Special Issue
Psychoanalysis and Cinema
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Guest Editor
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PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CINEMA

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INTRODUCTION

Celluloid and Psyche

By HARVEY ROY GREENBERG, M.D., Guest Editor

F rom his earliest researches, Freud frequently grounded his clinical theories in the recognitions of art, liberally credit- ing the intuition of the artist that preceded psychoanalytic insights. Freud’s followers were quick to follow the master’s lead. Variably accurate versions of analytic theory soon spread to respectable and “fringe” artistic circles. Studies of art by analytically inclined academics soon succeeded the explorations of practitioners. By the 1950s, the instruments and beliefs of psychoanalysis were highly regarded within the American lit/crit establishment.

During the first half of the century, most analytic criticism addressed fiction, poetry, and drama. Little depth psychological study of the “nonverbal” arts—painting, sculpture, music, dance, and architecture—was undertaken, possibly because the media and symbolic languages of these disciplines were unfamiliar to the average analytic critic. The almost total neglect of cinema by clinicians and academicians alike during this period remains more obscure; in my opinion, the lacunae originated in Freud’s problematic silence on the subject throughout his life.1

Setting aside the signal contribution in 1916 of “The Photoplay” by the psychologist Hugo Munsterberg—no friend to the Freudians—only desultory psychological interpretations of films appeared until the 1960s. Hanns Sachs, one of the earliest supporters of Freud in Vienna, consulted with George Pabst on Secrets of a Soul after his predecessor Karl Abraham’s untimely death. Later, Sachs would write acutely on kitsch and cartoon. Otherwise, relatively little of substance appeared in the clinical or academic literature, saving Parker Tyler’s curious opus and The Movies by Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites. The latter documented chief psychological motifs of all major American and European productions released during 1945.

The last thirty years absolutely addressed the paucity of analytic film criticism. An extensive literature has developed out of efforts by psychoanalytically sophisticated scholars in film study and popular culture, as well as working psychoanalysts. Psychiatric residencies and psychoanalytic training institutes for lay and medical psychotherapists now regularly present movies to illustrate psychopathology and elucidate psycho-dynamics. At analytic meetings, film is “treated” sui generis.

Much work by analytic clinicians continues to mirror the orthodox or post-orthodox Freudian viewpoints still pervading at American psychoanalytic institutes, leavened by egopsychology and object-relations theory. These studies have in the main proceeded along similar lines as earlier clinical investigation of other art forms, subject to modification by cinema’s peculiarities. Films are evaluated for characters’ symptoms and diagnoses; for their depiction of normal or pathological mental mechanisms; for their portrayal of life-stage specific psychological conflict, etc. Pathobiology, a staple of literary psychoanalysis, presents greater difficulty because of cinema’s collaborative nature. Pathobiological investigation has been conducted to strongest effect in the “cases” of auteurs like Fellini and Bertolucci, who have exerted considerable control over their projects.

Prior to the 1970s, most analytically oriented academic film study evinced the Freudianism of clinically trained literary critics—viz., the admirable interpretations of Norman Holland. The deployment of Freudian and post-
Freudian thought by the American film theory academy over the past two decades has been profoundly influenced by the semiotic revolution, by collateral developments in Marxist, linguistic, and feminist studies, as well as literary deconstructionist and reception theory. Students in cinema scholarship are regularly required to tackle a daunting corpus of knowledge that can include the writings of Levi-Strauss, de Saussure, Barthes, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Jauss, and Baudrillard; the pioneering work of the Cahiers group in the 1950s and 1960s; the challenging studies of Metz, Mulvey, Heath, Lyotard, Oudart, and so forth.

For psychoanalytic film praxis, perhaps the most crucial feature of the semiotic enterprise and its related discourses has been the close re-reading of Freud under the spell of Jacques Lacan's knotty theories. In the therapy of patients, Lacanian analysis goes essentially unpracticed by American clinicians. However, Lacan's writings and related research are taught as received truth for the successful "treatment" of film texts throughout many cinema study programs at this writing (and, I suspect, in not a few popular culture study centers as well).

Appropriate note must also be taken of analytically oriented critics whose worthy projects neither seem to reject nor exclusively rely upon semiology or Lacan. I cite—*inter alia*—Cavell, Wood, Ray, and Polan; Kavin, Kinder, Eberwein, and Gabbard. Gaylyn Studlar's recent powerful, semiologically infused interpretation of pre-Oedipal/masochistic dynamics in Von Sternberg notably rejects a Lacanian/Metz model.

Whether centrally or peripherally influenced by the semiotic revolution, academic psychoanalytic film study has gone far beyond the earlier work of clinicians in probing the psychology of cinema style and aesthetic; the resonances between collective cultural forces and individual psyche, and the manipulation of audience reception—intentional or otherwise—by the filmmaker toward questionable ideological ends.

Unfortunately, the field still is marred all too often by attacks mounted by the semiologists and their detractors against each other. Not a few critics who privilege continental theory charge that other approaches are hopelessly impressionistic, ideologically naive, lacking in rigor. On the other hand, some opponents find the semiotic enterprise toopheavy with dry intellectualizing; riddled with its own brand of imprecise generalization; so locked into regularly discovering the same signs of absence/castration as to rob film study of vigor and specificity, etc., etc.

Polemics by film scholars no less than psychoanalysts of different persuasions leave one with the uneasy impression that their authors would gladly consign dissenters to the stake. At this point, we would all do well to at least be more attentive to theories and methods to which we do not ascribe, even if we cannot easily accept them. Furthermore, although we have hopefully transcended the dreary reductionism that hallmarkd earlier work, clinicians interested in cinema study still have much to learn about the strengths of competing critical methods, let alone the realities of film production. *Mutatis mutandis*, many academicians could profit from acquiring greater depth in metapsychology, or at least a finer appreciation of the clinical subtlety that often beggars arid theory.

The contemporary analytic film theoretician confronts an amalgam of multiple methodologies, informed by a host of disciplines, enriched by research into real-time industry history, economic, and technical practice (increasingly performed by popular culture scholars). It seems obvious that a psychoanalytic *grand synagoga* constitutes an unhelpful illusion in such a pluralistic climate. No monistic, totalizing strategy will unpack a film or genre any more than a single interpretation suffices to energize miraculous healing from behind the couch or decipher a dream text.

Surely the cinematic text will endure past whatever present mode of its elucidation. Today's Lacanians may be tomorrow's Kohutians or subscribe to theories now unknown. Tolerance for diversity and respect for the inherent limitations of the analytic approach would thus seem incumbent. As Krin and Glen Gabbard have felicitously suggested, our work should modestly address how clinical psychoanalytic theory can illuminate the text, the characters, and the subtext of a film as well as the way in which an audience experiences it, *... our (chief) aim is to be psychoanalytically valid and internally consistent (emphasis mine).*

This issue's selections were made in the balanced, pluralistic spirit commended above. They are written by film scholars and clinicians. Apposite to the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*'s concerns, the authors consistently imbricate depth psychological process in the film(s) studied with issues and events significant to popular culture of the day.

The limited citation of Lacanian/semiotic criticism stems from no editorial bias but rather the ample availability of such material in so many other venues. Only Krin and Glen Gabbard's study of *Casablanca* deploys "lacanalysis" at any length—as one unforegrounded strategy amongst others.
The Jungian/archetype canon, generally neglected by mainstream film theory, is represented by John Beebe’s elegant interrogation of Notorious. Beebe sees the film as an extended metaphor of America’s struggle to heal the wounds of World War II and confront the postwar atomic angst.

James Conlon draws upon a study of the pre-Nazi era right-wing Freikorps to argue that the macho posturing of Top Gun’s warriors and the Marine husband in Coming Home is shaped by a virulent wariness of the feminine, founded upon fear of the pre-Oedipal “engulfing” mother.

Recent work has focused on the Hollywood film’s often dubious co-optation of psychoanalytic discourse itself and the analyst’s persona. Irving Schneider’s paper demonstrates wittily how four movies use analysts in the introduction of new genres, to break new ideological ground, or legitimize the transgression of previous censorship boundaries.

As the private practice of psychoanalysis languishes amidst chemical cures and co-dependency groups, one can take some comfort that the application of analytic principles to film theory continues to flourish so exuberantly. My appreciation to the editors of the Journal of Popular Film and Television for the opportunity to present a sense of the historical process and theoretical issues underpinning the contributions to this—to me, quite special—special issue.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Readers interested in a more comprehensive discussion of psychoanalytic film criticism and its vicissitudes are referred to a recent article by the author and Krin Gabbard in Psychoanalytic Review (Reel Significations, Psychoanalytic Review 77, No. 1 [Spring 1990], 89–110).

NOTES

1. This is perhaps attributable to cinema’s identification for Freud with the jangle of modernity he seemed to find so objectionable. One looks in vain in his project for references to automobiles or telephones, let alone movie theaters; it’s quite possible he never stepped foot in one. He summarily rejected an offer of $100,000 from Samuel Goldwyn to consult on a film about the great love affairs of history, commencing with Antony and Cleopatra. It was one of the few times anyone—particularly a writer—ever said no to the producer.


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