



# Psychoanalytic Film Theory

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# Psychoanalytic Theory

## Classical Theory

Psychoanalysis, as inaugurated by Sigmund Freud, analyzes the psyche, which, according to the theory, is a site of irrational and unconscious conflict between primal desires and traumatic realities. The following slides represent the core of Freud's theory regarding models of psyche, unconscious and repression, pleasure and reality, sexuality, basic disorders, and symptom and cure.

# Repression and the Unconscious

- ★ Two interrelated concepts underly all of Freud's work
  - ★ Repression: the procedure by which the conflicts and realities which the psyche cannot rationally deal with are put out of one's conscious, waking mind
  - ★ Unconscious: the part of the psyche into which conflicts and traumas are repressed

# Two Models of Psyche

## I. Id/Ego/Superego

- ★ Id (it): instinct or drive, the bodily and biological basis of all psychic processes
  - ★ Most id drives like sex are repressed; however, the id does not equal the unconscious.
- ★ Ego (I): the self, which originally develops out of the id, but is tested by reality and influenced by people in reality
  - ★ The ego manages the demands of 1) the libido and id, 2) external reality, and 3) super-ego.
  - ★ Overwhelmed by super-ego or reality, the ego represses prohibited drives or trauma.

# I. Id/Ego/Super-ego

Concluded

## ★ Ego, continued

★ Anxiety and psychic unrest signal the breakdown of the ego's management of its various relations.

## ★ Super-ego (over-I): family and societal influences, voice of authority

★ The super-ego represents the ideal of higher humanity (you ought to be like this--like your father) and the reaction-formation against prohibition (you may not be like this--like your father).

★ Paradoxically, the super-ego's prohibitive idealism can give pleasure; thus the libido can become fused to its own negation, causing neurotic desire, for instance.

# Two Models of Psyche

## 2. Unconscious/Pre-conscious/Conscious

- ★ Unconscious: the site of conflict and trauma, what one has repressed, what one cannot know without analytical help (It's not that one doesn't know she is obsessively washing her hands, but rather that she can't explain why)
- ★ Pre-conscious: what one is not thinking, but could if one chose to (short and long-term memory)
- ★ Conscious: what one is presently aware of

# Pleasure and Reality

- ★ Pleasure principle: originally simply a tension derived from a unsatisfied drive of an erogenous zone, but as the psyche develops memory and fantasy, pleasure is coded into non-genital action of primary process, imagination, dreamwork, and wish-fulfillment
- ★ Reality principle: the secondary process thought of reason and judgment which rivals and supersedes the pleasure principle, thereby installing the unconscious of repressed desires

# Pleasure and Reality

Continued

- ★ Eros vs Thanatos: undergirding the pleasure and reality principles, which exist in the order of the ego, are primal instincts, which exist in the irrational realm of the id.
- ★ Eros: the life instinct, pleasure derived from creation, love and affection
- ★ Thanatos: the death instinct, pleasure derived from (self-)destruction, hate and aggression



# Pleasure and Reality

Concluded

- ★ Art: a reconciliation between pleasure and reality principles, a sublime working through of Eros and Thanatos.
- ★ Sublimation: the fulfillment of basic bodily drives via transformation into something “better,” civilized and artistic

# Sexuality

- ★ Freud theorizes that humans pass through four stages of sexuality as they grow from infants to sexually active adults.
- ★ These stages seek to 1) localize desire from polymorphous perversity to genital pleasure and 2) transfer auto-erotic pleasure to others in the cause of heterosexual reproduction.
- ★ If a conflict or trauma in one of these stages is not resolved, then neurosis, psychosis, or perversity could result.

# Sexuality

## Continued

- ★ 1) oral, in which the mouth is the site of satisfaction,
- ★ 2) sadistic-anal, in which biting and excretion afford pleasure,
- ★ 3) phallic, in which the child undergoes the Oedipal complex of desire for the mother, rivalry with the father, and appropriate super-ego guilt taught through castration anxiety which causes the child to desire others outside the family; and the period of sexual latency which follows
  - ★ (Note: just because you don't remember your Oedipal complex doesn't mean it didn't happen. You were a toddler, and guilt veils or represses memory.)
- ★ 4) genital, green light for heterosexual reproduction

# Three Basic Disorders

- ★ **Neurosis:** overwhelmed by reality and super-ego, the ego flees reality by suppressing id, desire, conflict, or trauma it cannot manage
- ★ **Psychosis:** with no support from the super-ego, the ego forecloses upon and remodels reality according to unchecked id, desire, conflict, or trauma
- ★ **Perversion:** due to a founding trauma which it disavows the reality of, the ego gives up real sexual pleasure for a symbolic substitute

# Symptom and Cure

- ★ Everyone represses, but those for whom the unconscious causes debilitating suffering seek treatment with a psychoanalyst.
- ★ Symptom: manifest expression of unconscious conflict or trauma, a return of the repressed in somatic and agential form
- ★ Talking cure: the purpose of psychoanalysis is to reveal to the conscious mind, through analytical discourse, the unconscious underlying symptoms
- ★ Active Reversal: once an analysand realizes her unconscious conflicts, she can consciously seek to reverse them through new ways of being toward self, others, and the world

# Lacanian Psychoanalysis

## Three Orders or Realms

- ★ **Imaginary:** Initiated by the Mirror Stage in which the infant, feeling fragmented and inchoate, derives a sense of self and wholeness by looking at an image such as her primary caregiver or her reflection in a mirror, the Imaginary Order constitutes the pre-verbal realm of images in which the child feels complete and unified with the Desire of the Mother.

# Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Continued

★ Symbolic Order: Inaugurated by the Name-of-the-Father, i.e., the father's prohibition in language ("No") that breaks the dyadic bond of child and mother, the Symbolic Order is the realm of metonymic desire for the other, for the subject is always searching for the little lost object of desire, *objet petit a*, but only discovers a chain of signifying representations of it in the Big Other, the social rituals, cultural rules, and language system that...

# Lacanian Psychoanalysis

## Symbolic Order, continued

- ★...can only offer symbolic substitutes for the (primal maternal) presence which it lacks because it lost it via its entrance into language. The Symbolic Order splits the subject into conscious language and unconscious trauma over the castrated loss and subsequent desire for fullness.



# Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Concluded

- ★ Real: Alternatively, that realm which exists beyond or outside both Imaginary being and Symbolic meaning; or that moment of subjective destitution in which one sees through the chain of signifiers of the Symbolic Order and the ideology of the Big Other and is traumatized by the hollow kernel of nothingness, deprived of Symbolic meaning and bereft of Imaginary being.

# Psychoanalytic Criticism

- ★ Psychoanalytic literary criticism, using the principles of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, looks at the psyche and the psychological anxieties and issues of a literary text's
  - ★ Narrators or Characters
  - ★ Author or Culture
  - ★ Form or Genre
  - ★ Reader or Society

# Psychoanalytic Film Theory

- ★ Psychoanalytic film theorists conceive of film as
  - ★ Either as a formal medium for unconscious, perverse, or irrational thought processes (for instance, an individual film's structural properties visually represent irrationality that bypasses conscious, rational thinking or the voyeuristic pleasures of a genre's form disavow certain realities),
  - ★ Or the content of an unconscious dream (for instance, by the writer/director) or a mass fantasy (for instance, film is a virtual reality that sustains the culture's collective ideological wish-fulfillment).

# Lacanian Film Theory

- ★ Drawing on Hegel's and Sartre's existential philosophy of the self seeking recognition from the other/world as well as Lacan's mirror stage, Lacanian film theorists think of film
  - ★ Both as a mirror with which the spectator identifies and then derives her illusory, fictitious self
  - ★ And as the mirror of the Other which generates the subject's desire

# Marxist Psychoanalytic Film Theory

- ★ Marxist psychoanalytic film theorists combine socioeconomic cultural criticism and psychoanalytic criticism to use film as a diagnosis of the mass culture's ideology, i.e., a film is a product of social and economic forces seeking to maintain certain powers and structures by creating false consciousness in the mass populace.

# Feminist Psychoanalytic Film Theory

- ★ Psychoanalytic feminist film theorists analyze how film structures the spectator's gaze in order to create gender hierarchies, for instance how, in most mainstream movies, spectators are invited (if not forced) to identify with the active point of view of the male protagonist subject who looks upon objectified female bodies.

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