"*Skam*" (shame) as Ethical–Political Education

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Abstract

I here explore the educational potential of cinema and TV-series through the eyes of the French philosopher Alain Badiou. To illustrate, I read the Norwegian web-based TV-series *Skam* (shame), which reached out to millions of Nordic teens by a broad distribution, easy access and speaking a language young people could relate to. The series portrays the many faces and ambiguities of shame and shaming embedded in Nordic youth culture. In bringing the question of the pedagogy of cinema and TV-series to the forefront, I here read *Skam* on three analytical levels. First, to explore the TV-series capability to captivate the viewers through a doubling of the real. Second, to examine Badiou's idea of cinema as an ontological art, revolving around the question of the relationship between being and appearing. Third, I read *Skam* analytically, to consider Badiou's claim that cinema is a democratic emblem. In sum, what may be the series' potential for shaping the viewers' ethical–political awareness?

Keywords Cinema · Philosophy · Education · Shame · Alain Badiou

Introduction

I here explore the educational potential of cinema and TV-series through the eyes of the French philosopher Alain Badiou. In thinking cinema as education, Badiou conceptualizes cinema as an ontological art revolving around the question of the relationship between being and appearing. Cinema thus carries the prospect of speaking truths about and guiding our relationship with the contemporary world. To illustrate, I read the fourth season of a Norwegian web-based TV-series, *Skam* (shame).[1] This award-winning series, introduced to Scandinavian teens in 2015–2017, reached exceptional popularity. Moreover, the series is a fascinating example of a new genre. In using social media to interact with the audience while airing, Nordic teens could follow the fictive characters between different online platforms and social media, post comments on Facebook and watch the developing story

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[1] To stream the full Norwegian series, with English subtitles, please visit https://www.dailymotion.com/skamenglishsubs. I base my analysis on and quote the full series. However, if the dialogue I quote is available in excerpts posted on YouTube, I refer to the YouTube excerpt.

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day-by-day (Krüger and Rustad 2019). *Skam* is actually one of the very first web-based TV-series that fully embraces the logic of social media (Rustad 2018). The series thus illustrates the Deleuzian concept of "cinema" as movement, not only in terms of moving pictures but also as an art in transition (Deleuze 1986). Moreover, *Skam* demonstrates cinema as a mass art (Badiou 2013), reaching out to millions of teens by a broad distribution, easy access and speaking a language young people can relate to. Thereby, *Skam* clearly illustrates how contemporary cinema moves beyond the conventional distinction between movies and TV-series.[2] In exploring the educational potential of *Skam*, however, I do not discuss its cinematic qualities, but rather its pedagogy.

Skam portrays the daily lives of High School students in an affluent neighborhood. The main characters are five girls, "the losers of the school", who struggle to navigate high-school dramas, intrigues, attend parties, get drunk, take drugs, have sex and fall in love. The series depicts these girls' pregnancy scares, eating disorders, mental illness, religious life, coming out and sexual abuse. To represent the youth's own stories, the producers based the series on intensive research of contemporary youth culture in Oslo and hours-long individual interviews with the target audience.

"We found one main need", the director said. "Teenagers today are under a lot of pressure from everyone. Pressure to be perfect, pressure to perform. We wanted to do a show to take away the pressure" (New York Times 2016). *Skam*, however, became an integral part of the young viewers' online lives as the teenagers watched the story develop through their smartphones. The teens updated the *Skam* web page in a similar way as they updated Snapchat and Instagram. Consequently, they experienced the narrative "in real time", which meant that they had to wait together with the characters for that cool party, the result of a pregnancy test or for a boyfriend's reaction to a text message. In this way, the Norwegian broadcasting company blended the distribution of *Skam* perfectly with the youth's social media practice. The aim was to "help 16-year-old girls to strengthen their self-esteem by loosening taboos, making them aware of interpersonal mechanisms, and showing them the benefits of confronting fear" (Rushprint 2016, my translation).

Each season of *Skam* has a new central character. The fourth season follows the character Sana and focuses on Islamic religion, forbidden love and cyberbullying. Iman Meskini (19)—the actor who played the character—admits that she is now a role model for many Muslim girls. I here use this season as an entry-point to explore the series educational potential. In what ways do the series captivate the youths and how should we read their cinematic experience? Is there a relationship between the way in which *Skam* depicts the many faces of individual, social and cultural phenomena of shame and the formation of the viewers' ethical–political awareness? In bringing the question of the pedagogy of this TV-series to the forefront, I here read the fourth season of *Skam* on three analytical levels that, when taken together, clearly illustrate the educational potential of this series.

On the first level, my analysis focuses on the multiple meanings of Sana's headscarf relative to the many faces and ambiguities of shame (Bilge 2010; Butler 2004; Hutchinson 2008; Williams 1993). This reading illustrates Badiou's claim that cinema doubles the real; as the series presents simultaneously a false copy of a false copy of a false reality and a lived experience for a Muslim girl in Oslo, the series' give an ambiguous picture of Sana's shame. In other words, *Skam* clearly moves beyond conventional discourses on the veiled

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[2] Another example is the 2018 drama film "Roma", written and directed by Alfonso Cuarón, which was streamed via Netflix, won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film festival, and received 10 nominations for the 91st Academy Awards.

woman as it presents, on the one hand, a false copy of the unified idea of the situation and, on the other hand, an unthought-of reality for veiled students in Oslo. In this way, the series captivates the viewers' attention by doubling the real.

On the next level, my analysis illustrates Badiou's idea of cinema as an ontological art, revolving around the question of the relationship between being and appearing. I here focus on the ways in which Sana stages herself through the non-color black: Sana's black clothing, black lipstick and her motto "black is my happy color" carry multiple meanings. As black indicates a void, but also a multiplicity, we may read Sana's darkness as an example on the many contradictions embedded in cinema, and thereby on how Badiou conceives cinema as a paradoxical situation (Badiou 2013; Ling 2011).

On the third level, however, my analysis illustrates the ethical–political significance of cinema. Drawing on Badiou's claim that cinema is a democratic emblem, I here focus on the potential message and import of a speech that touches on urgent ethical–political issues and sums up the plot of the fourth season. Moreover, this speech may also signify an ambition of the creators to 'educate' their target audience (Lindner and Dahl 2019; Rushprint 2016). Consequently, this speech makes it again pertinent to explore the series' potential for shaping the viewers' ethical–political awareness.

Taken together, these three readings illustrate the educational potential of cinema and TV-series through the eyes of Badiou. First, because it points to how *Skam* captivates the viewers' attention; second, because it illustrates how cinema is an ontological art revolving around being and appearing; third, because the analysis points to *Skam* as a democratic emblem. In this way, *Skam* carries a potential for shaping the viewers' ethical–political awareness. Before implementing such a threefold analysis, however, let me briefly introduce Badiou's notion of cinema.

Cinematic Philosophy

In general, the term "cinema" (from Greek *kinema*—motion or movement) denotes a movie theater, a film, the film industry, or cinematography, which is the art or science of motion-picture photography. Within philosophy, we often refer to "cinema" as the seventh art (Canudo 1923) while categorizing "philosophy of cinema" as a subfield within the philosophy of arts. Philosophy of cinema, however, may signify either a philosophy *about* cinema or a *cinematic philosophy*. The first refers to a philosophical examination of cinema; the second confronts cinema *as* philosophy. In other words, a cinematic philosophy reverses the relationship between cinema and theory, since theory is not here applied to a film or a TV-series, but rather is conditioned by it. In this way, a cinematic philosophy studies cinema as thinking. The ambition is therefore not to assess the aesthetic—or say "cinematic"—qualities of a film or a TV-series, but rather to explore the cinematic production of thinking. In short, cinematic philosophy is a contemporary school of thought characterized by the claim that theory, or say the philosophical practice, is conditioned by film. A second characteristic is the focus on the link between cinema, politics and art, while concurrently rethinking this link. Examples are the work of Agamben (2007), Badiou (2013), Rancière (2014), and Žižek (2002). Third, cinematic philosophy constantly explores the concept of cinema in a sense that accounts for how moving images are produced, distributed and exhibited today. Thus, the concept of cinema is renewed along with innovations within the film industry. Fourth, this school of thought sets out to explore the cinematic experience in terms of the relationship between being and appearing. However, it should be said that this

exploration happens outside the tradition of phenomenology. Fifth, a cinematic philosophy does not privilege the symbolic over the imaginary, neither the affect over textual signification. In contrast to earlier film studies, cinema is here conceived as an entry point for thinking the relationship between sensory experience and signification as nonhierarchical. Sixth, and not least, this school of thought sees cinema as a social and political art per excellence (Baumbach 2019; Elsaesser 2019; Frampton 2006; Herzogenrath 2017; Shamir 2016).

This radically new way of conceiving the relationship between philosophy and cinema was initiated by the publication of Gilles Deleuze's seminal books on cinema (Deleuze 1986; 1989). Deleuze claimed that we should never read or use cinema to illustrate philosophical ideas. On the contrary, philosophy confronts cinema because cinema produces thinking that are generative for philosophy (Cole and Bradley 2016; Baumbach 2019; Elsaesser 2019; Frampton 2007; Herzogenrath 2017). In line with Deleuze, Badiou starts from the premise that cinema itself is a form of thinking. He asks, "What can cinema think that nothing but it can think?" (Badiou 2013, p. 123). Needless to say, I here read the TV-series *Skam* as an example on the cinematic production of thinking.

To Badiou, cinema is "an education in the contemporary: cinema introduces a certain number of young people […] to something having to do with their orientation in the contemporary world, the world and its exaltation, its vitality but also its difficulty, its complexity" (Badiou 2013, p. 18). Take for example the 2019 Netflix-series *Russian Doll*, which follows a woman caught in a time loop at her seemingly inescapable birthday party. She dies repeatedly, always restarting at the same moment at the party, as she tries to figure out what is happening to her. Captivated by this puzzle, the viewer watches one episode after the other. At first, she may be trapped in the same way as the woman. But after a while it dawns upon her that the woman is caught up in her past, and thus repetitive patterns of action; the only way to break out of this vicious circle and seemingly inescapable birthday party, is to reflect on what is going on. In this way, this Netflix series does not only invite a thinking on thinking, but it also produces some insights on circular thinking that may cut a hole in conventional knowledge. Badiou explains:

> … philosophy doesn't have to produce the thinking of the work of art because the work of art thinks all by itself and produces truth. A film is a proposition of thought, a movement of thought, a thought connected, so to speak, to its artistic disposition. How does this thought exist and get transmitted? It's transmitted through the experience of viewing the film, through its movement (Badiou 2013, p. 18).

So, a film thinks by itself and produces truths. It should be noted, however, that truths, to Badiou, are truths-in-worlds, which here belongs to the work of art, not to philosophy. Next, as Badiou claims that, "the only education is an education by truths" (Badiou 2005, p. 14), the cinematic experience—with all its impossible paradoxical features—opens a possibility to be educated by these truths.

An education by such truths-in-worlds is a transformative, open-ended and ongoing procedure instituted by an exception, a rupture, or event. Thus, education never follows any curriculum or pre-established methods in its promotion of ontological awareness, curiosity and search for non-knowledge. In other words, cinema calls for a way of thinking that avoids indistinct and diacritic judgements of any film. Thinking cinema is not about forming opinions. It is neither about evaluating a movie. Rather, we should ask; "what are the effects for thoughts of such and such a film?" (Badiou 2005, p. 85).

> Cinema has a unique relationship with philosophy: we could say that it is a philosophical experiment. This raises two questions. First, "How does philosophy regard

cinema?" Second, "How does cinema transform philosophy?" The relationship between them is not a relationship of knowledge. Philosophy does not enable us to know cinema. It is a living, concrete relationship, a relationship of transformation. Cinema transforms philosophy. In other words, cinema transforms the very notion of idea. Cinema basically consist in creating new ideas about what an idea is. To put it another way, cinema is a philosophical situation (Badiou 2013, p. 202).

In short, a movie is a mode of thought and cinema a potential producer of truths of the contemporary world. Such truths-in-worlds are existential, ongoing and open-ended ontological operations that do not belong to philosophy or any epistemic category. The task of philosophy, however, is to think these truths (Badiou 2009, 2021; Strand 2020). So, parallel to the prisoner that escapes Plato's cave, the cinematic experience may help the viewer to get a glimpse of reality outside the cave of illusion (Badiou 2012, 2013; Baumback 2019; Ling 2011).

A New Allegory of the Cave

In his translation of Plato's *Republic*, Badiou turns Plato's allegory into a fable of a gigantic movie theater. Socrates; "I'll try to paint you a picture, with shadow and light intermingled" (Badiou 2012, p. 212). The fable tells a story of a full house of thousands of spectators chained to their seats, with rigid headphones covering their ears and holding their heads in place. The audience gazes at an enormous screen in front, which goes all the way up to the ceiling. Behind them there are huge projectors throwing a white light and shadows of "a chaotic parade" on the screen. A myriad of characters, such as puppets, robots, animals, soldiers, gangs of youths, cultural consultants, turtledoves and scythe-bearers shout, sing, dance, play or just move silently along.

Unexpectedly, a member of the audience is forced to stand up, turn his head and look at the light. The sight hurts his eyes, so his impulse is to turn back to his seat. However, "a bunch of tough guys" forces him to leave the movie theater through a small side door, enter a muddy tunnel, and climb up into the open air. "At first he is blinded by the glare of everything and can see nothing of all the things about which we routinely say: "This exists, this is really here" (Badiou 2012, p. 214). After being used to the light, however, he enjoys the reflection of flowers and trees in the water before he eventually finds pleasure in the flowers themselves. As the night falls, he lifts his head to the sky and sees the moon and the stars. "Finally, one morning, he sees the sun, not in the ever-changing waters, or in its purely external reflection, but the sun itself, in and for itself, in its own place" (Badiou 2012, p. 214).

This allegory portrays the cinematic experience as a move away from *illusio* (illusion), beyond *doxa* (common beliefs) and towards *noesis* (wisdom). To Badiou, there are three dimensions that together constitute this educational process: The situation, the event and the subject. The situation is the movie theater, in which the artificial images and the shadows of the simulacra represents the world. The event is the unexpected turning of the head; the unpredictable enforced escape; the surprising ascension into the open air; and the experience of the sun and the beauty of the world outside. The subject is a thought-process that gradually unfolds the imports of the event by addressing the whole situation and unfolding the infinity of the truth exposed by the event. In sum, Badiou here portrays the cinematic experience as an "incorporation into a truth".

Badiou's fable thus shows that education is simply about directing, or re-directing, thinking towards truths-in-worlds. Socrates sums up: "education isn't what some people claim it is" (Badiou 2012, p. 218). Education is not a question of a lack of the capacity of sight. Nor is it about a lack of the capacity of knowledge. Every subject has such capacities. Education is rather about turning the subject into the right direction. "So education isn't a matter of imposing, but rather of orienting: It is a technique of conversion…" (Badiou 2012, p. 218). In short, Badiou portrays education as a "reorientation" and incorporation into truths. These truths are generic in the sense that they go beyond the situation and unfold something entirely new; something that we cannot grasp or apprehend by the already established categories of the discourse. In other words, education is a reorientation.

Consequently, Badiou's radical transformation of Plato's cave into a movie theater is not only a distinct comment on and critique of Plato (Bartlett 2011; Strand 2016, 2020), it also illustrates Badiou's idea of the power of cinematic experience. To Plato, the cave offers images of a false reality. To Badiou, cinema produces truths about the contemporary world. To Plato, it is imperative to leave the cave. To Badiou, it is imperative to "go to the cinema" (Badiou 2015). Here, "shadow and light intermingle" (Badiou 2012, p. 212). Consequently, cinema invites a new relationship to the real.

Here, it should be noted that Badiou's concept of the real is just another name for being-qua-being, which is distinct from a unified representation of a situation. The distinction between pure being-qua-being and the presentation of a situation is vital since there is an irreducible and apparently illogical gap between being-qua-being and a unified world. Pure and inconsistent being—being-qua-being—remains unthought-of. One example is the woman in *Russian Doll* who dies repeatedly because her past ties her to repetitive and totally incomprehensible patterns of action. Another example is the prisoner of the cave of illusion. Exactly here—in the apparently illogical gap between being-qua-being and the world—lies the very key to Badiou's logic: The world or situation is distinct from pure being, as pure being-qua-being is the unthought-of and inconsistent multiple, which is nothing. Thus, nothing *is*.[3] As cinema moves beyond the state of the situation and propose a different direction as regards to true life, it invites a new relationship to the real. In other words, cinema may offer a glimpse of being-qua-being. Badiou says, "I write about a film because it has produced some effect on me" (Badiou 2013, p. 20).

However, a conventional philosophical response to the pedagogy of cinema has been that cinema demonstrates an untenable relationship between the real and a total artifice. By contrast, Badiou holds that exactly here lies the pedagogical potential of cinema and TV-series. As cinema introduces simultaneously the prospect of a copy of reality and a total artificial depiction of that copy, cinema is a form of art containing incommensurable logics. Example is the way in which the web-based TV-series *Skam* simultaneously presents a copy of the teenagers' tangible experiences of shame and the artificial, cinematic versions of those experiences. The Norwegian broadcasting company added to this complexity by inviting the viewers' immediate response and pretending that the characters in *Skam* interacted through social media while airing. *Skam* thus presents a false copy of a false copy of a false reality. In this way, *Skam* contains a contemporary form of the ancient paradox of being and appearing.

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[3] With this claim, Badiou turns Plato's Parmenidean thesis upside down. Plato holds, "being is one, the multiple is not". By contrast, Badiou says, "the one is not, the nothing is" (Badiou 2005, p. 24).

> Cinema is a unique relationship between total artifice and total reality. Cinema is really both the possibility of a copy of reality and the complete artificial dimension of that copy. This amount to saying that cinema is a paradox that revolves around the question of the relationship between "being" and "appearing." It is an ontological art (Badiou 2013, p. 207).

In other word, cinema is an ontological art because it "makes the true life become present" (Badiou 2013, p. 205).

Moreover, Badiou identifies cinema as a "democratic emblem". Cinema is a mass art of the contemporary, since films "are seen and loved by millions of people at the very same time they are created" (Badiou 2013, p. 207). Yes, people loved the novels by Victor Hugo and the paintings of Pablo Picasso, but never at the same scale as people went to the movies to watch *Titanic* or *Matrix*. It thus seems indisputable that cinema is a mass art. The notion of a "mass art", however, implies a contradiction between the political category of "mass" and the aristocratic category of "art". All fine art was once avant-garde; people's access to the experience of fine art required some nearness to the history of the art in question and thus some kind of education. In contrast, cinema is not for the cultural elite only. Everybody has access and the cinematic experience does not require any cultivated eye. "Every film viewer can enter into the art of cinema from what is not art" (Badiou 2013, p. 211). As cinema speaks a language most people can relate to, you may go to the movie or sit in front of the TV-screen to relax, experience a film in your most ordinary moods, while also arriving at the most refined and powerful ethical–political insights.

> So there is a paradoxical relationship in cinema, a relationship between heterogeneous terms. Art and the masses. Aristocracy and democracy. Invention and familiarity. Novelty and general taste. That is why philosophy is concerned with cinema (Badiou 2013, p. 208).

In other words, cinema contains a paradoxical relationship between art and non-art, creation and ordinary life, the work of thought and ordinary opinion. Precisely here lies the ethical–political significance of cinema.

To sum up, Badiou portrays cinema as an alternative allegory of the cave. First, because cinema invites a new relationship to the real. Next, because it is an ontological art revolving around the relationship between being and appearing. Third, because cinema is a democratic emblem. So let us take a closer look at the possible powers of *Skam*. What may be the educational potential of this TV-series?

Cinema Invites a New Relationship to the Real

The fourth season of the Norwegian web-based TV-series *Skam* (shame) follows Sana, an 18-year-old Muslim girl that identifies herself as one of "the losers of the school". She is part of the small gang of girls that is at the midpoint of the series, but she is also close to her elder brother and her classmate Isaak. This season depicts Sana's participation in, and entanglement with, the intricate high school dramas towards the end of the school year, how she practices Islam, her falling in love during Ramadan, the month of fasting, and how she gets lost by committing cyberbullying. Sana confides:

> I'm angry because I'm not Muslim enough. And whatever I do, I will never be Norwegian enough. And I'm not Moroccan enough. And I'm not chill enough. And I'm

not pretty enough either. And I'm angry because I'll never be able to fit anywhere (YouTube 2017a).

Sana's anger relates to her experiences of shame and shaming. She describes a painful feeling of social exclusion. However, her anger also signifies an interest: Sana feels shame because she cares about others in ways essential to who she is, namely Muslim, Norwegian and Moroccan. "I'm angry because I'll never be able to fit anywhere". Thus, the series portrays the phenomenon of shame as exceptionally ambiguous.

In general, shame exposes both the pleasures and risks of social life (Heller 2003; Tarnopolsky 2010). Shame is a vital part of becoming subject in relation to others. It also designates different kinds or degrees of painful feelings caused by injury to one's pride or self-respect. On the one hand, shame helps to navigate our social relations in a decent and respectful manner. On the other hand, the uncomfortable feeling of shame could cause us to turn away from social interactions and political engagements (Honneth 1995; Mead 2015; Plato 2018; Williams 1993). Shame is thus "a peculiar phenomenon. It has the potential to fracture our social ties in the very instance that it reveals them" (Tarnopolsky 2010, p. 2). As Sana's hijab is a striking signal, it invites a focus on her ambiguous feelings.

> Do you know what people think when they see me? When they see my hijab, which is the first thing they see? They think I'm wearing it because I'm forced to do so. Not because I want to. And if I say it's because I want to; no, then I'm brainwashed. Because I do not have my own opinions (YouTube 2017b).

In fact, as the root of the noun "shame" (*shām*) denotes the parts of the body that modesty requires to conceal; it seems pertinent to read Sana's headscarf as a religious symbol of virtue. However, today's discourse has turned the veiled woman into an allegory for undesirable cultural difference (Badiou 2011; Benhabib 2011; Bilge 2010; Guenther 2011; Hollan 2012). The Muslim veil raises fundamental questions about citizenship, nationalism and diasporic meaning making, as well as conceptions of freedom and emancipation that are hegemonic within Western feminist imaginaries. Sana's experience of shame and shaming may be a product of this discourse: People "think I'm wearing it because I'm forced to do so. Not because I want to. And if I say it's because I want to; no, then I'm brainwashed. Because I do not have my own opinions". An impossible dilemma is that her hijab simultaneously signifies passive subordination and active resistance.

On the one hand, conventional discourses on the veiled woman may well construct her as a victim of oppression. The veil is a symbol of male power or religious indoctrination. If so, Sana is a victim devoid of agency. Her hijab signals passive subordination. What Sana herself says about her hijab is irrelevant, since her words signify a false consciousness: We may believe that Sana is oppressed and should be emancipated. If so, we may justify Sana's painful experiences of shame and shaming as parts of unpleasant, but also unavoidable "emancipating" encounters with Western values: Sana should be enlightened so that she can recognize her victimized position and next make free, autonomous and rational decisions.

On the other hand, conventional discourses on the veiled woman may as well construct her as a threat. The veil is a symbol of self-authored difference. If so, we see Sana as an unruly rebellion and a danger to Western cultures of freedom. Her hijab signals confrontation and active resistance. We may interpret Sana's veiling as a rebellious reaction to the shaming of essential parts of her identity. However, we may also see it as a reaction towards Western imperialism and Islamophobia. The hijab thus symbolizes absence of subordination to traditional Western norms and forms of practice. In short, the veiled woman

may invite fear if we see her as a resistant and unruly rebel that contests communal values and habitual ways of being.

However, the series moves beyond conventional discourses on the veiled woman. Yes, the series mirrors these discourses. However, we are not invited to take a stand. Our cinematic experience seems rather indifferent to judgement since the series does not paint an unequivocal picture of Sana's agency, her subordination or resistance, passive or active role. The series rather draws attention towards the many faces, ambiguities and paradoxes of what we conceive as more or less realistic aspects of Sana's feelings of shame and the series' artificial narration of high school dramas. In fact, it is the complex and ongoing processes of signification and re-signification embedded in encounters between reality and the total artifice that creates our experience of Sana's shame (Badiou 2013; Deleuze 1989; Peirce 1907; Strand 2014). So, what does this cinematic experience expose?

Overall, cinema changes experience into perception as it assembles the double of the real and offers images that captivates the viewers. First, the viewers know that the portrayal of Sana's shame is simultaneously a false copy of a false copy of a false reality and a lived experience for some Muslim girls in Oslo. This doubling of the real is paradoxical; the reality of shame *is* and *is not*. Second, as the moving images are a strong force of identification (Badiou 2013; Deleuze 1986), *Skam* captivates and calls for compassion. The viewers may recognize that there is nothing particular about Sana's shame; it is something that holds for everybody in similar situations. Sana's ambiguous feeling thus becomes something we all can relate to. In this way, the cinematic experience may invite a search for truths. Listen to this dialogue between Isaak and Sana:

– *Sana, I have a question. No offence, but how are you religious?*
– Is there something about my religion that bothers you?
– *Nothing specific about your religion – other than that you believe that there are some things that are right and some things that are wrong. And that there is a God who gets to decide those things*
– By fasting, praying 5 times a day. It gives you focus, and it's to all the time be reminded of what is the most important things in life. And that is to be a good person (NRK 2015–17, S3E4[4]).

In short, Sana holds that the most important thing in life is simply to be a good person. However, the TV series clearly shows that it is not that simple. To illustrate, it seems pertinent to take a closer look at the ways in which Sana stages herself through the non-color black.

The Paradox of Being and Appearing

The two Greek words for "shame"—*aidōs* and *aischuné*—points to a two-directional aspect of shame that seems to harmonize with the series' portrayal of Sana's shame. Plato used *aidōs* and *aischuiné* interchangeably, either to express the feeling of shame in front of other persons or the act of shaming or disgracing others (Tarnopolsky 2010). Sana's way of staging herself through the non-color black may indicate these

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[4] Season 3, Episode 4.

two-directional aspects of shame. Her black staging point to a darkness that simultaneously obscures and discloses shame and shaming (Badiou 2017). Sana's dark clothes, black lipstick, eye makeup and black nail polish are striking contrasts to her friends' bright look. Even the motto "black is my happy color" written at the back of her cellphone is rather unorthodox. We may thus come to interpret her liking of dark colors as an indication of a dark anger. The episode on her cyber bullying portrays such anger. After admitting trolling, ruthlessly humiliating her schoolmates and risking being expelled from school, Sana writes a lengthy text message to her close friends, "the losers of the school". She opens the letter:

> Hi. In the 9th grade there was a social worker who told me I had an anger issue. I thought, "Fuck her, she doesn't understand shit". Because she did not understand shit. But now I am wondering if maybe she was right. Because I am angry (NRK 2015-17, S4E8).

Sana is angry. Her anger does not only come forward as trolling. She starts a fight with her brother. She angrily accuses her mother: "You talk of my friends like they're criminals or something". Moreover, her anger is noticeable when she uses a Trump-voodoo-doll as needle pad for the pins she uses to attach her hijab. Her liking of dark colors may relate to this anger. However, to interpret Sana's black staging unambiguously to signify anger may be somewhat naïve. Sana continues her letter:

> I'm angry because I made it so important to fit in. I'm angry because I don't fit in anywhere. Because I always get angry and fuck up. But most of all, I'm sad because I affected you. […] I'm sorry for what I've done. I don't give a shit if I'm expelled, just please, forgive me. Sana (NRK 2015-17, S4E8).

Sana regrets her wrongdoings. She begs for compassion. Her friends' wellbeing matter more to her than being expelled. Hence, Sana's black staging points to a painful feeling of social exclusion. However, Sana's black may also signal the opposite.

Conventionally, we read black and white to designate opposites, such as dark and light, good and evil. Black is the pure absence of light. However, used as an outward appearance, black can also signal power, elegance or creativity. Imagine the cloaks worn by members of the International Court of Justice, Coco Chanel's "little black" dress or Andy Warhol's black turtleneck. It is true that black signals a void. Nevertheless, black may as well signal power, elegance and originality. With the risk of over-interpretation, the viewers are thus invited to read Sana's dark staging as an allegory of how her sense of emptiness and social exclusion is paired with a sense of uniqueness, inventiveness and potentialities. Such an interpretation fits well with the personal insecurity and ambiguous sense of shame described by the target audience in the interviews (Lindtner and Dahl 2019, New York Times 2016).

Philosophers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre (2003), Simone de Beauvoir (2011), Axel Honneth (1995), and Emanuel Levinas (1969) portray shame not only as an emotion among other emotions, but rather as an ontological phenomenon that originates in my exposure to the gaze of the other. To Jean-Paul Sartre, shame is ontological as far as it is related to our existential being: "My being is dependent at the center of a freedom which is not mine and which is the very condition of my being" … "I offer myself to the Other's appraisal" (Sartre 2003, p. 291). Simone de Beauvoir (2011) politicizes the feeling, as she describes the process of becoming woman as an extended lesson in shame that simultaneously reduces the young woman to her body and alienates her from it; she has nowhere to hide and nowhere to be. So again,

> Shame is notoriously ambivalent. On the one hand, it operates as a mechanism of normalization and social exclusion, installing or reinforcing patterns of silence and invisibility in ways that feminists, queer theorists, and scholars of race and class have analyzed and critiqued. The burning feeling of shame, the sense of being out of place, judged by others and unworthy, unwanted or wrong - not only in this or that particular action but in one's very existence - leaves the shameful subject nowhere to be, and yet nowhere to hide or escape […]
>
> On the other hand, a world without shame would not be possible, or even desirable. … the capacity for shame may be important for relational subject formation … shame is not merely a painful feeling of social exclusion, but a primary effect of intersubjective life (Guenther 2011, p. 24).

Shame is a social phenomenon that carries the potential of simultaneously excluding and including, pressing down and lifting up, making you feel powerless but also unique. The TV-series invites the young viewers to relate to these ambiguities. To Sana, the ambiguities of shame come forward as impossible social dilemmas: On the one hand, she reveals an urge to fit in. On the other hand, she rejects to adapt to social norms. She identifies herself as a good Muslim, but critiques Islam. She desperately wants to be with people that matter to her, while she undermines her social relations. She craves to be included. At the same time, she is angry with herself for making it so important to fit in. In this way, the TV-series presents a contemporary form of the ancient paradox of being and appearing.

The Ethical–Political Significance of Cinema

Cinema is always paradoxical. And so is the web-based TV-series *Skam*. First, because *Skam* is concurrently a copy of reality and a complete artificial version of that copy. Next, because the TV-series revolves around the question of being and appearing. Third, because it is a mass art of the contemporary, containing paradoxical relationships between art and non-art, creation and ordinary life, the work of thought and ordinary opinion. In this way, *Skam* produces some truths about the contemporary world. Besides, it invites philosophy. Because the task of philosophy is to think truths emerging from paradoxical relations. "There is philosophy, and there can be philosophy, because there are paradoxical relations, because there are breaks, decisions, distances, events" (Badiou 2009, p. 16). In other words, as the task of philosophy is to think truths-in-worlds emerging from situations exterior to philosophy, Badiou recognizes cinema as a philosophical experiment. Consequently, *Skam* is a situation for philosophy, too.

In addition to being a paradoxical, truth-producing situation for philosophy, *Skam* is a democratic emblem. As a "mass art", *Skam* reached out to millions of teens through a broad distribution, easy access and speaking a language young people could relate to (Lindtner and Dahl 2019). The series did not require a cultivated eye. Precisely here—at the intersection of the series' production of truths and the fact that it was loved by millions—lies the ethical–political significance of *Skam*. So let us take a closer look at the series' potential for shaping the viewers' ethical–political awareness.

In the very last episode, Sana throws a party to celebrate *Eid al-Fitr* (the breaking of the Muslim fast). Arriving at the party, her friends greet her *Eid Mubārak* and give a speech:

> Dear Sana, this speech is to you. Because what you invite us to today overturns US presidents tomorrow.

We live in a chaotic world where it is difficult to understand the rules. Because why are some poor and others rich? Why do some people have to be refugees while other are safe? Why are some people spat on in the street? And why is it that sometimes, even though you try to do something good, its still met with hate? It is not weird that people give up, that they stop believing in the good.

But thank you for not giving up, Sana. Because even though it sometimes feels like it, no one's ever alone. Each and every one of us is a part of the big chaos. And what you do today has an effect tomorrow. It can be hard to say, exactly what kind of effect. And you usually can't see how everything fits together. But the effects of your actions are always there. Somewhere in the chaos.

In a hundred years, we may have machines that can predict the effect of every action. But until then, we can trust this: Fear spreads. But:

Fortunately, love does too (NRK 2015-17, S4E10).

This personal speech, co-written by a few of Sana's schoolmates, sums up the plot of the fourth season. It also touches on urgent ethical–political issues. In doing so, this speech elegantly illustrates the phenomenon of shame as intersubjective, cultural and political processes that affirm both the hopes, longings, pleasures and risks of social life. Moreover, it illustrates how the intersubjective structures of shame and shaming help to identify, and thus throw some light on, the shared values in a world of change: "… we can trust this: Fear spreads. But: Fortunately, love does too".

We may thus agree that this TV-series has the prospect of speaking truths about and guiding our relationship to the real. Not by giving some clear answers, presenting any solutions or offering unambiguous narratives on "the losers of the school". On the contrary, *Skam* provides an honest portrayal of the many conflicts of the young people's life. Sana is here the hero, a great moral figure, who constantly reveals, struggles with and debates substantial value conflicts of today's world of change. *Skam* thus comes forward as an excellent example on the ethical significance of cinema.

Cinema deals with courage, with justice, with passion, with betrayal. The major genres of cinema, the most coded ones, such as the melodrama and the western, are in fact ethical genres, genres that are addressed to humanity so as to offer it a mythology. In this respect, cinema is heir to certain functions of the theater, of the theater at the time it was a theater for citizens (Badiou 2013, p. 211).

In short, cinema is primarily an art that presents "the great conflicts of human life to an immense audience" (Badiou 2013, p. 240). The moral role of cinema is to stage these conflicts. In doing so, and through a doubling of the real, cinema moves beyond the state of the situation and propose a different direction as regards to the true life.

Badiou's novel position on the pedagogy of cinema recognizes cinema as a philosophical experiment. Cinema makes truths-in-worlds manifest. The cinematic experience thus comes forward as an education by truths. Because education is nothing more, and nothing less, than a transformation initiated by an encounter with truths. Consequently, Badiou certainly does not speak about an education by the state. An education by the state would simply just perpetuate, replicate or reproduce the norms, laws, procedures and worldviews already contained by the situation. By contrast, an education by truths, is a transformative, open-ended and ongoing procedure instituted by an exception, a rupture, or event. An education by truths transforms the thinking subject. It operates through a subtraction from the situation and proposes a different direction in regard to the true life. In other words, an educated subject moves beyond the situation, propose a different direction as regards to the

true life, and may next contribute to a transformation of the world. Again, cinema is "an education in the contemporary: cinema introduces a certain number of young people […] to something having to do with their orientation in the contemporary world, the world and its exaltation, its vitality but also its difficulty, its complexity" (Badiou 2013, p. 18).

The Educational Potential of Cinema and TV-Series

To sum up, Badiou conceptualizes cinema as a philosophical experiment. He holds that cinema is a new allegory of the cave (Badiou 2012, 2013; Baumback 2019; Ling 2011). First, because cinema invites a new relationship to the real. Second, because it is an ontological art revolving around the relationship between being and appearing. Third, because cinema is a democratic emblem. The web-based TV-series *Skam* is a good example. First, the series presents simultaneously a false copy of a false copy of a false reality and a lived experience for a Muslim girl. In doing so, the series invites a new relationship to the real. Next, the series portrays the ambiguities of Sana's shame as it revolves around the ancient paradox of being and appearing. Third, the series is a mass art, reaching out to millions of teens and speaking a language they could relate to. Accordingly, the series carry a potential of shaping the viewers' ethical–political awareness as it exposes vital ethical conflicts and propose a direction as regards to the true life.

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