulting from tears. While we do not fully fuse into a collective whole as in the case of hilarious laughter or shocked screaming—since it hardly ever occurs that we cry together overtly but rather weep silently—a collective feeling prevails nonetheless, precisely because we are aware that we do not weep alone. Again, *Titanic* might serve as a case in point: Its famous female teenage audience often attended the movie in large groups of friends because they could enjoy weeping as a community. What is more, these teenage girls, for whom the threshold of public weeping is lower anyway, shared a similar identity, which further broke down the barriers of weeping. It bound them together as an instant community in front of which they did not have to feel ashamed.²³ This similar identity comprised their age, their gender, their shared adoration of Leonardo DiCaprio, their identification with the not-too-beautiful attractiveness of the Kate-Winslet character, their devotion to the Celine Dion soundtrack, and other shared characteristics.²⁴

Nevertheless, weeping together has a drawback. As we have seen, the isolating tendency of weeping results in a strong individual engagement with the film. If we do not give ourselves up to the movie but focus on our weeping neighbors as well, we put something between us and the film. In other words, we slightly increase the phenomenological distance to the filmic world. Obviously, this does not imply an either-or scenario: We are able to concentrate on the film *and* our neighbors. But splitting our attention takes away the full tear-jerking potential of the movie and lessens our private joy of tears. Consequently, there is a shift in pleasure emphasis: from the private pleasure of tears to the collective experience of weeping together with our peers of tears.

Eye Confess: Weeping as Emotional Self-Admission without Words

But why do we weep at all? In the movie theater most of the functions commonly ascribed to tears are not in effect: to inhibit aggression and signal surrender, to elicit help or compassion from others, to prove emotional solidarity, etc. Tears generally place a serious demand upon our environment by begging for reactions.²⁵ Tears are so obviously there, so conspicuously communicating some significant emotional turmoil that a person who watches someone else weeping or even crying is expected to act. This implies, in turn, whenever we get teary-eyed, special attention is paid to us. Katz has described in minute detail how crying works as an effective interaction strategy used to elicit desired responses from others.²⁶ In the movie theater, quite the opposite is the case. We deliberately renounce the communicative function of tears—and not just because tears come with the threat of shame. We shed them clandestinely *on* our own *for* our own pleasurable ends. It might be true that sometimes we hope that our partner or someone else will recognize our tears and comfort us. But this is the case primarily when we do not respond directly to the filmic world but only indirectly by way of happy or painful personal *memories* triggered by the film. In her book *Crying at the Movies* (2002), Madelon Sprengnether describes various instances in which she broke down in tears because of the sad, traumatic memories specific films brought back.²⁷ In these cases, she shed tears not because of the moving movies themselves but because of the reminiscences they evoked.

However, weeping at the movies proper is an activity that we often wish to carry out *privately* (which does not necessarily mean *alone*). The specific surroundings of the movie theater further silence the communicativeness of tears in manifold ways. The enveloping darkness, the unidirectional seating position, the backrest in combination with stadium seating, the all-encompassing loudness of music and sound effects, the immersive quality of the melodramatic movie—all of these characteristics hamper both our ability to communicate and the other spectators' attention directed at us. They simultaneously conceal us and redirect the focus of the other viewers. Hence we can and do shed tears *without* begging for response—provided that we remain content with discrete weeping rather than overt crying. But tears are not only a way of shaping social interaction; they always also come with a specific form of individual *experience*. Since in cinematic weeping the communicative function is muted, we should be prepared to find the meaning of shedding cinematic tears in its experiential aspect—an experience that we crave and

enjoy. In this context, it is important to remember what I have mentioned before: We are not passively flooded by tears but have to give in to them actively—we have to *let* them happen.

This is true in two respects: first of all, we can always look somewhere else or leave the theater before the film starts to overwhelm us. In horror movies, people often cover their eyes and ears because they feel threatened by the brutality or repulsiveness of what they perceive. Maybe more apposite: in psycho thrillers, a genre comparable to melodrama in its deep immersive experience and strong reliance on sympathy and empathy, viewers sometimes look away because they can no longer endure the intense engagement with the filmic world. Hence the decision to remain entangled with the tear-jerking world of the melodramatic movie is an *active* one.

Secondly, tears in the movie theater are not a physiological reaction to a physical irritation. When I cut onions or ride my bicycle on a cold day, I cannot avoid tears. Cinematic tears, on the other hand, do not reflex-like answer a stimulus. When I watch a film, I can “fight back” the surge of tears before I eventually give in and “break down.” Spurred by the power of emotions, tears seem to besiege us from within. But they do not flow before we let it happen. Hence weeping at the movies consists of both a passive *being done by* and an active *doing*, a passive emotional captivation and an active drawing on the body.²⁸ We watch a sad, pitiful, depressing, joyful, exhilarating, or beautiful scene and are emotionally captivated (the being-done-by part). However, being emotionally involved is only a necessary component of weeping—not a sufficient one. Emotions like sadness or joy can take possession of us authentically and forcefully without resulting in tears. Weeping therefore requires an “act of inner capitulation,” as Plessner puts it.²⁹ The fact that we give in to cinematic tears only in favorable situations underscores the thesis of an *active* capitulation. Think of sitting in the movie theater next to your boss or the woman of your dreams—chances are high that you do not let the tears flow freely simply because you decide against it for good reasons. We have to release the hold of ourselves in order to release a load of tears (the doing part).³⁰

The inner act of capitulation in weeping is a unique, non-verbal, embodied way of “admitting” to ourselves emphatically that our bodies are powerfully moved, unutterably moved, unusually moved—in fact, moved to tears. One key word often used to characterize melodrama is “excessive.” In melodrama, life is blown up to oversized proportions. The viewer is constantly confronted with scenes that are larger than life: inhuman suffering, the unbelievable overcoming of insurmountable

obstacles, great loss, enormous success against all odds, etc. Melodramatic scenes are so sad or pitiful, joyful or beautiful that our bodies have no other appropriate response at hand but to resort to tears. This is especially true for the movie theater where talking is not an option. Katz notes, “Where social customs demand a respectfully silent and stationary watching, tears often emerge as the only outlet for an irresistibly responsive grasping of the happenings.”³¹ Moreover, tears are often a response to a situation that could not be answered by speech anyway: words would distract, sound inappropriately banal, or make insufficient sense because they could not capture the experience. Hence in a crying situation, the crier is literally left speechless but is nevertheless able to admit to him- or herself the deep emotional involvement.

In the movie theater, no one else is supposed to overhear this admission. Tears are thus a form of somatic *self*-confession. They *ex*-press quite fluidly, in the most literal sense, our strong emotional involvement. The wordless response of tears is so significant that we even perform it in private. (This aspect, by the way, points once more to the individualizing tendency of weeping at the movies: while we weep alone in front of the TV set, we rarely laugh out loud when we watch a comedy by ourselves.) Sometimes our emotionally “gripped,” “captivated,” and “moved” body makes this “statement” even *against* our cognitive reluctance to hear what it has to tell us, as in the case of intellectually or ideologically dubious movies.

Now, if it is true what Plessner says—that crying is less immediate than laughing, that it involves an act of self-abandonment, that we have to give in to our emotions before tears can come—then weeping in the face of intellectually inferior or ideologically dubious movies hints strongly towards the guilty pleasure of teary eyes.³² If we know that the movie is questionable and *nevertheless* give in to the gradual (not abrupt!) surge of tears, then the experience of weeping must provide a pleasure or gratification hitherto unmentioned. As a female fan of *Titanic* put it, “It’s so much better to cry because it makes the movie so much more enjoyable.”³³ A psychological study designed to test the appeal of tear-jerkers implicitly confirmed the reaction of the *Titanic* devotee. The test persons who felt saddest while watching the 1989 melodrama *Steel Magnolias* were also the ones who enjoyed it most thoroughly.³⁴ The question is—why? What exactly is the pleasure of being moved to tears?

The Best Tears of Our Lives? Why Cinematic Weeping is so Enjoyable

The answer lies hidden precisely in the corporeal “statement” that we as embodied beings make to ourselves: tears literally bring our bodies to mind.³⁵ Hence in weeping, we live through a specific corporeal metamorphosis in which our otherwise absent bodies enter the foreground of awareness.³⁶ In everyday conduct, the lived-body is tacitly taken for granted and kept in the background of consciousness. When I sit in the cinema, I am virtually not aware of my eyes watching, my hands leaning on the armrest, my throat swallowing the bucket full of popcorn... My consciousness is dedicated almost wholly to the movie. More precisely, while my *ambient* consciousness is involved with my sitting in the cinematic Here, my *focal* consciousness is devoted to the filmic There. The situation changes, however, once we leave the non-emotional (or, given the continuous nature of the matter, we should say *relatively* non-emotional) flux of mundane concerns and enter an emotional situation.³⁷ Jack Katz explains, “The one constancy in the metamorphoses that distinguish different emotions is a sensual turning of one’s attention to regions of the body that, outside of one’s own direct awareness, had been employed to construct behaviour. [...] [I]n emotional experience one turns, sensually rather than via thought, toward background corporeal foundations of the self.”³⁸

Turning consciousness to an otherwise hidden region of the body is obviously not an exclusive characteristic of the tear-jerker. The repulsive monster of the horror movie, the suspenseful constellation of the thriller, the absurd slapstick of the comedy—in every case, the reacting body is called forth in different ways. These differences not only concern how the lived-body is affected but also how comprehensively it is involved. The frightening confrontation with the monster is a *wholesale* emotional captivation that has to be distinguished from a more *peripheral* reaction such as the nausea caused by cinematic disgust. While fear affects our selves as a whole, disgust is restricted to local areas of the body such as the stomach or the gorge. Similarly, the sad or joyful grip of the melodrama touches the viewer completely, but once he or she gives in to tears the lived-body experience is predominantly concentrated on the face and specifically the eyes. Moreover, the somatic transformation of the tear-jerker is characterized by an outstanding peculiarity: it brings to the fore the only three-dimensional *out-come* of the body that is socially accepted in the movie theater and not considered abject. As such, tears markedly differ from other secretions such as feces, urine, mucus, vomit,

or semen. In comparison to those secretions, the advantage of weeping lies in its proximity to the central perceptual engagement of the movies: the act of viewing. While vomiting as a disgusted response to bestial violence or monstrosity by necessity draws our attention *away* from the screen, melodramatic weeping does not. Even if tears put a liquid film between us and the film, they are transparent enough, both in the metaphoric and the literal sense, to allow for a continuous engagement with the onscreen world. It would be wrong to assert that in weeping we pay no more attention to the movie—far from it. Rather, we are suspended in a state-in-between. Isolating us from the rest of the audience and thus relegating to the background of awareness the social aspect of our cinematic experience, weeping makes us pay attention primarily to the melodramatic movie as well as to our foregrounded body.

Shedding tears in the movie theater is therefore nothing more and nothing less than a way of enjoying a publicly accepted, powerful experience of the body.³⁹ As we have seen, weeping depends on two components: a passive emotional captivation and an active tearful capitulation. While strong emotional involvements can be gratifying per se, tears add another turn of the screw. They put the exclamation mark of an *external* outpouring behind the *internal* turmoil of our emotional experience. But not every foregrounding of the body is pleasurable, not every secretion enjoyable. In illness or pain the body comes to mind as well. Vomiting or blowing one’s nose entail secretions, too. Yet, how many people puke passionately, how many sick persons lie in bed enthusiastically? What, then, is the reason we enjoy the foregrounding of the body in weeping?

We could evade the question by pointing out that the descriptive method of phenomenology comes to an end when a causal explanation is needed. However, in the case of weeping, the lived-body phenomenology of Hermann Schmitz provides a clue to a slightly more satisfying answer. With Schmitz, I would argue that the specific pleasure of tears lies, at least partly, in the *lived-body’s* (not the *physiological* body’s) tendency to dissolve, soften, and expand.⁴⁰ “Dissolving into tears,” the lived-body gives up its tense, hardened state required by daily life in general and masculinity in specific and acquires a momentary state of softness.⁴¹ In order to appreciate the softening effect of weeping, we do not have to believe the idle talk of the “healing powers” of tears. The softening of the lived-body simply provides a pleasurable feeling that is not unlike the dissolving feeling one experiences when taking a relaxing bath. Moreover, as tears flow by, the viewer seems to be freed from a pressing constriction (or tension) and starts to experience a feeling of lived-body expansion.

Schmitz even talks about a “flight from constriction into expansion.”⁴² It is precisely the *transformation* of the lived-body from a tight and tense state into a soft and expanded one that makes weeping at the movies so pleasurable.⁴³

These softening as well as expansive tendencies are obviously part of everyday weeping as well. But in most cases they cannot be experienced as fully and enjoyably as the tears of *aesthetic* experiences. There are at least four reasons: First, in non-aesthetic weeping our personal existence is often too intricately interwoven with the *cause* and the *emotions* that we give in to. Crying over the death of my grandfather is not enjoyable because I suffer from an *actual* great loss, whereas the tears spilled over the *fictional* death of, say, Bambi’s mother can be pleasurable. Second, aesthetic experiences are free from any responsibility to act.⁴⁴ When Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio) drowns onscreen with the Titanic, we can enjoy our weeping because there is no chance for us to intervene. Third, we can enjoy even the ambivalent tears caused by movies running counter to our moral convictions because aesthetic distance grants us a certain leeway in terms of moral evaluation. We do not have to be morally outraged as much as in real-life precisely because the depiction is “merely” fictional. And fourth, unlike everyday weeping, tears in the cinema are pre-packaged: they are not only available on demand, but the length and the intensity of our involvement can for the most part be foreseen. In this context, the significance of genres comes into play. Genres as communicative tools tell us beforehand what we can expect by and large. Selecting a melodrama for tonight’s entertainment, we do not run the risk of an unsafe, possibly overwhelming experience but know the extent of our involvement in advance. Thus, watching a melodrama means that we give in to tears because they allow us an institutionalized, controlled form of experience otherwise hardly available—at least not in the secure and regulated form provided by the movie theater. This aesthetic experience has a strong pleasurable and self-affirmative quality as phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne reminds us: “If the idea of an aesthetic pleasure has any meaning, it is in terms of a pleasure experienced by the body—a pleasure more refined and discreet than that which accompanies the satisfaction of organic needs, yet one which still sanctions self-affirmation.”⁴⁵

The corporeal self-affirmation afforded by melodrama-inspired tears has to be considered against the backdrop of our disembodied way of life in advanced modern societies—a way of life in which the body is suppressed in various ways. While it is true that everyday conduct generally relies on the absent body as a tacit, taken-for-granted

background, the Western disembodied way of life restrains the body to a hitherto unknown degree. Mechanization, industrialization, motorization, growing bureaucracy, etc.—all have their share in effacing our lived-body experiences. The somatic experiences at the movies, just like other corporeal leisure activities, acquire a pleasurable compensatory value: cinematic tears—just as cinematic laughter and screaming, just as fear, thrill, and disgust—affirm and confirm that our suppressed bodies are not just a background container of the mind but can be foregrounded and can thus also rouse an awareness of aliveness. Tears might put us in a precarious, potentially shameful position but their enwrapping, individualizing tendency allows for a focused experience of an otherwise neglected part of ourselves. Thanks to our tears we have a good—a very good—weep in the dark.

Notes

¹ Hanns Zischler. *Kafka Goes to the Movies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 104.

² *Ibid.*, 103.

³ James Elkins. *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*. New York: Routledge, 2001, 231.

⁴ Schröder admitted at the October 2003 premiere of the movie (international title: *The Miracle of Bern*) that he had already cried while watching the rough cut. See “Das Wunder von Bern”: Der Kanzler hat geweint.” *WDR.de* (16 October 2003). http://www.wdr.de/themen/kultur/film/wunder_bern/premierenfieber.jhtml. Accessed 11 July 2007.

⁵ My phenomenological description restricts itself to the viewing situation in American theaters, even if comments from British and German spectators will sometimes help to underscore my observations and might indicate the description’s validity beyond the United States. On the other hand, I am far from claiming universality. There are, of course, variations in historical and cultural norms for crying as well as variations in crying behavior across epochs and cultures.

⁶ See Helmuth Plessner. *Philosophische Anthropologie: Lachen und Weinen. Das Lächeln. Anthropologie der Sinne*. Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1970; Jack Katz. *How Emotions Work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, and Hermann Schmitz. *Die Person*. Bonn: Bouvier, 1980.

⁷ For example, the editors of a 2001 essay collection on adult crying note, “When we began our research programs on crying, we were surprised to learn that so little was known about crying and that what there was consisted of much more speculation than theory driven research. Adult crying in many ways still is ‘terra incognita’ in the behavioral sciences.” See *Adult Crying: A Biopsychosocial Approach*, ed. A. J. J. M. Vingerhoets and Randolph R. Cornelius. New York:

Brunner-Routledge, 2001, xxiii. As to cinematic tears, interesting quotes from British viewers in the 1950s are reprinted in Sue Harper and Vincent Porter. "Moved to Tears: Weeping in the Cinema in Postwar Britain." *Screen* 2.37 (1996): 152-173. Scattered remarks on the experience of weeping can be found in Hermann Kappelhoff. *Matrix der Gefühle: Das Kino, das Melodrama und das Theater der Empfindsamkeit*. Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2004; Gertrud Koch. "Zu Tränen gerührt. Zur Erschütterung im Kino." In *Pathos, Affekt, Gefühl: Die Emotionen in den Künsten*, ed. Klaus Herding and Bernhard Stumpfhaus. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004, 562-574; and Ed S. Tan and Nico H. Frijda. "Sentiment in Film Viewing." In *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, 48-64. The academic online journal *Nach dem Film* has devoted an entire issue to crying and film. See *Nach dem Film* (October 2002). <http://www.nachdemfilm.de/no4/no4start.html>. Accessed 11 July 2007.

⁸ On the suppression of the body in contemporary Western culture see Richard Shusterman. *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000; Vivian Sobchack. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004; Bärbel Tischleder. *Body Trouble: Entkörperlichung, Whiteness und das amerikanische Gegenwartskino*. Frankfurt/Main: Stroemfeld, 2001; and Karl-Heinrich Bette. *Körperspuren: Zur Semantik und Paradoxie moderner Körperlichkeit*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989. Bette, for instance, talks about a "process of ever-increasing suppression of the body." See Bette, *Körperspuren*, 2, my translation.

⁹ Katz, *How Emotions Work*, 150-156.

¹⁰ Arthur Koestler. *The Act of Creation*. London: Penguin, 1989 (1964), 271-272, emphasis in the original. The psychologist Nico H. Frijda goes in a similar direction when he assumes a "basic difference between noise production, the crying proper or shrieking, and the shedding of tears." See Vingerhoets/Cornelius, *Adult Crying*, xvi.

¹¹ The following statement made by a 38 year-old teacher in response to a 1950 survey on crying in the cinema is apposite: "If I find myself becoming emotionally upset I kill it by thinking 'it's just a play.' Admittedly one loses much by this attitude but it's better than making an exhibition of one's emotions." Qtd. in Harper/Porter, "Moved to Tears," 155.

¹² *Ibid.*, 157.

¹³ Peter Krämer argues that "male prejudice, and dislike of, love stories" is a "commonsense view held by Hollywood executives and confirmed by audience research." See Peter Krämer. "Women First: *Titanic*, Action-Adventure Films, and Hollywood's Female Audience." In *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999, 124.

¹⁴ Linda Williams. "Melodrama Revised." In *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 42-88.

¹⁵ See Despina Kakoudaki. "Spectacles of History: Race Relations, Melodrama, and the Science Fiction/Disaster Film." *Camera Obscura* 2.17 (2002): 109-153.

¹⁶ David Bordwell. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. On the classical mode see pp. 156-204; on the art-cinema mode pp. 205-233.

¹⁷ Plessner, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, 159, my translation.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, my translation.

¹⁹ In an online forum on tears at the movies, set off by the academic internet journal *Nach dem Film*, a contributor named Libby recalls an anecdote that occurred to him while watching *The Joy Luck Club* (1993): "The violins were coming up big time, and I was fighting with myself not to start really crying when, suddenly, I was distracted by the sound of the person behind me just sobbing; really, I was listening, deep into the film's story, and then I just hear this jagged intake of breath behind me and I'm out. I stopped listening to the earnest dialogue and the violins and started listening to the theater around me, and realized that everyone was just dissolving into tears and crying their hearts out, and that I just had been totally blocking out this other noise while concentrating on the film. Just as suddenly, the whole thing seemed really cheap to me..." (English in the original, emphasis in the original). See "Tear Watch," *Nach dem Film* (October 2002).

²⁰ Plessner, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, 159, my translation.

²¹ Koestler. *The Act of Creation*, 272.

²² José B. Capino shows that the situation is quite different with gay adult theaters, which (still) function as cruising sites and therefore reduce the individualizing effect of porn significantly. See José P. Capino. "Homologies of Space: Text and Spectatorship in All-Male Adult Theaters." *Cinema Journal* 1.45 (2005): 50-65.

²³ Concerning the lower shame threshold of young girls, Katz assumes that girls' collective crying at rock concerts is "perhaps the last time in the life cycle that Westerners can freely go all out in crying seemingly without limitation and in large orchestrated groups." See Katz, *How Emotions Work*, 212, emphasis added.

²⁴ See Melanie Nash and Martti Lahti. "'Almost Ashamed to Say I Am One of Those Girls': *Titanic*, Leonardo DiCaprio, and the Paradoxes of Girls' Fandom." In *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999, 64-88.

²⁵ See Tom Lutz. *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears*. New York: Norton, 1999, 19.

²⁶ See particularly chapters 5 ("An Episode of Whining") and 6 ("Crying in the Whirlpool") in Katz, *How Emotions Work*, 229-308.

²⁷ Madelon Sprengnether. *Crying at the Movies: A Film Memoir*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2002. In one case (*Schindler's List*, 1993), she felt so afraid of

being alone with her sadness and wanted her husband to come with her so strongly that his refusal became the cause for a serious marital estrangement, which ultimately ended in divorce.

²⁸ Katz comments on the active doing in crying: "It may seem odd to imply that people 'do' these little turns into their bodies, seizing on resources that they do not in any cognitive sense seem aware that they have, in order to produce the corporeal practices of crying. But if the person involved does not make a tacit turn on his or her body to find the material stuff of crying, who or what does? It is inadequate to dismiss the question with the view that the behavior of crying is somehow 'wired in' to people as an inherited response pattern. Cultural and situational variations in the practices of crying are sufficient to keep the issue vigorously alive. Biological explanations just beg the question of how they work their influence into human behavior in nonrandom, socially situated patterns." See Katz, *How Emotions Work*, 213.

²⁹ Plessner, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, 136, my translation.

³⁰ Some entries in the above-mentioned online forum *Nach dem Film* can be cited as evidence for this argument. A contributor named "bb" admits, "While I generally do not allow myself to cry at films (thinking myself above mere visceral reaction), I often cannot control a sudden [...] impulse to 'almost cry'" (English in the original, emphasis added). And a reader called Sonja writes, "Watching *Johnny Got His Gun*/Trumbo [sic] I have to fight my tears very strongly. I do not permit myself to cry—but once the camera shows Johnny lying in bed and we, the viewers, can hear him think, the emotional pressure starts. In fact, it does not stop throughout the whole film" (my translation). See "Tear Watch."

³¹ Katz, *How Emotions Work*, 198.

³² Plessner, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, 153-155.

³³ Lutz, *Crying*, 43.

³⁴ See Minet De Wied, Dolf Zilmann, and Virginia Ordman. "The Role of Empathic Distress in the Enjoyment of Cinematic Tragedy." *Poetics* 23 (1994): 91-106.

³⁵ Gertrud Koch similarly maintains that in the movie theater we predominantly weep for weeping's sake; the attraction of touching films lies in the very experience of a bodily sensation. See Gertrud Koch. "Zu Tränen geführt: Zur Erschütterung im Kino." In *Pathos, Affekt, Gefühl: Die Emotionen in den Künsten*, ed. Klaus Herding and Bernhard Stumpfhaus. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004, 564 and 572.

³⁶ The foregrounding of the body necessitates that our analytic mind recedes into the background. Small wonder that critics and academics—both professionally dependent on their ability to verbalize, analyze, and intellectualize—for the longest time refrained from acknowledging, let alone praising, the emotional experience of melodrama. Film critics often reproached melodrama for its excessive emotionality. Academics, even though busy with discussing melodrama from various perspectives for several decades, rarely confronted its aesthetic experience.

For the concept of body foreground and background, see Katz, *How Emotions Work*, 332-343 and Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

³⁷ See Katz, *How Emotions Work*, 341.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 335.

³⁹ Note that a foregrounding of the body does not necessarily imply an individualized experience—think of the experience of cinematic laughter, in which the foregrounded body of the individual merges with the collective body of the laughing audience.

⁴⁰ See Schmitz, *Die Person*, 126.

⁴¹ However, precisely because its softening quality puts the hard-bodied foundation of masculinity into question, weeping is more difficult to enjoy for men.

⁴² Schmitz, *Die Person*, 129, my translation.

⁴³ One could call this pleasurable transformation from a constricted and tense to an expansive and relaxed state *cathartic*. I hesitate to use this expression, however, since the word *catharsis* usually implies a purgation of negative emotions and hence a healing effect—which in the case of crying is highly doubtful from an empirical point of view. See also Randolph R. Cornelius. "Crying and Catharsis." In *Adult Crying: A Biopsychosocial Approach*, ed. A. J. J. M. Vingerhoets and Randolph R. Cornelius. Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge, 2001, 199-211.

⁴⁴ See Ed S. Tan. *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996, 55 and 76.

⁴⁵ Mikel Dufrenne. *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, 339.