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## **Cinema and Unconscious: A New Field for Historical Research?**

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# Cinema and Unconscious: A New Field for Historical Research?

*working paper*

A new field for historical research: such a sentence sounds like either a joke or heresy. Is it not obvious to everybody that psychoanalysis is central to the study of human behaviour and is becoming more and more fashionable for social scientists. Listing the meetings, conferences, books and reviews devoted to the links between social life and psychology, between knowledge of the unconscious and cinema would take hours and hours<sup>(1)</sup>; thus the title of this study ends with a question mark. Starting upside down, I shall write my conclusion at the very beginning of my text: the historian cannot avoid using psychoanalysis, since today psychoanalysis affects not only individual lives but also collective demeanour; at the same time, we must use the tools and concepts of psychoanalysis with care for it is a dangerous and unreliable instrument of inquiry.

When dealing with politics or economics, the historian works on safer ground; his job consists in establishing if, according to the available evidence, changes occurred or did not occur at a certain time. But many historians are no longer satisfied simply with reading texts, comparing data, classifying events or statistics; they are more inclined to suppose that changes occur after long periods of maturation and that it is necessary to trace them to their origins. There are now a number of historians who contend that it is important to describe and assess the attitudes, expectations and capacity of understanding which can be detected in the periods preceding the germinal events and subsequent changes. To make sense of society these historians claim that it is necessary to investigate the prejudices, opinions, and beliefs in order to understand how they develop.

Hopes, feelings, fears baffle current observation. We need an accurate 'thermometer' which reliably indicates the 'mental temperature' of a society. Is not psychoanalysis the key we might use to have access to that until now invisible world, for do not psychoanalysts claim to open



the way of the unconscious? Given facts, which are apparently trivial or unimportant, or which seem deprived of any signification, the psychoanalyst interprets them after having attributed them to a source. It has often been said that he goes back from the present effects to the past causes and, thus, practices 'regressive history'. If a psychoanalyst is able to correlate defined behaviours with precise deceptions, failures or traumas, as it not plausible that the historian could use the same method with analogous material. Was not Freud the first to attempt to match analysis and history in his case study of the American President Woodrow Wilson <sup>(2)</sup>?

The 'psychoanalysis' of the «great men» is possibly based upon their public and private papers (or tape-recording in the instance of President Nixon) in addition to contemporary external evidence. Such evidence helps us understand how certain politicians challenged adversity and came to such and such decision, but it does not throw any light upon the confused feelings of average people. How often have historians wondered about the comprehensiveness of their accounts of Nazism which — despite giving full consideration to factors like frustrated German nationalism, endemic class conflict, and Germany's economic crisis — seem not to have fully grasped the essential appeal of the Nazi ideology to a majority of the German population? Perhaps there is after all something which is basically *irrational* in the appeal of Nazism and can only be uncovered by using psychoanalytic techniques of study.

For many years historians have looked at novels, drawings, stage-plays and movies to clarify the conceptions and values and weakness implicit in the Weimar Republic. Imaginative works necessarily refer to situations, places and men of which we are more or less knowledgeable, for a minimum of familiarity is necessary for us to accept the fictions. At the same time, fictional works do not exactly 'imitate' social life. Some are more realistic, some less but it is often possible to attempt a 'double-level' analysis with constant references to the material problems of a society on the one hand, and to the ideas, meanings, theories, and beliefs of the same society on the other. But we cannot grasp ideas in the same manner as we can grasp an event or a relation between events.

After having read a great many papers devoted to what social scientists call 'mentalities' I am still puzzled by their concept of 'realism': meanings, beliefs are often considered as things which are easily detected and explained with reference to Freudian theories. Here is a *purely imaginative* example of the problem. In the French cinema of the thirties, we see many children who have lost their fathers, and many fathers



who know nothing about their children, sometimes ignoring the fact that they have children; these movies usually reunite fathers with their children. It is well known fact that thousands of men died or disappeared during the First World War and a great many French children grew up with no father at home. These fatherless Frenchmen were twenty years old in 1940 and forty years old in 1960: it is their generation which successively supported two father figures, Marshall Petain and General de Gaulle, accepting them as heads of the French state. According to popular Freudanism, is it not possible to suppose that these men 'missed' the *oedipal phase* in their psychological development and thus longed for a fatherly figure? Such a theory would be tenable; the use of French feature films as supportive evidence raises important objections:

- 1) The oedipal phase and the roles of the parental figures are central to the western cinema; is it then proper to restrict them to a particular period and to a single country?
- 2) The quest for father — or children — might be interpreted in many ways, for instance in connection with the dramatically low birth rate of the thirties. If I say that the cinema urged Frenchmen to act as fathers — and was not ineffective in doing so since the birth rate started to increase in 1942 — who will be in a position to say that my theory is wrong whereas the other one is right?
- 3) The interpretation only takes into account the oedipal phase; we must admit that a critical method which seizes upon one or a few unconscious themes and uses them to crystallise the total meaning of a whole series of movies is altogether too crude, for it levels all of the subtle differences of plot, imagery and storyline down to a single, unitary meaning.
- 4) The 'theory' ignores women who strongly supported Petain and voted for de Gaulle.
- 5) The most serious criticism is that when we correlate political or diplomatic events with 'feelings' expressed in films, we do nothing but we rediscover what is already well known.

The scholarly social science papers which are structured in the way I suggest only find in feature films what was firmly asserted outside films.

Using cinema and psychoanalysis to find something which might have been found more easily seems to be rather absurd. Is it possible to perceive something new? Little has been done in this precise field of research<sup>(9)</sup> and this article seeks to ask some preliminary questions.



I first have to define the terms which will be used; readers are well aware of what psychoanalysis and cinema are and I do not for a moment imagine I shall teach them anything; I merely want to make clear what the words are supposed to mean in this context.

Psychoanalytical theory, at least as it was redefined by Freud after 1924<sup>(4)</sup> distinguishes two systems in the psychic apparatus: the *id* and the *ego*. Directly connected to the instinctual drives, the *id* aims at getting immediate gratification. At the beginning of his/her life, the baby is only pressing for limited satisfaction (food, maternal fondness); when he does not achieve them immediately, he is able to anticipate them in imagination, to hallucinate them. As the infant grows up, his requirements increase and the outer world resists them; the child is now obliged to take external reality into account and to attempt to exploit the opportunities for gratification. The *ego* is thus the part of the mind which develops to adapt the needs of the *id* to the conditions existing in the external world; it is able to delay the claims for immediate gratification and has at the same time the capacity to distinguish between hallucinating wish fulfillment and material satisfaction. In other words, it is the means of adaptation to environment, that part of the mind which adapts to reality ('reality' is the knowledge of possibilities and restrictions resulting from the existence of a material world). The *ego*, which was, at first, a mere executant for the *id*, eventually becomes the 'socialised' part of the mind.

Until now, the theory is not so different from many other ones. It is generally recognised that we cannot restrict the understanding of our personality — or the personality of the other human beings — to the 'conceptualised'/'socialized' part — the *ego*-part; we recognise that subconscious drives sometimes determine our behaviour. Complications arise with the division of the 'socialised' part into the *ego* and the *super-ego*, which is an important characteristic of the Freudian theory. Childhood represents a period of protection and relative freedom from the domination of external realities; it is in that phase of weakness and dependence that the child comes up against an obstacle which is felt by him as a threat. Roughly speaking, the child is now reaching the *oedipal* phase of his development: the infant understands he is not alone, he does not have his mother (more generally the person he depends upon) all to himself<sup>(5)</sup>. He recognises at least one rival (most of the time his father) who threatens to supplant him. Unable to compete with this rival, the child comes to terms with him and resigns himself to limited aspirations. By internalising the omnipotence of the rival, and making it a part of his mind, the infant accepts a law — the law of the parental figures, which is the law of the moral commands and prohibitions. The



*superego* is the part of the mind which has to do with the moral functions. Man's choice of action results from an interaction among the three systems of the mind. It would be, of course, easier to deal with well defined acts or thoughts, to separate the ones which are correlated with the unconscious and the ones which belong to the conscious. That is impossible for instinctual drives, adaptation to external factors, and moral rules play an important if not pivotal part in all human behaviour. The conscious and unconscious constantly mix in our life, in the way we make films as well as in how we look at them and enjoy them.

What is this unconscious? The concept of the unconscious is an imaginative interpretation of some data (a hypothetical construct we cannot see or study) directly used to denote certain consistencies in a person's mistakes, errors, feelings. In the same way, gravity is also a concept we do not observe directly, yet we can infer it from the persistence of relationships between physical phenomena. Hypothetical though it is, the unconscious is not vague and indefinite but has a characteristic mode of functioning: constant mobility, lack of logic, timelessness, and, what is most important for us, *preference for visual memory traces*. Thinking in visual images, freely mixing plastic representations, and shifting from one form to another with no continuity are typical of the unconscious at work.

Freud, describing the work of the unconscious, while it is transforming thoughts into visual images, reminds us of the work of the script-writer; he points out we are 'thrown back from alphabetic writing to picture writing'<sup>(6)</sup>. Is it possible to say that every film is shaped to some extent by the unconscious? The characteristics of the work of the unconscious that we have mentioned earlier suggest that the answer is *no* for a movie sequence is not often timeless or completely illogical and only occasionally do directors make inconsistent pictures. But that is not exactly the problem. First it is necessary to agree upon a definition of what a movie is. A moving picture is a set of various visual and auditive elements put together in order to form a whole which might be 'sold' to as many people as possible. The viewers pay for gratification and they are generally supposed to fear the saturation which might result from the variety and complexity of the various components. Film-makers thus help their audience to select information by binding as many elements as possible into a logical continuity which is, in most instances, the continuity of a narration. If we agree on that preliminary definition, we must add that:

1) Logic is not absolutely necessary or is more or less useful, according to the 'genre'.



2) The style of the 'logic' evolves with what we shall call the 'cultural context'; in the thirties, movies scarcely used the breaks of continuity, whereas the overlappings of various and often undetermined periods which are common today.

3) Spectators often agree on what is the general line of the movie they have just seen, but differ so much about important details, that people who did not attend the same performance are tempted to ask 'are you sure you have seen the same picture?' It is a common place to say that the picture we perceive is a mixture of external contingency. We reject what we would feel unpleasant or offensive with the help of our eyes, we select what gives us pleasure to see. In many cases, the lack of visual sensation can be considered an attempt to obstruct the perception of a disagreeable sight<sup>(7)</sup>. Any moment of a movie encloses more visual and aural information than that which is necessary for the viewer to understand the plot. Some movies do not allow the audience the opportunity of wandering away from the main line, whereas other films have pauses and allow spectators to grasp details. Our perception of the meaning of a movie is the result of our ability to repel or attract the 'reality' and of the latitude of scanning that the pictures provide us with.

It is my belief that movies dealing with the unconscious 'psycho-films' have constituted a 'genre' for many years. Today logical continuity is much less important to movies; the 'cutting and chopping' produces more and more difficulties for the viewers, the consequence being that psychoanalysis has become deeply involved in film analysis. The cinema has always been concerned with mental diseases; the silent period stopped at the hypnosis (remember *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) and the Freudian theories (or at least some aspects of the Freudism) took over in the late 1920's with the talkies. From 1940 onwards, American and consequently European screens have been overwhelmed with psychoanalysis<sup>(8)</sup>. To list the movies devoted to the new science would itself necessitate a book but a few comments are important here. The main characters of the 'psycho-films' have been fixated to a particular stage of their past; the analytical theories provide the film-makers with three constituents: 1) *Traumatic events*: the characters witnessed or sometimes carried out an action they were unable to deal with: in two of Alfred Hitchcock's films (*Marnie*, 1964) Marnie witnessed a murder and Norman Bates (*Psycho*, 1960) killed his mother. As these characters were not strong enough to 'work off' that experience, they fell mentally ill. 2) *Amnesia*: the characters are amnesic as a result of the trauma.



3) *Screen memories*: These are well preserved recollections of impressions that the patients felt just before the trauma. The characters themselves have forgotten the events from which their obsessions derive and have replaced them by another one, casually connected to it. The prominence of these three aspects suggests that the cinema offers an orthodox though elementary illustration of certain aspects of psychoanalysis. Take Norman Bates (played by Anthony Perkins), for instance. He is, in one sense (and only in one sense for we shall see there are many other issues) a man who is constantly dominated by a strong conflict between *id* and *superego*. *Id* presses for immediate sexual satisfaction but he fails to achieve it because of the resistance of the women he desired (Marion on the screen, but we are told by the sheriff that there have been many others before). *Ego* acts as the servant of *id* as Norman welcomes Marion, persuades her to stop at the motel and to accept the room where he will be in a position to secretly look at her. However, Norman's mind has internalized his mother's prohibitions. Norman's *superego*, identified with the mother, motivates the young man to punish the *id* by suppressing what gratifies it — in other words by killing the women he would like to gaze at.

This perception is not particularly clever or interesting because it seems to be too simple, too consonant with basic theory — but it works and that is important. *Psycho* and hundreds of similar pictures have given Western audiences an extensive and precise knowledge of the unconscious and its operations. Cinema was not alone in making psychoanalysis one of the most appreciated intellectual 'gadgets' of our time — but it extensively contributed to it<sup>(9)</sup>. It is not possible to understand a great many current attitudes and beliefs without taking into account what the 'common' man or woman think of the unconscious and what they have been told cinematically of the functioning of the mind. This is where they get such knowledge, not from *The Scientific American*.

The first time I saw *Marnie* (1964) I was struck by the similarities between it and *The Enforcer* (1951). The two stories have little in common but, in both cases, there is a young lady who witnessed a murder when she was a young girl and has been suffering the consequences ever since. *Marnie* steals money and was involved in a criminal affair. She is not chased by the police because the film is not a detective story but a 'psycho-film'. If you disregard the 'genre', you find that Sean Connery's role is that of Bogart's private eye, investigating, searching everywhere for details and clues since there is no hope of *Marnie's* mental recovery if 'the truth' is not discovered. 'Psycho-films' are often thrillers with the usual murders, detectives, and inquiries. Where do the distinctions lay? In the psycho-films the investigator is usually a private individual



and, in many cases, a close friend of the mentally ill person. The central issue, however, is a reexamination of the meaning of the concept *guilt*: Marnie is not guilty although a thief, nor Norman 'guilty' of murdering women. Psycho-films and detective-films may use the same devices but, in the latter, the 'good' unmasks the 'evil', whereas in the first, the 'good' helps the 'frenzied' to recover consciousness. This cinematic re-evaluation of individual responsibility with its emphasis upon psychological trauma<sup>(10)</sup> and the statement of how difficult is to demarcate mental illness from health<sup>(11)</sup> is of importance for the history of the social life in the second half of the twentieth century.

The end of *Psycho* is especially frustrating; a psychiatrist tells the audience (the audience which is around him, on the screen, as well as the one which is in the movie theatre) that Norman was psychotic: *id*, *superego*, murder, *The End*. It is as if, at the end of a good play an intruder said: 'Now, it is time to come back to serious things'. Typically, Hitchcock's last shot is the uninteresting photograph of Marion's car being pulled out of a muddy pool and the psychoanalytical lecture achieves nothing. When we are very involved in a movie — and it is difficult not to be involved in *Psycho* — we feel uneasy if we have to come back too 'realistically' to our everyday-life. The last-minute disclosure of *Psycho* makes us feel uneasy and I am sure this is not accidental. *Psycho* should be considered as the symbol of a new relationship between films and psychoanalysis. Of course, such a change does not come in a day; *Marnie* (1964) is less involved in the new manner than *Psycho* (1960) and many contemporary pictures (*Eyes of Laura Mars* among many others) prove that the old style is still alive today, twenty years after the transformation had begun. What was new with *Psycho*? Some aspects of the movie require analysis before giving a general statement<sup>(12)</sup>.

Many pictures begin like *Psycho*: a town, seen from above; a long tracking shot which ends inside an hotel room; a man and a woman speaking about their lack of money and of the impossibility of getting married. The shooting is at the same time sophisticated (the tracking-shot) and rather banal. First we witness (from outside) the long conversation between the two lovers; soon after we leave the man and we follow the woman. Marion, whom the film is now focused on, is the main character. Semiologists call the interests and concerns which are prevalent in one sequence and which make the viewers imagine they look at the scenery according to the hopes and wishes of one of the characters 'the point of view'. Marion's point of view is predominant in the beginning of the film, that is to say we see her 'seeing' the world; we are with her stealing the money and preparing to join her lover. The point of view then starts to shift, almost imperceptibly, in such a



manner that we may fail to recognize the shifting<sup>(13)</sup>. As I am not writing an article on *Psycho* I am not in a position to give all the evidence and I have had to be content with a general survey. After she has stolen the money, Marion is seen driving her car by the man she had told she was ill and had to go to bed immediately. No more than a detail but it produces two consequences:

1) The primary aim of joining her lover is now out of range. If Marion does not return the money to her employer, she will be charged with theft. She then goes on and commits blunder after blunder. (We are slightly out of the logic development of the initial sequences).

2) Marion is seen briefly as an object as we see a man looking at her. As we are driven by her in the car, we more and more perceive her from an outside point of view. Marion is seen by the garageman, by the policeman, by Norman, by Norman's birds (the pictures make perfectly clear the direction of their dull eyes) and we now ignore her point of view. Whom are we seeing with? With an imprecise series of eyes we might be tempted to call 'the looking men' (the man in the street, the garage-manager, the policeman, Norman) but that would be a mistake.

After having looked at the young lady through the hole-in-the-wall (an episode during which we are also peeping-toms), Norman goes to his house whilst we, spectators, still see Marion under the shower<sup>(14)</sup>. We witness the shower and the murder from *our own* point of view. The first sequences were filmed as seen through an external eye and what was shown was a pseudo-objective vision; a subtle device gets us to shift from a realistic description to an admittedly subjective one. The position of the spectator/witness has been destroyed and the viewer is temporarily forced to take part in the story. It is only when Marion is dead that the audience comes back to characters' point of view. What do we see while we play the role of witness? It is important to note that people generally do not agree on the details of the shower episode. The same data (water, limbs, knife, blood, eye) are redistributed by the spectators in various, inconsistent sets of pictures. Furthermore the change in perspective is not essential for keeping the spectator in suspense as is proven by the terrifying sequence which leads Marion's sister to the basement of the old house. Although seen from her point of view, the audience is held breathless.

At the beginning of the movie, the shots are bound by the predominance of one point of view and by the logic of the actions; this binding, weakened by the ruptures in logic, becomes temporarily ineffective — just for the moment of the murder. It might easily be shown that many other, less important ruptures of the logical structure occur in the



film. It is possible to secure important information by looking, for instance, at the shifting of eyes, or at the variations on bisexuality. What emerges from this brief discussion is that it is not possible to account precisely for the significances and effects of the shifting point of view.

We are able to isolate a sequence of disturbance and to suggest what that sequence adds to the narration (although there is also a disturbance in the story: spectators ignore who is the murderer and, most of the time, are mistaken) but it is very hard to account for a single 'meaning' of this sort of passage. May I explain that this is not, of course, specific to *Psycho*. It is a common place to say that a turning point occurred in Western cinema at the outset of the Sixties. One of the most important, and often underestimated aspects of that turning point is the disruption of the binding or logical structure and the intrusion of shifting or disconnection of causal line. A predominant narrative line with zones of disturbance, as developed by Alfred Hitchcock, concerns us and not experimental movies. Robin Wood has given a psychological commentary on *Psycho* which is perfectly valid<sup>(15)</sup>. He says you may interpret the picture as a thriller, or as a 'clinical' exhibition of a case of psychosis. However you explain it, there is always a 'residue' and that is what film-commentators are often puzzled by. They can neither ignore the shifts nor 'justify' them. Meanwhile such shifting becomes the technique more and more frequent in contemporary movies.

We are facing a new phenomena. In the traditional Western cinema (between roughly 1935-65) film-makers translated into pictures some 'messages' that their audience was supposed to 'decode'. It was thus possible to write: 'such was the purpose of the film-makers; such are the filmic tricks they used to make it effective; such is the result'. Today the message is only a part of the movie. Many sequences are purposeless, which does not mean they are boring for everyone accepts the according to his hopes and his fears giving way to his personal associations.

Instead of a message, we have what I would like to call 'some raw-material for imagination'. This is by no means unexpected for Eisenstein wrote extensively to announce what 'another' cinema might be: «the method is clear — to abstract 'inner tonalities' of all 'external' matter. Such a method *consciously attempts to divorce all formal elements from all content elements*; everything touching theme or subject is dismissed, leaving only those extreme formal elements that in *normal creative work* play only a partial role». Furthermore: «A work of art, understood dynamically, is just a process of arranging images in the feelings and mind of the spectators. It is this that constitutes the peculiarity of a truly vital work of art and distinguishes it from a



lifeless one, in which the spectator receives the represented result of a given consummated process of creation, instead of being drawn into the process as it occurs»<sup>(16)</sup>. Eisenstein takes a very simple example, the colour yellow, and spends twenty pages to enumerate the mental connections that can arise from the mere perception of that colour.

By mixing colours, shapes, sounds and motions, without binding them by an external logic (the logic of the 'message' for instance) contemporary movies offer to the viewer an almost infinite multiplicity of associations. What about the work of film-commentators, of film-analysts? Is it doomed to failure and thus obsolescence? I think not. A moving picture remains a human product, artificially made with edited elements. The products no longer 'say' or 'demonstrate' anything (or do not constantly aim at 'saving' something) but they do impress their audience.

One task of the critic should be to understand — and then to explain — how films exert pressure upon its audience. May I risk a comparison? Are historians able to adequately describe how spectators feel and respond to athletic events? We realise that a social historian must take into account such athletic meetings only because of the potentialities they offer to mass audiences. How do contemporary films challenge spectators? That is one question which historians ought to be asking.

Many movies still send a message and with them the traditional style of 'content' investigation is always effective. Other films leave disturbances a clear field: here, we have to use new tools. I have already said that we cannot 'prove' the validity of the Freudian concepts: the psychoanalysis is only a set of hypothesis which provide us with some keys for the study of the unconscious. If we want to describe what will probably catch the attention of the viewers, and make them react in a 'shifting' sequence, then we have to use the tools of psychoanalysis since there are presently no other tools available to the historian of film or social historian.

An excellent example is found in the Italian film, *Strategia del Ragno/Strategy of the Spider* (1970) which offers a direct link to narrative, sociological and historical analysis. Briefly, a young man, Athos Magnani (*Athos s.*) arrives in Tara, the village where his father, Athos Magnani (*Athos f.*) used to live and where he was killed during the fascist era. Athos f. is regarded as a hero but his murderer has never been unmasked.

The movie is, partially, a detective-story in which Athos s. is supposed to investigate the crime. As a matter of fact, he never asks the questions which would give him the solution. There is a narration which is constantly disrupted and never succeeds in being a coherent story. But



after all, cohesion might be found elsewhere; the 1970 generation looks at the 1936 generation and judges it. Is not the reevaluation of fascism and anti-fascism a good topic for historians? Unfortunately, there is no political opinion expressed by anybody, young or old, upon the past.

Athos f. is the hero of Tara and his name is to be found everywhere in the village, in the streets, on buildings, and in the middle of the central square. The inhabitants speak of him with admiration — but who was he? Towards the middle of the film, Athos s. goes to the cemetery at night and destroys the inscription engraved in honour of his father.

The hero was a traitor and his political friends, after having killed him, made the death that of a martyrdom. Is not Athos Magnani f. a mythical hero, one of those eponyms invented to give a past to a place or people? What of the village? At first, we would describe it as typically Northern Italian, with its church, its railway station, its square and its houses. If we try to make a 'sociological' study, we very soon come to a dead end for we shall never know if there are many people or not, if the village is small or large, poor or rich. Tara <sup>(38)</sup> is, in turn, a village and a backdrop, an impressive architectural setting.

The film had opened with a perfectly circular panning shot which, starting from the country-side, integrates the station into the landscape: the classic outset of a documentary film. But the second shot sets the audience in front of a stage, with the station as a background, two symmetrical clumps of trees as a foreground and people moving from the background to the background and then to the wings. Theatre, opera, scenery constantly intervene in the movie which is not, nonetheless, supposed to be a fantasy and often displays a virtually ethnographical level of information. In narration as well as in socio-historical description the positions that are presented as true are simultaneously shown as for false. No character has a firm position, just as the norms of the world they live in are unstable. We fail every time we try to catch 'the meaning' of the picture for everything happens as if no solution could be achieved.

Turning from the story to the shooting, we notice three main things:

- 1) The camera movement of the introductory shot is regularly reused. The camera constantly pans, all its motions are done during simple shots, without interruption and that mechanical continuity give the feeling of a closed, round, restricted space.
- 2) The 'theatrical shots' and even the pans are often constructed with an internal prospect as if the main action was spread out, extended (or, on the contrary, annulled?) by another one. One example is typical of this.



Having left the station, Athos s. goes across Tara and we see him walking through a long vista of arcades. He visits his father's mistress, Draïfa, and as they are speaking Draïfa slowly moves. Photographs of Athos f., taken under arcades, are pinned on the walls. The camera swivels round to follow Draïfa's face in close-up in a background of first the garden, seen through the window, and then photographs of Athos f. This panning shot is a constant demultiplication of the house. In the same frame we catch two different images and this type of endlessly opened shot implies a feeling either of disjunction (garden = outside, Draïfa's face = inside) or of close conjunction (Athos f. under the arcades, like Athos s. a few shots earlier).

3) In the previous example, the two Athos's are distinct and complementary; the same result can be obtained by suddenly substituting one figure for another: we see Athos s. running; now its Athos f. and Athos s. again, etc., or we see Athos f. in close-up, a lion in close-up, Athos f. again.

It is almost impossible to account for all these devices and to suggest how they might be supposed to contribute to understanding the story. But, if we remember the work of the unconscious, as described by Freud, we cannot avoid to notice the similarities with the three above mentioned tricks. As we already know, in the unconscious, ideas and images substitute one for other with an ease and freedom quite unthinkable in the conscious. Freud speaks of condensation — superimposition of signifiers <sup>(19)</sup>, displacement — a transfer of signification <sup>(20)</sup>, and transformation of thought into visual images <sup>(21)</sup>. In order to be understood, Freud separates the work of the unconscious in three achievements; in fact, the three constantly overlap, in our mind as in the film *Strategy of the Spider*. Some of the associations that the movie makes use of look very naive. Athos f. was as brave as a lion. As we develop the character of Athos f., we realize that the lion was not a banal metaphor. In the preceding close-up, Athos f. was shown behind the bars of an iron gate. He is encaged, whereas the lion is free. The bars of this shot correspond to the bars of the same gate which are at the background of some preceding and following shots standing in contrast with intercut shot of Draïfa and Athos s. in the open air. The pictures are never fully contradictory, nor absolutely complementary and they cannot be «read» either separately or in short series.

Before going farther, I have to clear up a possible misunderstanding. I do not say that the work — shooting and editing — which produced *Strategy* was unconscious. Did the film-makers knowingly resort to associations, substitutions, shiftings, for clear psychological reasons? For our



purposes an answer is not important. Our assumption is that there is no well defined 'message' in the movie and that the spectators, who attend a film showing are immersed within a process which develops similarly to the process of the unconscious. The viewer's response can be cold and adverse (forgetting of some film passages, unpleasant feeling) or warm and sympathetic. Take the simplest of the camera tricks we have detected, the 'enclosing' shot. The swivelling camera delimits an invisible, impassable barrier; a progressive confinement eventually results in Athos s. (and the viewers) being prisoners in the village. Inside the circle, Athos s. is treated as if he were a child, overfed by Draïfa and by his father's friends, browbeaten by some people, roughly handled by others. Athos s. is typically in a phase of regression, i.e. of return to an earlier, infantile stage of his life<sup>(23)</sup>. Regression is rarely total; it affects some parts of the mind, whereas others are unaltered. Athos s. is not mad for he still communicates with the inhabitants of Tara but some aspects of his demeanour are characteristic of a regressive activity.

In the regression, the three associated systems of the mind shift towards a previous stage of mental functioning. *Superego* often regresses to a stage when the child was constantly being watched by adults, which leads to what Freud calls the delusion of being watched<sup>(23)</sup>. When Athos s. arrives in Tara, people do not turn their heads towards him — but, progressively, he is caught, captured by eyes, the most impressive being the eyes of his father's statue. The regressive *ego* is a weak, not yet stabilized *ego*. In the film, there is a constant ambiguity around sexual identity<sup>(24)</sup> and, as we shall see later, particularly around Athos f.'s identity. It is not difficult to spot, in the picture *id* regression which reactivates wishes from the pre-genital levels. Reference is made to phantasms of consuming (oral level) and of rejecting (anal phase). Some frames are filled with food and Athos s. is obliged to eat too much.

People make threats of devouring him and in one of the «prospect-shots» quoted earlier, we see Athos f. and Draïfa in close-up while in the background, an unknown woman rushes to seize and carry away a child. In the same passage a lion is often spoken about which in the past escaped from a circus. We have the lion substituted for Athos f. but what is so frightening for children? The lion or Athos f.? This is an indirect fear of cannibalism (fear of being devoured by the father).

*Strategy of the Spider*, unlike *Psycho*, is not a clinical description; it is a potentiality, an opportunity for phantasms that viewers accept or not, according to their wishes. Some of the bindings that are characteristic of the conscious no longer work. We have said that the unconscious is timeless and the time is upset in *Strategy*. Athos s. looks very young



(20-25) whereas, being born in 1936, he should be 34. The film is a constant intercut of flash-back to 1936 and contemporary scenes; Draïfa and the three friends of Athos f. are identical in the past and in the present; Tara, Draïfa's house are unchanged and the old lorry where Athos f. and his fellows used to have their meetings, unaffected by the passing years, still serves as a meeting-place for Athos s. and the three men. Deprived of the ordinary time-references, the spectators either try to restore a chronology or admit that past and present, yesterday and today, coincide. In the first case, they endeavour to establish fixed relationships, logic and continuity resisting the work of the unconscious. In the second instance they give free rein to mobile displacements and condensations — the work of the unconscious.

When people do not master the mobility of images, what may happen? I believe that, with a movie such as *Strategy*, every viewer is sure he will achieve a set of perceptions consonant with his structure of mind.

Freud calls the stories the children tell themselves to imaginarily modify their ties with their environment 'family romances' <sup>(25)</sup>, Athos s.' story is a typical family romance. We incidentally learn through Draïfa, that Athos s. was born and grew up in Milan, with his mother. He never speaks of his mother or of his childhood and visiting Tara, he changes his life becoming the son of a hero. Once he is in the village, Athos s. slowly shifts from admiration of his father to identification with his father. There is one scene which the film editor 'mixes' the father with his son, there are other examples as well. But it is not only the incorporation of parental values and commands which occurs during the oedipal phase. Athos s. behaves like his father, he is, to a certain extent, his father — who, as we have said, might have been no more than an Eponym. And the process does not stop at that point for Athos s. is anxious, shares his father's fears, thinks he is watched and threatened.

Are these threats real or phantasmatic? The film fosters ambiguity.

A young man (who appears only once in the film and about whom we know nothing) strikes Athos s. Does this attack actually happen, or is it a dream? However, too close identification with the father results in detestation and Athos s., while obliterating his father's name in the cemetery, 'kills' his father. When he does that, he does not yet know his father was a traitor — but we might suppose that it is Athos s. himself who changes the former, now detested, hero into a traitor. In conclusion: 'family romances' are common in *neurosis*; megalomania and the delusion of being attacked frequently occur in *psychosis*; affective disturbance and lack of self-representation are characteristic of *schizophrenia*:



whatever their mental structuration is, the spectators can feel easy — or uneasy.

The *Strategy of the Spider* has been intentionally studied as a complex object, excluding a traditional socio-historical approach. The aim was to point out that, though it may not be consciously noticeable to the spectators, the movie is shaped by processes which are very close to the work of the unconscious. Two additional questions must also be raised, however briefly.

Firstly, is it possible to use Freudian theories when dealing with films in which all components are firmly linked by the general line of the story, the dialogue, the editing — in short the majority of the pictures shot before 1960? I might answer by referring to a film classic of the 'thirties', *Stage-Coach*. When Ringo (John Wayne) jumps onto the road, he seems to ignore everything which could hinder the fulfillment of his wishes. He intends to kill the Plumers regardless of the law, for in his mind, the *id* drives pressed for immediate satisfaction. Curly, the Marshall (= the law) seizes Ringo's gun. This metaphorical castration is enhanced by the position of the young cowboy, sitting does on the coach floor, as if he were a boy, by the downward glances that the passengers cast at him and by the way Doc calls him 'son'. Ringo then begins to develop contacts with the outer world — to build his *ego*. He internalized the moral commands (*superego*) so effectively that, at the end of the movie, he asks Curly to take him to jail. Remember Curly is not a sheriff but a marshall: he should not have released a man who has just killed three men — nor would he if the film was not, in one way, symbolical: the development from the *id* to a fully structured mind. The basic scheme of psychoanalysis operates perfectly with noticeable alterations: women do not interfere in Ringo's solving of his own oedipal conflict; the law the cowboy submits to is the prohibition of unauthorized violence, not the prohibition of incestuous impulses; finally the 'father' (the marshall) gives Ringo the 'girl' (Dallas) as a reward for having accepted the castration. A significant number of movies shot during the period 1930-1960 include aspects of the «oedipus complex» and a comparison between the various ways the complex is staged and solved is likely to illuminate the conceptions of family relationships among western societies.

Secondly, if historians are supposed to infer facts from evidence, what results can be expected from using psychoanalysis, whose formulations can never be demonstrated in the traditional manner? I assume that the 'facts' here lie in the difference between movies which deliver a message and movies which do not. Film making has been changing since the

sixties; some categories such as 'causality' or 'time' have become more 'flexible'; films have become 'indefinite' and the constant overlapping of the «non-rational» does not permit the simple use of historical or sociological explanatory schemes to comment on the pictures. If the Freudian theories help us, even indirectly, to delineate the beliefs, attitudes, mental views implied in the movies, to understand how they work in films and how they may impress the film-viewers, should we not use them? If that question is of no importance — or if historians only ask psychoanalysis for quick recipes — it would be better to give up the unconscious and, along with it, the rich seam of Freudian theory altogether.

PIERRE SORLIN



## NOTES

- (1) See — among many other books — S.O. LESSER, *Fiction and the Unconscious* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1957); W. PHILLIPS, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (Meridian Books, 1963); F. CREW ed., *Psychoanalysis and literary process* (Cambridge, Winthrop, 1970).
- (2) SIGMUND FREUD and WILLIAM BULLITT, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson, Twenty-Eighth President of the United States. A psychological Study* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1966). For the relationship between Psychoanalysis and Social Sciences, see T. PARSONS, «Social Structure and the Development of Personality: Freud's contribution to the integration of Psychology and Sociology» (1958, reprinted in *Social Structure and Personality*, Glencoe, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964) and, more recently, R. BOCOCK, *Freud and Modern Society* (London, Nelson, 1976).
- (3) See Marshall BUSH, «The problem of Form in the Psychoanalytic Theory of Art», *Psychoanalytic Review*, 1967, pp. 5-35.
- (4) Is it necessary to remind the reader that, in its first presentation, Freudian theory divided the mind into three systems: the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious, those systems being separated one from the others and the mind being conceived as analogous to a series of pigeon-holes. Freud himself pointed out (*The Ego and the Id*, 1923, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London, Hogarth Press, vol. 19) that a theory which isolates the conscious from the unconscious is unable to give an account of mental conflicts; he then elaborated a description in terms of functions, not in terms of topography.
- (5) Freud says the child fears to be castrated by his rival, in retaliation for his own wish to displace this rival or, more commonly, in punishment for sexual naughtiness. A great many examples show that the threat of castration has often been used — supposedly as a joke — against young boys. But it is not necessary to generalize; the most important thing, in the oedipal phase, is that the child acknowledges he is not alone and that other people have some rights. See FREUD, *Three essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), *Standard Edition*, vol. 7 and T. PARSONS, «The Father Symbol: an appraisal in the Light of Psychoanalytic and Sociological Theory» (in *Social Structure and Personality*, see note 2).
- (6) FREUD, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916-17), *Standard Edition*, 15, 175, and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *Standard Edition*, 4, 310. See also WILMSATT, *The Verbal Icon* (Moonday, 1960).
- (7) See GRODDECK, «Vision, the World of the Eye and Seeing without the Eye» (in *The Meaning of Illness*, London, Hogarth Press, 1970).
- (8) If it is necessary to fix a starting point, I suggest this might be *Blind Alley* (1939).
- (9) In *Shock Corridor* (1963) Péter Breck tells Constance Towers the best way to win the Pulitzer is to write a book on madness — «That's what people pay for».
- (10) Freud paid much attention to war traumas (especially in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920, *Standard Edition*, vol. 18). Is it by chance that traumas became a central theme for pictures during the World War II and that a change occurred in Psychofilms during the Vietnam War?
- (11) Marnie and Norman act in day-to-day life as ordinary people; on the contrary, the investigator of *Shock Corridor* goes mad at the end of the film.
- (12) The descriptions of *Stage Coach*, *Psycho* and *Strategy of the Spider* are based upon shot analysis. I think it unnecessary to cite the shot numbers in a paper which is simply a general introduction to the question.
- (13) More information on the film is to be found in JAMES NAREMORE, *Film Guide*

to *Psycho* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1973). For the point of view, see NORMANN FRIEDMANN, «Point of view in Fiction» (1955, reprinted in STEVICK ed., *The Theory of the Novel*, New York, 1967).

(14) The shower gives rise to various interpretations. Some people say that Janet Leigh (Marion), having decided to return and give back the money, washes out her mistakes and starts again from scratch while others claim she acts out a form of sexual intercourse with the running water. A scene edited in such a quick manner, with constant motion and no verbal commentary, is precisely intended to serve as a pretext for the expansion of individual phantasms.

(15) *Hitchcock's Films* (London, 1967), p. 110 f.

(16) *The Film Sense* (London, Faber and Faber, 1943), p. 24.

(17) *The Film Sense*, p. 97 f. Freud often refers to yellow, a colour which had an important function in his life and seems to have been linked with some of his screen-memories (see BERNFELD, «An unknown autobiographical fragment by Freud», *American Imago*, 1946, I). It is worth mentioning (although this has nothing to do with the present paper) that even if he tried to list all the relations between that colour and his wishes or fears, Freud had certainly forgotten one of the most important relationships: that yellow has been associated with the Jews for a long time, especially in the German countries; e.g. yellow star worn by Jews in Germany and occupied Europa during World War II.

(18) Shall I underline the signification of that name: Tara is Scarlet's estate in *Gone with the Wind*; after having inherited it from her parents, she locks herself there as Athos s. does in his father's village.

(19) The formation of fresh unities out of elements which, in our waking state, would have remained separate, «latent elements which have something in common being combined and fixed into a single unity» (FREUD, *Standard Edition*, 4, 279 and 15, 171).

(20) «A latent element is replaced... by something more remote»; «the psychical accent is shifted from an important element on to another which is unimportant» (FREUD, *Standard Edition*, 4, 305; 15, 173).

(21) See above, note 6.

(22) FREUD, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, chapter VII (*Standard Edition*, 5), esp. p. 540. See also J. ROSE, «Paranoia and the Film System», *Screen*, XVII, 1976.

(23) FREUD, *On Narcissism: an Introduction*, *Standard Edition*, 14, 96.

(24) Three scenes are built upon the uncertainty of sexual determination.

(25) FREUD, *Family Romances*, *Standard Edition*, 9, 237 f. «The later stage in the development of the neurotic's estrangement from his parents might be described as the 'neurotic family romance'. For a quite peculiarly marked imaginative activity emerges first in children's play and then, starting roughly from the period before puberty, takes over the topic of family relations» (p. 238).