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Psychoanalysis in the Barrios An Interview

Psychoanalysis in the Barrios: Race, Class and the Unconscious (2019) is a collection of thirteen essays explicitly on the relationship between psychoanalysis and “the Latino population”. However, its latent meanings go far beyond that focus. How culture and history not only are read by psychoanalysis but how they in turn write the psychoanalysis that is then the frame for that reading

is one of them. The bi-directional interplay among theories, history, and practice is told in reference to the Latin American story, but the lessons to be learned are for psychoanalysis in general.

This past spring, two of the editors of the collection (Patricia Gherovici and Christopher Christian) and one of the contributors (Mariano Plotkin) had the

following conversation with Loren Dent, (website Editor, *DIVISION/Review*).

LD: Please share a bit about how this collection came to be.

CC: The origin really was prompted by a number of very successful events that we had at the New School, co-sponsored



Words of Seeing Bettina MATHES

1. Born in Europe in the last years of the 19th century, psychoanalysis and the moving image are siblings. So, of course, they had a complicated relationship. In 1925, Georg Wilhelm Papst prepared a pro-

Critical Flicker Fusion: Psychoanalysis at the Movies.

By William Fried

Karnac 2017, 184 pages, \$30.93

(Confederation of Independent Psychoanalytic Societies series on the boundaries of psychoanalysis)

duction of his silent film *Geheimnisse einer Seele* (Secrets of a Soul) collaborating with Karl Abraham (who did not live to see the movie) and Hanns Sachs as consultants.

Ten years earlier, Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg had likened the cinema to Freud's theory of the mind in his now classic study *Das Lichtspiel* (The Photoplay). Meanwhile, father Freud was not amused: he famously disliked the movies, believing films had nothing to contribute to psychoanalysis and vice versa.

Starting in the 1970s, scholars like Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey (who is also a film-maker), Teresa de Lauretis and Tania Modleski began to employ psychoanalytic theory—for the most part drawing on Freud and Lacan—to explain the ways in which the cinema

produces meaning and shapes the spectator as gendered subject. Concepts such as *unconscious signifier*, *dream work*, *screen memory*, *mirror stage*, *the gaze*, *voyeurism*, *phallus*, and *fetish* were instrumental in ushering in a new kind of film criticism, concerned with naming and critiquing the powerful effects of the cinematic apparatus on the spectator's unconscious. Most recently, Winnicottian notions such as the *transitional object*, *potential space*, and *holding environment* have been used by both scholars and therapists to understand more about how spectators experience and “use” the films they watch (Sabbadini, 2011; Kuhn, 2013).

By the beginning of the new millennium the effort to uncover the cinema's manipulative “subtext” had become formulaic and predictable. Article by article, book by book confirmed the power of the moving image to serve up “bad objects” that controlled the viewer's unconscious, reactivated early trauma of castration, and reaffirmed outdated psychoanalytic concepts. Each study also confirmed its author's power to halt the flow of the movie, break it up into bits and pieces, insert psychoanalytic and philosophical references, and reassemble it thereby creating a new narrative—the narrative of the one who interprets, the one who knows, as it were. It was obvious: psychoanalytic film criticism had exhausted itself. Time to pause. Time to remind ourselves of what got lost in the process of dismantling a film's defenses: that most of us go to the movies (or watch films at home) to be moved (both emotionally and spatially), that watching a movie is pleasurable and, sometimes, satisfying; that we derive pleasure and gratification from moving on and through the sensuous fabric of the screen. To say it with Giuliana Bruno: “A film's spectatorship is a *practice* of space that is dwelt in,” Bruno writes in her splendid *Atlas of Emotions*. And: “the realm of motion is never too far from the range of emotion.” The viewer's pleasure is the surface pleasure of a traveller. And film-making is the “making of (e)motional space” (2002, pp.62, 69). In her recent *Surface* (2014) Bruno asks us to be at her side as she explores the material pleasures of visual images, as she discovers, over and over again, that the surface is rarely ever superficial.

In recent years, a growing number of psychoanalysts have been eager to analyze individual films, despite Freud's rigorous aversion to the cinema. Unlike film scholars, though, who have developed an extensive vocabulary to engage with the symbolic dimension of the *formal* and *technical* aspects of the cinema (what makes a film a film and



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not, say, a play), psychoanalysts, despite their best intentions, tend to focus on (linguistic) content and meaning at the expense of almost everything else that distinguishes film from literary genres like dramas, novels, short stories, and poetry. Which is somewhat surprising, given that without its “technical elements” (what is nowadays called the frame), psychoanalysis wouldn’t be any different from ordinary conversations. In his recent book, Andrea Sabbadini (2014), (founding) director of the *European Psychoanalytic Film Festival* in London, lists among the “rewarding results” of watching and writing about movies that movies may help the analyst to better understand a patient, “to illustrate a number of psychoanalytic ideas and convey a sense of what analytic work consists of” (p. xv). In writing about individual films, psychoanalysts (including himself), he states, are mostly interested in content, in “the unconscious aspects of characters and stories” (p.xv).

I don’t dispute that movies (like other art forms) can indeed contribute to our understanding of the psychological, political, and cultural dynamics we encounter in the consulting room. Of course they do! But a film that tells a story (not all films do) tells it in a visual and auditory way. Absent from this almost exclusive focus on meaning and motivation is the consideration of form and technology as independent elements, that is to say of *how* the characters *appear* on a *screen*, of *how* the stories are told visually and in time. And what about films that don’t tell a story in which characters act out their unconscious fears, wishes, or complexes?

To focus on content is to interpret, to push through the visual (and auditory) surface of the film in order to uncover its “real” meaning. Plot, story, dialogue, character development, and motivation are the materials which, that is the assumption, contain the film’s secret, its *hidden truths*, as it were. While such an approach can yield fascinating insights *and* confirm the power of psychoanalytic thinking, especially if the author has a wide range of extra-filmic material to draw on (literature, drama, philosophy), it implies that the psychoanalyst-as-critic doesn’t trust the image as image, doesn’t quite believe what unfolds on the screen before his very eyes, doesn’t have a vocabulary that respects the sensuous, the superficial, and the nonverbal.

In his new book, *Critical Flicker Fusion*, William Fried is this kind of critic. Here’s how he describes his approach to the films that he included in his book:

I think analysts would do greater justice to movies if they approached them as they do sessions, that is, as potentially coherent, internally consistent

entities, the underlying meanings of which can be discovered by a process of exegesis [...] that will result in an ...elucidation of the work’s themes and motifs” (pp.xxii–xxiii)

In the preface to the book, Frederic Perlman, the editor of the series in which Fried’s book appears, presumes a “natural alliance of art and analysis [which] clearly reflects the parallel nature of their purposes—to represent otherwise hidden truths” (p.xiv).

Not surprisingly, many would disagree with Perlman that the purpose of psychoanalysis (or art) was *to represent otherwise hidden truths*; just like not every analyst (or analysand, for that matter) approaches a session as a *coherent entity* awaiting the analyst’s *exegesis* (Fried’s word for interpretation). Whether we call it a “holding environment” (Winnicott), the emergence of “the Real” (Lacan’s term for the breaking down of signification), “chora” (Kristeva’s word for preverbal experience), “the unthought known” (Bollas), or “unformulated experience” (Stern)—psychoanalysts of quite different analytic persuasions have urged us to make space for nonsense to come forth in a session. Interpretation (the analyst’s tool to assert his authority as the one who knows) is thus necessarily pushed into the background.

And then there’s transference, or rather the lack of it. In a psychoanalytic session, patient and analyst both actively create a transference relationship that goes both ways. Films invite the spectator’s projections, but characters in a movie do not develop transferences to the audience. To treat films like psychoanalytic sessions is, I think, a misleading analogy.

Finally, and importantly, and regardless of the question of whether watching a film resembles being in a session with a patient, the overemphasis on internal coherence and exegesis cannot address film as art. All (now classic) movements in the history of the cinema—German expressionism, Italian neorealism, the French *nouvelle vague*, the metaphysical films by Tarkovsky and Bergman, or the cinema of Ozu and Kurosawa—are not important because of the content matter they present. As art, the cinema has the unique ability to examine and offer an experience of the never settled relationship between sight and sound; time and space; movement and stillness; image, thought, and word. It does so not through content but through formal, technological, and stylistic choices. Thus, when Fried writes about a film by an *auteur*, Kiarostami’s *Certified Copy*, all he can offer are “general reflections that may elucidate the film without addressing its particularities” (p.66). In the section on Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*,

another milestone in film history, his aim is to “comment on some of the fundamental differences between Freud’s world view and that of the neo-Freudians” (p.97).

Fried has organized his book thematically, with each chapter discussing two or more films. The chapter on “secrets” is followed by chapters on “time and death,” “love and lust,” and “human identity.” His associations with the films he discusses take author and reader far and wide: he roams the lands of poetry and drama (Shakespeare, Yeats, Coleridge, Wordsworth), philosophy (Aristotle and Blaise Pascal, among others), and history, bringing back treasures that make for an interesting, sometimes surprising reading experience. What is lacking, however, is attention to the films as films. Almost completely absent are the names of actors/actresses as well as information on the duration, color, format, projection gauge, and film material (film stock, video, digital). Likewise missing is a discussion of the respective director’s visual choices, e.g., editing, framing, camera position, color palette, sound, etc. As if it didn’t make a difference whether a film was 20 or 200 minutes long, whether it was shot on 35 mm or 16 mm, whether it employed lay actors or world famous actresses, whether it was shot in color or in black-and-white, whether it was produced for TV or the cinema, whether the spectator watched it in a movie theatre, on his home screen, or on her smart phone. Fried considers these technical aspects of film-making negligible, perhaps even trivial. His inattention is a choice, not an oversight (p.xxi). In an appendix (pp.123–128), he spells out what in his view (not everybody would agree) are the connections between filmic *mise-en-scène*, dreams, and psychoanalytic sessions. He does not, however, offer an example of how these perceived similarities might be used in a film review. Fried’s exclusive focus on content, wide-ranging and interesting as it is (Fried is a perceptive and jargon-free writer), does not “do justice” to the films included in the book. In fact, we learn nothing about the films as films, but a lot of interesting things about Fried’s literary preferences. By focusing on verbally relatable content, Fried, more than he seems to know, shares in Freud’s aversion to the cinema. He does take psychoanalysis to the movies—with eyes wide shut.

2. As a psychoanalyst, what can I offer film criticism? What kind of clinically informed psychoanalytic commentary is useful when engaging with visual images?¹ Images that move according to their own

1. This is not to deny the auditory dimension of the cinema. However, I don’t have the space here to also think through what we do when we put written words to sound and music.

very specific temporality, images that evoke a preverbal immediacy (their effect is instant, derived from my sense-perceptions), images that, unlike spoken or written language, are excessive and contained at the same time (they say everything at once and yet hold themselves together).

Others have asked these questions before (though not necessarily regarding film criticism). I'm thinking of Julia Kristeva, who, confronted with the paintings and frescos by Giotto, wondered whether to "insert the signs of language" into the threeness of the image required the viewer to "open out, release, and set side by side what is compact, condensed, and meshed" (1988, p.27). A "finding our way through what separates the place where I speak, reason, and understand from the one where something functions in addition to my speech: something that is more-than-speech, a meaning to which space and color have been added" (p. 27). A kind of "put[ting] back into words that from which words have withdrawn" (p. 27). I'm thinking of Susan Sontag's passionate (and somewhat desperate) call for an "erotics of art, for a criticism that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place" (1964/1990, p.12).

For both Kristeva and Sontag, it is the "technical elements" that deserve close attention: color, rhythm, texture, temperature, tone of voice, form, genre, and style. And it is precisely in the domain of technicality that, I believe, psychoanalysis as practice has an important contribution to make to film criticism. Which is another way of saying that some analysts know more about visual images than they know.

How so?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to first say something about how analysts (and patients) arrive at the words they put to unconscious or dissociated experience.

As psychoanalysts, we work between words and that which at the same time retreats (recoils, as it were) from language, even though created by it, *and* is amenable to it: metaphor and the unconscious. What some analysts refer to as "working in the transference," I would describe as allowing a patient's unconscious to take shape in me over time. (Whether we characterize it as unformulated experience, dissociated self-states, projected identifications, unconscious signifiers, or unthought known is not important for my argument.) To receive and feel texture, temperature, and tone, to be carried by its rhythm and pace, and to put (my) words to what I receive. I give a part of myself over to what cannot yet be spoken by the patient. I put my ability to feel, think, and speak at the service of the patient. And I reach for words inside

of me, hoping they will carry a charge that resonates within the analysand. In this sense, the words that I speak are metaphors, and they are both mine and not mine. This is why I speak differently with every patient. If all goes well enough, every psychoanalytic couple creates their own idiom. If things don't go well enough (and things often don't go well), and the analyst, for instance, over and again speaks to the patient in preconceived ideas, he sabotages the process. Freud and Dora learned this lesson the hard way. Maybe because Freud was too impatient.

The psychoanalytic process takes time, sometimes a very long time. Much of this time is spent waiting. Waiting for the patient's unconscious to take shape in the analyst and in the space between them. Waiting for attachments to form. Waiting for a signal the analyst can catch: a sound, a silence, a gesture, a word. Waiting for an opening. And sometimes waiting for something to happen, not knowing what that something might be. Waiting to recognize repetitions, mannerisms, idiosyncrasies, and timings. Waiting not knowing how much longer to wait to be able to say words that feel true to the patient's and the analyst's experience. Words that touch, move, perhaps even cut. Words that make a difference. Waiting to recognize the ways in which patient and analyst unconsciously express, edit, and frame their experiences of themselves and the other.

If films are not sessions and the characters in them are not patients, how can what I have said about waiting and words be useful for the kind of film criticism that serves both the film and the viewer?

In contrast to the still image (painting, photography), films are anticipatory. They ask me to become a person-in-waiting. Before DVDs and streaming platforms were invented, which allow me to stop, rewind, or fast forward a film at any time, to watch a movie I had to go to the cinema, where once the movie had begun, I adapted to the tempo and the rhythm of the film. When I watch a movie, I'm always waiting for the next image. If I don't check the time on my watch (or my cell phone), I have no way of knowing how long I've waited and how much more there is to wait for. Depending on my early experiences, cinematic waiting can be comforting or deeply frustrating (and everything in between). As psychoanalyst-at-the-movies, I can accept the necessary waiting as an invitation to register the ways in which the film carries me, and the places it takes me—if, that is, I have learned to wait.

Writing about movies, from the place of the clinical practice I have sketched, is to let myself be moved, afflicted, infected

even, by the visual (nonverbal) images that come to me, pass by me, transport me somewhere else. It is to receive the surface (because that's all I've got) in an accommodating and kind way, with empathy. It is to, as Susan Sontag has asked us, first "supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of [the] work of art" and use that as the basis for interpreting. It is to pay attention to editing, montage, pace, framing, and color. It is to be moved by the movement on the screen—and later, sometimes a long, long while later, to be moved into words, words that can be shared in a review or an essay. Words that fit the movie and my reception of it. It is to interpret *not* what is supposedly hidden beneath the screen (what isn't there but should be there), but to describe and analyze what becomes apparent in myself as spectator. Put in Freudian terms, I'm waiting to be taken from thing-presentation to word-presentation.²

Of course, I'm not saying that psychoanalytic theory does not have its place in the kind of film writing I'm advocating here. It does! In fact, every time I write about a movie in the way I have suggested, I contribute to psychoanalytic theory. My viewing experience and the words I come to put to it might enliven, examine, expand, and even alter theoretical concepts. Used this way, films do not illustrate or explain theory, but theory stands (or fails to stand) the test of movie goers.

I realize that my understanding of waiting in the transference is one among many ways of doing psychoanalysis. It is, I do believe, *the* version of psychoanalysis that makes a genuinely psychoanalytic (because process-based) contribution to film writing, adding our clinical sensibility to the theory—and history-oriented film criticism practiced by film scholars, art historians, and cultural critics.

Words of seeing.

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2. In her essay on Giotto, Kristeva (1988) makes a similar but also slightly different point.