Syllabus

Images of the Unconscious:
Overlapping Visions in Film and Psychoanalysis
Instructor: Michael Pariser

In recent years, psychoanalysis has been depicted in movies as a tragicomic world of buffoons, charlatans, drug addicts, sexual abusers, and even murderers. Such abasement of our profession, however, was not always the case, and in fact, the relationship between cinematic visions and psychoanalytic ideas was, for many years, extremely close. A striking description of this connection comes from the great director Federico Fellini:

“Talking about dreams is like talking about movies, since the cinema uses the language of dreams; years can pass in a second, and you can hop from one place to another. It is a language made of image. And in the real cinema, every object and every light means something, as in a dream.”

So what can cinema tell us about the unconscious processes of the human mind, and what can such understanding do to aid our clinical work? This class will view cinematic attempts to illustrate unconscious human psychology, including dreams, motivations, and other psychodynamic processes, as they manifest in the intersubjective field defined in narrative cinematic arcs. We will then attempt to relate them to contemporary analytic concepts so that they can become useful sources of knowledge about human nature and the analytic process.

Each session will utilize clips from a number of films, shorts, and TV shows. Some of the possible candidates are listed below, but the final decision will not be made until closer to each class, and will embody not just my ideas, but those of the students as well (in other words, you get a say in this.)

Class #1 [September 27, 2014]: Unconscious, Uncanny, Unreal.

Where is the line between conscious and unconscious? What is real? Unreal? Surreal? And what happens when the boundaries begin to break down?

Reading:

Class #2 [November 1, 2014]: Dreams and Nightmares

As Fellini points out, dreams are cinematic and films are often dreamlike. James Grotstein claims that every session is a dream. And as our world becomes more and more frightening, our cinema reflects our nightmares in endless serial killers, horror bloodbaths, and post-apocalyptic visions.

Reading:

- Atwood, G. (2012). Dreams and Delusions, in The Abyss of Madness, Ch. 4, p.89-106. NYC: Taylor and Francis
- Kafka, F. (1915) The Metamorphosis

Clips drawn from:
- Wild Strawberries
- The Trial
- The Cell
- Spellbound
- Inception
- The Science of Sleep
• 8 ½
• Land of Confusion
• M
• Metropolis
• Dr. Mabuse
• Rosemarie’s Baby
• Shutter Island
• Nightmare on Elm Street
• Apocalypse Now
• Barton Fink
• Road Warrior
• Final Days

Class #3 [December 6, 2014]: Identity and Its Vicissitudes

Who are you? Do you ever really know? If you’re discovering in analysis things about yourself you never knew, are you now someone you’ve never been before? The characters in these films demonstrate the fluidity of identity, as they struggle to elucidate and integrate ephemeral and often fragmenting senses of self.

Reading:

• Rossi, L. (2009). Being and Becoming. The Italian Psychoanalytic Annual. 3:177-192

Clips drawn from:

• Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
• The Mask
• Persona
• Memento
• Marnie
• Last Year at Marienbad
• Groundhog Day
• What About Bob
• Unforgiven (Metallica)

Class #4 [January 24, 2015]: Motivation

To borrow from the Bible, they know not what they do. Beneath their awareness, unconscious forces drive these people to heights of cruelty,
ambition, murder, altruism, and just plain weirdness; but making sense of their psyches is harder than it looks. Was it really just all about the sled?

Reading:


Clips drawn from:

- *Freud*
- *M*
- *Ordinary People*
- *Psycho*
- *Fatal Attraction*
- *Citizen Kane*
- *Taxi Driver*
- *Dr. Strangelove*
- *White Heat*
- *Casablanca*
- *The Maltese Falcon*

**Class #5 [March 28, 2015]: Sexuality**

If we were all real Freudians, this would be topic #1, but even for contemporary analysts, it is still important. What lust lurks in our hearts? What are we to do about it? And can anyone stop us when we want what we want?

Reading:


Clips drawn from:

- *Black Swan*
- *Prince of Tides*
- *A Dangerous Method*
- *Repulsion*
- *Lolita*
Class #6 [May 2, 2015]: Case Study

This will be a close examination of Luis Bunuel’s masterpiece, *Belle du Jour*. The story of a rich doctor’s wife who becomes a prostitute, this film has it all: surrealism, dreams, identity confusion, sexuality, obsessions, compulsions, and bad parenting. It is an amazing depiction of multiple, varied unconscious processes at work in a complex intersubjective world.

Reading: