

**Youth as a State of War:
Todd Solondz's Images of American Youth***

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“What does it mean to become a man?”, asks thirteen-year old Timmy (Dylan Riley Snyder) in Todd Solondz's *Life During Wartime* (2009), a variation on *Happiness*, produced in 1998. As in his previous films, *Wartime* focuses on the life, the times and the tribulations of young people - children, adolescents and young adults. Timmy's brother, Billy (Rufus Read/Chris Marquette) is eleven years old in *Happiness* and twenty-one in *Wartime*. Dawn Wiener (Heather Matarazzo), the protagonist of *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), is eleven; her brother, several of her schoolmates and Scooby Livingston (Mark Webber), the protagonist of *Storytelling* (2001), are seventeen years old. Aviva in *Palindromes* (2004) is played by seven different actresses and one actor: four of them are thirteen-fourteen years old, one is a six-year-old girl and the other two are adults in their mid-twenties. In *Happiness* and *Wartime*, children and young adults are not cast in leading roles but are nevertheless key figures.

Solondz's young people all appear in a highly original cinematic universe which relies on strong intertextual links provided by returning characters and obsessively recurring subjects. Following the destinies of several of the protagonists introduced in *Happiness*, *Wartime* recasts all the returning characters with different actors. In *Palindromes*, Dawn Wiener's tragic fate is briefly revealed in the very beginning by her brother Mark (Matthew Faber), who appears again as a supporting character in *Wartime*. Self-reflection does not only produce variations of the same theme, it also allows the filmmaker to deepen his viewpoint. His stories echo each other, creating a metatext, sustained by the fact that most of Solondz's films are set in the suburbs of New Jersey and in Jewish middle-class families, the seat of the filmmaker's roots. Florida, which provides the setting for several sequences of *Happiness* and *Wartime*, appears - not unlike California - as the appropriate reminder of the American Dream, a notion which the filmmaker constantly scrutinizes.¹ Against this geographic and sociocultural background, Solondz, the writer of his own pieces, explores childhood, youth and life in contemporary America in fragmented narratives, focusing on taboos such as physical disability, racism, homosexuality, social exploitation, rape and pedophilia. A greasy, constantly sweating phone-sex fetishist, a psychiatrist who turns out to be a pedophile, an obese young woman who had dismembered her building's superintendent, a nymphomaniac writer and other (sexually) frustrated loners and losers are among the protagonists in Solondz's films. However, it is not so much his critical view on

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¹ For further details on the filmic stereotype “Florida”, see Penny Starfield, “Transformations of Stereotyped Film Objects in American Films of the Sixties and Seventies”, in Zeenat Saleh, ed., *Le cinéma et ses objets/Objects in Film (La Licorne, hors série-colloques IV, 1997)*, 258-260.

American suburbia or his proclivity for taboo subjects which make Solondz a highly controversial director-writer.² It is also the fact that the usual victims of marginalization - the mentally and physically disabled, the migrants and the poor - aren't spared from satirical representation. Even the holocaust becomes a target of the filmmaker's unsettling humor. This does not mean that Solondz is just replacing one social stereotype with another one. He challenges liberal complacency revealing how much American film production seeks to adjust social criticism to so-called political correctness. His most uncompromising attitude might explain why his films, despite some critical success, are still lacking broader academic acknowledgement.³

This is regrettable in the light of the complexity of his work. Solondz's social portrayals go far beyond suburban daily life, reminding the viewer how much individual destiny and broader political questions are connected. *Wartime* refers very openly to current questions of international terrorism that the United States has been confronted with especially since September 9, 2011, and to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.⁴ However, it is essentially the representation of young people that alludes to a warlike situation, symbolized by the generation gap and enacted in the confrontation with growing sexuality. The pressing question underlying this cinematic kaleidoscope of situations, reflections and emotions built on characters who are prisoners of love and life at this warring stage of their lives is: "What does it mean to be a child or adolescent in Todd Solondz's world?" How does the representation of youth challenge a society that celebrates materialism and success above all and the very ideal of family it relies on? This article will try to show how Solondz questions social concepts and conventions through provocative images of young people and conflicting relationships between young protagonists and adults or other adolescents in his feature films from *Fear, Anxiety & Depression* (1989) to *Dark Horse* (2011). Sexual abuse becomes another important topic for exploring America's ambiguous attitude toward violence. Here again, a war is fought inside American homes rather than on international battlefields and the social portrayal is highly introspective.

The family as a war zone

The family, the nucleus of society, provides the filmmaker with one of his central dramatic spaces. The oil painting of the Wiener family in *Dollhouse*, a reminder of the portrait tradition of the European aristocracy and (American) economic and political dynasties, is obviously executed from a photograph. Not unlike idyllic family life, it is revealed as a fake, as a cheap imitation of art. In *Happiness*, the ever-smiling Trish in her neat kitchen appears as the caricature of the perfect American housewife and mother as presented in films of the fifties and sixties or in commercial spots. At the end, her ideal of a

² Controversy was mainly raised for his portrait of the pedophile in *Happiness*, considered as too sympathetic. Universal canceled the distribution deal which was set for the film, because the head of the studio which had financed *Happiness* through its sub-division October Films considered it as "morally repugnant". See Steve Warren, "Todd Solondz and his latest 'last movie'", www.heraldtribune.com, April 22nd, 2012.

³ As yet, no monographic work has been published on Solondz's films, a situation which may result from the limited distribution of some of his films.

⁴ Another link to a broader context is the reference to international terrorism and to the situation in the Middle East in *Wartime*, in which Trish's lover immigrates to Israel to support the Jews.

home will be destroyed by her pedophilic husband's secret life. In *Storytelling*, the massive body of Marty Livingston (John Goodman) becomes the expression of the overbearing head of the household, the antipodes of his nervous wife, played by the slender Fern Livingston (Julie Hagerty).

For Toby Oxman (Paul Giamatti), who wants to direct a documentary film on youth in American suburbs in *Storytelling*, the adolescent is the key to the truth. For Solondz, the truth lies behind the illusionary surface of the idyllic family life he tries to unmask and is represented by outsiders such as Scooby. His brother Brady (Noah Fleiss) is an extrovert football star and Mickey (Jonathan Osser), his youngest brother, is a bright pre-ten. The introverted Scooby plays the role of the maverick, which both his looks and behavior underline. In contrast with his brothers' accurate haircut and impeccable dress, Scooby's shoulder-long curly hair looks blowzy and neglected. His clothes may be clean but his dark t-shirt and jeans indicate that this loner does not care much about his looks. Indeed, Scooby, for all that, seeking his identity, tries to disappear behind drab, nondescript clothes. Picking at his food and avoiding eye contact, he signifies through his behavior both protest and anxiety. His sagging shoulders are another bodily expression of youth at "unease" with itself. Shots of this inarticulate, sullen teenager depict him as profoundly lacking in self-confidence. Dawn Wiener, Aviva in the sequence called "Judah", and Joy (*Happiness*) are other adolescents and young adults who behave in a similar manner at the crucial moment between childhood and adulthood which the films portray. Ten years after her first appearance in *Happiness*, Joy (Shirley Henderson) is about 30 years old and still eager to embrace the world's misery and to do good works. Not knowing how to set about it, she is as clueless as Scooby, a name that is all too appropriate for this seventeen-year-old in his last year at high school without any particular interest except his CD collection, and above all no intention of going to college. His only wish is to become famous, like his idol, talk show host Conan O'Brien (Himself), a goal achieved in a daydream in which he appears vivacious and happy for the first time.

Similarly, in *Dollhouse*, Dawn is the odd-one-out, the "other" at her family's table. She refuses to say that she loves her mean-minded, seven-year-old sister and, as punishment, is not allowed to leave the table until she apologizes. An epitome of resistance, Dawn remains seated, grim-faced, her body stiff, refusing to obey. The editing suggests that it is her mother who gives up in the end, sending her to bed much later that the evening. More than Scooby, Dawn is the family's black sheep, constantly clashing with her mother and younger sister, who do not stop provoking her. "Club of special people" is the name given to the club which she has founded and whose only members are Dawn herself and her friend Ralphie (Dimitri Iervolino), an outsider like her. This does not mean that she is eager to welcome other people, even if she offers her idol, seventeen-year-old Steve (Eric Mabius), honorary membership. It is Steve who reveals to her the particular meaning of "special people". Quite often Solondz's characters are such "special people", human beings with intellectual deficiencies or physical infirmities. The student Marcus (Leo Fitzpatrick) in *Storytelling* has cerebral palsy; the children offered a home by the Sunshine family in *Palindrome* suffer from multiple mental and physical deficiencies or incurable diseases. According to Aviva's career-oriented mother—also a successful painter—, such children should never be born. The fear of malformation is one of her arguments for the abortion that she forces on her underage daughter. Despite their trim song performance of overwhelming

optimism, the Sunshine children are the excluded ones from the American Dream of success and happiness. However, while the liberal middle-class woman denies disabled persons the right to live, the Sunshines–pro-life activists and Christian fundamentalists–expel the homeless Aviva, thinking that she is a prostitute. They even accept murder as a means for defending their moral viewpoint. Thus Solondz’s films portray the immediate social and political concerns which make the family a microcosm for contemporary America. They highlight the social rejection of children who refuse to comply with social norms and the ideal of the healthy body and mind, while stressing the exploitation of the Salvadorian housemaid Consuelo (Lupe Ontiveros) in *Storytelling* by her employers, the Livingstons, who nevertheless consider themselves as liberal and tolerant. The United States of America, the home of freedom and democracy, is depicted as a nation of intolerance and hypocrisy. Repeated shots of housemaids walking with their employers’ children in the streets could have been set in the nineteenth century, except that Solondz frames them in front of middle-class properties in suburbia which, deprived of other signs of life and filmed under a grey sky, look cold and hostile.

Everyday rites, especially the dinner sequences - a recurrent situation in Solondz’s films - bring out the adults’ confinement and narrow-mindedness. In *Storytelling*, the table is located in the corner of a room, in which the curtains are closed, while the camera remains close to the characters. The insistence on confined spaces in Solondz’s films, dominated as they are by indoor shots, and the multiple close-ups and medium close-ups which block the view, transform home into a prison that the adolescents suffer from or try to escape from. The sensation of being enclosed is also expressed in the succession of the shots and a reduced palette. The family as the ideal image of society reveals itself as illusionary. The Livingstons or the Wieners sitting around the table are filmed as the image of an ossified society, their isolation underlining their parochial views.

The dinner sequences evolve around the problematic communication between adults and adolescents which characterizes life at home and at school. “One cannot rely on anybody. They [the adults] don’t trust you”, complains Judah (Robert Agri) in *Palindromes*. Trish (Allison Janney) thinks of her son Timmy as too young to understand the meaning of sexual abuse. Timmy misunderstands her disguised warnings and mistakenly accuses his mother’s lover Harvey (Michael Lerner) of being a child molester. A dialogue in *Happiness*, a film in which everybody lives behind closed doors, sums up how the dilemma of communication creates and explains conflicts leading to isolation and exclusion at best. The selfish Helen (Lara Flynn Boyle), who thinks of her sister Joy as a failure, says with feigned regret: “I am sorry. I am laughing with you, not at you”. Joy answers surprised, “But I am not laughing”, underlining Helen’s hypocrisy.

The universal and the ordinary

Alongside social criticism and in close connection with it, Solondz explores universal emotions and everyday problems of teenagers whose lives do not revolve around international policy, but who are preoccupied with more personal questions. Friendship, first romance, sexuality, school and college, acceptance by others, related to the search for identity - these themes are at the core of Solondz’s films. By focusing on problems which at first glance seem minor and unspectacular, the filmmaker reminds us of their tremendous

gravity for his young protagonists. A sequence in *Dollhouse* poignantly reveals the feelings of a girl caught between childhood and adulthood. At a party in her parents' home, Dawn prepares herself to declare her romantic longings to her older schoolmate Steve. Dressed in a garish and childlike gown, her tense body expresses her disturbing desire. "In this one image, Solondz evokes the very intensity that is the nature of growing up, for Dawn is not only confronting her tormented affection for an older boy, she is facing the inevitable conflict of becoming an adult."⁵ The confusing discovery of sexuality epitomized in these few shots calls for a universal reading which many viewers are invited to share. The "dollhouse" refers to a girl who dreams of having a boyfriend and thinks of sexuality as a means of liberation from childhood and family. In *Storytelling*, Scooby's first sexual experience becomes part of his rebellion. While he is making love with his classmate Stanley (Andrew Marantz), the camera does not show the two adolescents but moves to a painting of orange-colored spots. They start rotating and are transformed into the flames of a stake on which the Livingston couple is tied, unnoticed by Scooby; he is busy talking to his idol Conan O'Brien, who invites his young fan to his talk show. Obviously the rebellion described by Solondz remains an imaginary one.

However, sexuality is mainly presented as a set of anxieties with gender and identity. Dawn or Aviva have to face these anxieties without any help from their parents. The clumsy Dawn, still looking like a child in her girlish dresses, is contrasted with her schoolmate Lolita (Victoria Davis) who, true to her name, appears more sensual and adult-like. For Dawn, sexuality is still a mystery. Misunderstanding the meaning of "to do it with your hands", she plays the piano to guide Steve's attention to her hands. Sexuality remains an unknown territory located between fear and frustration, even if in this sequence the topic is depicted in a light-hearted and humorous manner. This unknown territory is however mapped with clichéd images and fantasies also forged by the media - including film -, providing society with role models or, at least, contributing to conventional gender roles. Stereotypical images of masculinity as well as common rape narratives are subverted in *Dollhouse*⁶ by self-referential means. The shots in which the school's bully Brandon (Brendon Sexton, Jr.) threatens Dawn, with his face plunged in darkness, are borrowed from the iconography and aesthetics of the thriller. The frequent resort to generic devices asserts the link to a clichéd masculinity which is shown as the product of an adolescent's wishful fantasy. The suspense is dissolved when Brandon tells Dawn that he will rape her at 3 p.m. He tries to intimidate her with a knife and is surprised that she joins him at the fixed hour. Instead of doing her any harm, he talks in a quite innocent manner to the girl he seems attracted to and even reveals a family secret, the hidden existence of his mentally disabled brother. The dependence on male physical violence is broken by the absurdity of the situation, which suggests that Brandon's power is as imaginary as his sexual experience. One can presume that, not unlike Brandon, Dawn's schoolmates' sexuality is the theme of their talk rather than their actions.

Another familiar situation is recreated in *Happiness* in which Billy discovers his pubescent body and fears he is not normal because he does not "come". Many male viewers

⁵ Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 39.

⁶ Michelle E. Moore, "If It Was Rape, Then Why Would She Be a Whore? Rape in Todd Solondz's Films", in Dominique Russell, ed., *Rape in Art Cinema*, (New York: Continuum, 2010), 129-141.

will presumably understand the self-doubt that such discoveries of their own body and of sexuality can lead to. In *Happiness*, Billy's worries are depicted humorously in the last sequence when the family's Labrador licks his sperm and puts his wet muzzle on Trish's face. The funny moment is heightened by a feeling of glee that the viewer, the filmmaker's accomplice, is allowed to enjoy because he/she understands what remains unnoticed by Trish and the other adults in the sequence. Their disinterest points once again to the gap between generations, revealing adults as selfish and self-absorbed.

In *Dollhouse*, the universally understandable affective states and variations on growing sexuality are embedded in the narrative of the high-school film with its cast of types and its conventions. As Timothy Shary puts it, "*Welcome to the Dollhouse* offers the first extended portrait of a female nerd in junior high school."⁷ Dawn is a rather mousy girl with big incisors, her eyes hidden behind thick glasses, the emblematic accessory of the "nerd", even if she does not fit with the type such as the bright student or the bookworm. High-school films as a subgenre of American youth films point to the importance of being accepted by society. Solondz pushes this scheme further when Dawn is willing to submit to rape by the school delinquent Brandon as a means to becoming accepted. Membership of student societies and the importance attached to social activities are part of American school and college life. In contrast to his sister Dawn, the opportunistic Mark is aware of society's rules and the importance of networking. At the end of the film, Dawn reluctantly follows his advice and joins her fellow students on a school trip. Solondz suggests that in the land of freedom, democracy only works for those who belong to influential circles. Mr. Livingston does not hesitate to declare in front of Toby's camera that his son Scooby, despite his failure in the exam, will be admitted to Princeton because of his social connections. Neither Dawn nor Scooby revolt against the establishment or break with social rules requiring conformity. Moreover, they are ultimately reintegrated into a system revealed as corrupt. Scooby himself has sabotaged the exam by refusing to answer the questions. After his brother Brady lapses into a coma caused by a sports accident, Scooby reconsiders his plans and even aims at Princeton, convinced that his father's connections will steer him through. His rebellion is apolitical, born out of the transitory moment of the struggle for identity. In a resigned manner, youth is featured as a temporary threat to the adults who nevertheless reintegrate the resisting adolescents as in *Dollhouse* and *Storytelling*. Solondz unmasks a social ideal, celebrated in so many Hollywood movies, that of individualism as a mere illusion.

Far from respecting Hollywood conventions, Solondz's protagonists are neither romantic rebels nor freakish teenagers or tragic figures. The main characters in Solondz's films are not marginalized because of physical or mental deficiency, their social status or sexual orientation, even if the high-school football star Brady fears for his image because of rumors about his brother's homosexuality. Solondz underlines the basic irrationality of marginalization, but puts it down to more ordinary reasons such as looks, dress, or behavior. Pointing to everyday experiences many viewers can identify with, Solondz's films conjure up a society obsessed with the perfect body, questioning this attitude on several levels. In the opening sequence of *Palindromes*, Aviva cries bitterly because she does not want to become

⁷ Shary, *op. cit.*, 33.

like her cousin Dawn, in other words fat, spotty and unpopular because of her appearance. The film suggests that this is enough to turn one's life into hell.

This everyday hell is depicted in *Dollhouse*, in which Dawn is harassed by her classmates, proving how stressful the life of a high-school student is. In *Storytelling*, the director of Scooby's school explains that according to an inquiry the stress factors for American high-school students preparing for college are higher than for adolescents during the bombings in Bosnia. Dawn is pressurized by adults - her parents and her teachers - and by her fellow schoolmates, who torment her verbally and physically. "Why do you hate me?" asks Dawn, and Lolita replies cruelly: "Because you are ugly." Far from being ugly, Dawn's face is that of a child and not that of the young woman she wishes to be. It is her lack of self-esteem which makes her a "nerd". Film critic Lisa Schwarzbaum writes optimistically, "that Dawn Wiener - and Heather Matarazzo - will one day soon bloom into talented and beautiful young women."⁸ However, in Solondz's films unpopular teens do not achieve self-respect or acceptance. Dawn is not another ugly duckling transformed into a beautiful swan or finding romantic love. *Palindromes* is not a fairy-tale, but a film which suggests that there is no happy ending for the pregnant Dawn, who commits suicide after being raped. The lesson, Solondz tells us, is the one Mr. Livingston gives his son Brady: "Life is not fair."

Childish monstrosities

Children such as Missy (Daria Kalinina), Dawn's younger sister, and Mickey, Scooby's younger brother have already assimilated the lessons of a society relying heavily on competition. They know how to make themselves loved. Shots of Missy pirouetting gracefully in her parents' garden appear repeatedly, providing *Dollhouse* with another ironic commentary on a shallow, middle-class idyll. Parody is created through the gap between action, music and the rather anonymous suburban setting. Missy's yearning glances and precocious remarks which beguile her mother and other adults are only a mask. Behind the image of the fragile innocent creature hides sheer meanness, revealed by her insolence. Watching a home video in which her older sister falls into a paddling-pool, the little girl comments sardonically: "Mommy, we should watch this again."

Mickey in *Storytelling* is a typical bright child constantly seeking recognition. He does not hesitate to lecture his father: "Gay people are people too, you know. You're just being prejudiced." He is presented as manipulative when he hypnotizes his father in order to persuade him to fire the maid Consuelo, whom he finds too slow and lazy. The boy pretends to take some interest in Consuelo's life while treating her like a slave. Missy and Mickey are already as hypocritical as the adults they try to please. Not unlike Tweety, the sweet little bird in the Warner Bros. cartoon, they are capable of the dirtiest tricks. But where Tweety acts in self-defense, the targets of the two children seem far more defenseless than the dull cat Sylvester.

Solondz challenges the romantic presumption of childhood as a state of innocence in his portrayals of everyday life, and not within the frame of the horror genre or the social

⁸ Lisa Schwarzbaum, "Welcome to the Dollhouse", *Entertainment Weekly*, May 31st, 1996, 43.

problem drama.⁹ In horror movies, the violent and monstrous metamorphosis of children is a metaphor for the adolescent as a threat to traditional values. The figure of the possessed child in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) or *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976) acts out the adult's anxieties about adolescence and youth in revolt.¹⁰ The link to the horror genre and its projection of fear onto child characters as embodiments of evil is, however, echoed in *Palindromes* by the frequent use of a haunting melody inspired by Krzysztof Komeda's lullaby from *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1969).¹¹ The intertextual link created by the music points to sexuality as a main factor in adult discomfort with youth as displayed in the horror genre. In *The Exorcist*, Regan's pubescent body is the source of fear; in *Palindromes* the pregnancy of the thirteen-year-old provokes the conflict between the generations and reveals a family (and a society) in crisis. Aviva is not only played by actresses of different age, one of the actresses is a little black girl, another one an obese black teenager. One actress is red-haired, another has curly brown hair. In one sequence, the role is performed by a boy. Aviva becomes the embodiment of "All-American youth", symbolically linked to Huckleberry Finn as a key cultural figure in a sequence entitled "Huckleberry". Aviva represents youth as positioned between opposite tendencies in American society, the pseudo-liberal, success-oriented family she comes from and the fundamentalist group offering her shelter for a short time. Both the materialist bourgeois home and the utopian community of American stock destroy individual longings and both are inclined to violence, of which Aviva becomes a target.

However, Aviva, Scooby and Dawn are not presented as mere victims. Dawn does not give up her dreams and tries to resist. She enacts her desire for revenge when she tears the heads off her sister's Barbie dolls. Much more active than the lethargic Scooby, she is courageous enough to stand up to the school bully Brandon telling him that Ralphie will move up whereas the less intelligent Brandon will not. An outsider herself, she defends the younger boy Troy (Scott Coogan) against three much older pupils. Instead of being grateful, Troy remarks: "Leave me alone, Wiener sausage." As in real life, good deeds do not always pay or meet with approval.

The victims of prejudice do not necessarily show solidarity, but spread prejudices themselves: for instance, Dawn is irritated by Ralphie and calls him a "faggot". She is, however, willing to revise her opinion of Brandon. Like her teachers and schoolmates, she thinks that he is a drug dealer, but she believes him when he tells her that he is not. The film later corrects Brandon's image of a bully who threatens Dawn with rape. His power is just further deceit of an adolescent trying to emulate the image of the male who relies on power achieved by violence. In contrast to the western movie in which "a man has to do what a man has to do" to fulfill the heroic gesture, Brandon, perhaps impressed by Dawn's courage, abandons the strong-male role, confessing his longings for love and approval.

Although Dawn or Scooby are not completely likeable characters, it is even more challenging to identify with a character such as Aviva, played by several actors. The frequent use of long shots and the static framing support a cinematic style that creates a distance

⁹ John Calhoun, "Childhood's End: *Let the Right One In* and Other Deaths of Innocence", *Cineaste* XXXV, 1 (Winter 2009), 27-31, 27.

¹⁰ Mark Kermode, *The Exorcist*, 2nd ed. (London: BFI, 1998), 9. To these could be added a film such as *Problem Child* (1990), which mocks the figure of the evil child as known from horror movies.

¹¹ The soundtrack of Solondz's film was written by Nathan Larson.

between viewer and character or situation rather than providing opportunities for identification. This ambiguous position is part of *Storytelling* in which Toby Oxman, a young man in his late twenties aims to make a documentary about the fears and aspirations of ambitious teenagers. He intends to present “the realities that kids and their parents face in America today”. By chance he meets Scooby and decides to focus on him and his family as an example of American middle-class and teenage life in the suburbs. However, the project quickly turns into a parody that makes fun of his subjects including Scooby, who feels betrayed. Toby defends his film against his producer’s reproach of having abused the people he has filmed: “I am not making fun of them. I love them.” It sounds as if Solondz, having been previously accused of mocking his characters, is addressing his critics, namely Sam Mendes who had criticized *Happiness* for being “condescending”.¹² In “Non-fiction”, the second part of *Storytelling*, Solondz replies in a hilarious manner to Mendes’s attack by trivializing the famous sequence with the plastic bag blowing in the breeze, replacing it by a scrap of paper. Another reminder of Mendes’ *American Beauty* (1999) is the title chosen by Toby Oxman for his documentary: *American Scooby*.¹³

Solondz not only criticizes *American Beauty* as “shorthand for a particular type of educated middlebrow American culture”,¹⁴ he also explores the very function of parody. *Storytelling* resembles a film by an independent filmmaker, an outsider from the studio system, who makes a film about a loser (Toby) filming another loser (Scooby). Parody is created through the very fine line between the comical and the serious which risks keeling over into tragedy or banality at any moment. The derisory elements and constant *déjà vu* created by intertextual links breaking through the apparent realism create contradictory portraits of youth and adulthood which reveal the parody at work in an allusive manner. The sense of absurdity deflects the realism of the photography and generates an ironical distance. Parody and the phantom haunting Joy in *Wartime* underline that this is a fiction in which the viewer can nevertheless still be reminded of childhood memories. By taking the perspective of the child within the adult, Solondz’s disquieting portraits of American families and youth form a chain of sympathy for the eternal loser. If Toby is one of Solondz’s many *alter egos*, the characters and situations depicted in his films are a mirror in which viewers, too, might recognize themselves and their own experiences as grown-ups. These caricatured portraits confront us, the viewers, with our own prejudices and raise the question of why we laugh and who we laugh at. We are constantly required to find the balance between social satire and freak show. Indeed, the image that Solondz invites us to look at is a distorted image of reality and ourselves. This is the challenge and we, as the audience, are involved. It is up to us to question our very feelings and thoughts; we have to face our own doubts and perhaps we will discover our own hypocrisy and the limits of our tolerance.

¹² Steve Rose, “Life after Happiness” www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2001/nov/26/artsfeatures, accessed March 25th, 2013.

¹³ The reference is dual for it also alludes to the documentary *American Movie: Making of Northwestern* (Chris Smith, 1999). The guitarist Mike Schank, who starred in *American Movie*, has a small role in *Storytelling* playing Toby’s cameraman.

¹⁴ Peter Bradshaw, “*Storytelling*”, www.guardian.co.uk/film/2001/nov/30, accessed March 25th, 2013.

Home as a site of terror

Even if the glimpses on the road sign “Watch children” in *Happiness* is another ironical comment on the way a society deals with its children in a film concerned with pedophilia, *Happiness* and *Wartime* approach the difficult topic without the recourse to parody. Extreme sexual behavior becomes a means to discuss the power relationship between adults and children or adolescents. In *Happiness*, the psychiatrist Bill Maplewood (Dylan Baker) tries to comfort the father of eleven-year-old Johnny, a friend of his son Billy’s, when the man expresses the fear that his young son might be homosexual. On several other occasions, Bill speaks in a very friendly and patient way with his son Billy about his awakening sexuality. But behind the mask of the caring father, the film reveals the pedophile that sodomized Johnny (Evan Silverberg) after drugging his dessert.

We even see Bill in a dream shooting people (including a homosexual couple) at random in a public park. This sequence of great violence accompanied by classical music underlines how much civilization is a mere varnish, hardly covering the violent impulses under the surface. Ten years later, in *Wartime*, Bill (Ciarán Hinds) is framed sitting next to a mirror confronted with his own double. The pedophile Bill, plunged into darkness, is the two-faced man whose violent side is revealed. The reflection in the mirror is also a reminder of Narcissus and hints that child molesters are often immature neurotics. Bill and other adult characters in Solondz’s films are stuck in their mental and psychological development, unable to face responsibility and to live normal sexual lives. In *Happiness*, Allen’s () sexual activities are reduced to masturbation. He molests women on the phone and is still doing so ten years later in *Wartime*. The shy Joy with her wispy little girl voice and hippie clothes is the type of child-woman continuously seeking love and she is still treated like a child by her sisters and her mother. In *Happiness* and *Wartime*, Solondz provides disturbing images of the (American) dream of eternal youth, asserting that adult America is still immature and not yet able to cope with normal life. The reference to Huckleberry Finn in *Palindromes* and the figure of the outcast remind us of the eternal adolescent embedded in a literary and cinematic tradition with somewhat childish heroes whose pre-sexual, juvenile mode of existence precludes overt sexuality, in other words is a barrier to social life and the responsibilities of adulthood.¹⁵

In fact, the family, instead of being a site of protection, becomes the site of terror and abuse. The pastoral image of a public park with the silhouette of a human being dressed in white appears three times in *Wartime*. It is a projection of Bill’s mind: the viewer grasps after the third appearance of the picture in which the silhouette takes shape that the figure is Bill’s younger son. Indeed, the mysterious figure is Timmy, an image haunting Bill in his dreams. Is it the dream of a pervert who has sexual fantasies about his young son even if he does not acknowledge this desire to himself? In *Happiness*, Bill reassures his son Billy telling him that he would never have touched him. However, he says, when his son asks him what the word “serial rapist” means, that he has made love with the boys, that he enjoyed it and that he will do it again. The romantic but unsettling images are also connected with the recurring dream of innocence embodied by the young boy, this innocence forever lost and

¹⁵ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 2nd rev. ed., (New York: Stein & Day, 1966), 134.

inaccessible to Bill. Or, are these images simply the wishful dream of a father to be with his son again?

In contrast to Chris Menges' *The Lost Son* (F/UK/USA, 1999) and Tim Roth's *The War Zone* (UK, 1999.), neither *Happiness* nor *Wartime* demonize the pedophile. The molester in the latter is not a monster who deserves to be killed, as Menges' and Roth's films suggest. Solondz does not construct "the pedophile as the totally other to the normative white male (hetero)sexual"¹⁶ as Menges does. Moreover, there is no distinction made between "good" and "bad" fathers. On the contrary, the abuser's humanity is taken into account by allowing the viewer to experience empathy for him. *Happiness* "[...] effectively achieves a *critical* semiotic (as opposed to Freudian) displacement. Because he disrupts the inclination to readily apply moral terms to Dr. Maplewood, he turns attention away from Maplewood as an object of scorn and toward the discourse of sexual morality."¹⁷ The reflection in the mirror in *Wartime* is a means of pointing to the distorted personality of the child molester who is both normal and perverted and whose perception of his acts differs from normalcy. Indeed, in a very brutal and powerful sequence in *Wartime*, Bill is a most pitiful figure when, dirty, ragged, and starving, he begs Billy for a glass of water. The danger which emanates from the dark-haired actor Ciarán Hinds, as the dark-suited Bill in *Wartime*, is combined with the feeling of an overwhelming sadness which indeed prevents the viewer from making any moral judgment. Hinds and Dylan Baker (Bill in *Happiness*) play out their character's inner struggle through their facial expressions, revealing the humanity of the man tormented by his inability to control his sexual drive. Solondz has been criticized for his portrayal of the pedophile, considered by some critics as being too sympathetic. In *Wartime*, it becomes clear that, rather than being a sympathetic character, Bill is a tormented soul, haunted by his desire. The Irish actor's presence and performance add the necessary gravity to the part. The mirror-sequence brings to light the dark side of a man who will forever be the prisoner of the terrifying part of his ego. However, the man who is confronted with his own reflection, whose ego is divided, is also weakened. "The doubling of an image is a propagation that diminishes it, and the man who sees his own *Doppelgänger* has a weaker sense of his own identity than the man who does not."¹⁸ Moreover, the image of the self-alienated abuser revealing his vulnerability lacks the irony usually at work in Solondz's films.

Solondz does not deal with the lifelong anxieties of the victims of abuse. However, he displaces their pain, evoking the disturbing consequences for Bill's sons who are Bill's victims too. In *Wartime*, Bill, coming out of prison, goes to see Billy, now a student of anthropology. He tells him that he wanted to make sure that Billy has not become like him. Billy, unable to forgive and to forget, points out how much his father's crimes have determined his life and his fear of being homosexual.

Solondz's portrayals of human beings and society are riddled with contradictions which his films do not suppress. Through the inner conflict of adolescents (and of adults) at

¹⁶ Rosie White, "The Lost Son", <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk>, June 2000, accessed March 25th, 2013.

¹⁷ Michael J. Shapiro, "Affirming the Political: Tragic Affirmations versus Gothic Displacements", in Jane Bennett and Michael J. Shapiro, ed., *The Politics of Moralizing: A Positive Ethos of Democratic Debate* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 2002), 223-241, esp. 226.

¹⁸ Paul Coates, *The Story of the Lost Reflection: The Alienation of the Image in Western and Polish Cinema* (London: Verso, 1985), 11.

war with themselves, the filmmaker provides disconcerting portrayals of contemporary America. "Becoming a man" seems to imply that one has to live with failure, with fear and desire. Timmy says several times, "I am almost a man" and "I am the man of the house." But on the day of his Bar Mitzvah, he breaks into tears and cries: "I just want my father." At that very moment, Bill, unnoticed by him, is passing in the background, crossing the image from the right to the left. In these last shots, his body looks translucent. Trish had told her children that Bill is dead: here he is a walking ghost, a father figure who is absent and omnipresent, a phantom still haunting. One must conclude that that the wounds of childhood never heal in the pitiless society of immature adults - frustrated and neurotic mothers, weak, abusive or absent fathers - that Solondz continuously calls into question.