Professor Alex E. Blazer

English 4910/4925/4955/5950

8 February 2022

Psychoanalyzing Classic Film Noir Heroes, Femme Fatales, and Spectators

1. **The Unconscious**
   1. “The unconscious doesn’t just exist apart from consciousness but acts as an existential threat to consciousness.” (19)
   2. “The unconscious is an alien within, but this alien constantly intrudes on the subject’s everyday life by distorting how the subject perceives and knows the world. The unconscious is hidden, but it is hidden in plain sight.” (20)
   3. “. . . the unconscious possesses an extimate status---at once inside and outside.” (21)
   4. *Thinking of Sam Spade, Walter Neff, and Al Roberts, what alien thing or things inside them constitutes an existential threat to their very being? Ask the same questions of Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Phyllis Dietrichson, and Vera.*
2. **Desire**
   1. “The cinema attracts spectators because it ignites their desire, and psychoanalysis is a philosophy of desire.” (17)
   2. “The problem is that the subject’s desire is opposed to and undermines the subject’s self-interest.” (19)
   3. “Films translate unconscious desire into a series of images that we can analyze.” (21)
   4. “. . . desire is unconscious because the subject cannot translate it into a conscious project.” (22)
   5. *What does Sam Spade want that he cannot articulate, but the film can—through imagery? What does Walter Neff unconsciously desire? What is Al Roberts’s unconscious desire? Ask the same questions of Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Phyllis Dietrichson, Vera.*
3. **From Need and Demand to Desire**
   1. “Initially, the human animal is a being of need, but when this being of need encounters the demand that accompanies the introduction of the signifying order, desire emerges.” (26)
   2. “[Demand] is the subject’s demand for love or recognition and the social order’s demand for the subject’s obedience.” (26)
   3. “. . . the subject’s desire results from an initial demand for love that is unsatisfied.” (27)
   4. *How does the conflict between the individual’s demand for love and the society’s demand for obedience play out, respectively, for the protagonists and antagonists of* The Maltese Falcon*,* Double Indemnity*, and* Detour*?*
4. **The Big Other and the Symbolic Order**
   1. “We desire the Other to desire us.” (28)
   2. “…desire emerges through the encounter with the Other’s demand and the interpretation of the Other’s desire that results from this encounter.” (29)
   3. “What I say always outstrips what I mean. The signifier is the vehicle for my unconscious desire.” (31)
   4. “We inhabit a shared symbolic order with others, but . . . . the big Other (or an anonymous social authority) controls that symbolic order.” (31-2)
   5. *What does the Big Other want from Sam Spade? From Walter Neff? From Al Roberts? What does Sam Spade think that the Other wants from him? Walter Neff? Al Roberts? Ask the same questions for Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Phyllis Dietrichson, and Vera.*
5. **The Real**
   1. “No matter how we symbolize reality, we always produce antagonisms that indicate a failure within the symbolic order.” (34)
   2. “No matter how we try to resolve the problem, we keep running into the same impossibility. The paradox thus makes evident the inability of the symbolic order to solve all the problems that it produces. . . . Trauma is the failure of sense---the encounter with non-sense.” (37)
   3. “Even though cinema displays images, it has the capacity to depict the impossible real.” (38)
   4. “The real traumatizes the subject because it indicates the absence of the symbolic order that can provide a constant support for the subject’s identity.” (39)
   5. *In what ways does the symbolic order of* The Maltese Falcon *have a non-sensical hole? How does the symbolic order of* The Maltese Falcon *fail to prop up Sam Spade’s identity? Ask these same questions for* Double Indemnity *and Walter Neff as well as* Detour *and Al Roberts.*
6. **The Imaginary**
   1. “The real is symbolic impossibility, and the imaginary is the illusion of plenitude that hides this impossibility” (39)
   2. “It is easy to see how film can serve an imaginary function for the desiring subject.” (40)
   3. “The imaginary process of identification provides the subject a way to avoid recognizing itself as a desiring subject.” (41)
   4. *Do Sam Spade, Walter Neff, or Al Roberts identify with anyone or anything that gives them a sense of wholeness and plenitude? What about Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Phyllis Dietrichson, and Vera?*
7. **The Lost Object, the Object of Desire, and Objet Petit A**
   1. “Every desire, no matter how apparently idiosyncratic, is animated by the lost object. When we desire any particular empirical object, it functions as a stand-in for the primordially lost object that we can never find because it doesn’t exist and has never existed.” (43)
   2. “But there is also the lost object that causes the subject to desire, . . . the objet petit a or objet a. . . . It indicates the point of absence that arouses our desire because we associate it with a lost enjoyment that we are incapable of finding present anywhere in the world.” (46)
   3. “It is only through the erection of the obstacle that the object of desire becomes desirable, which is why . . . the objet a has so must more importance than the object of desire.” (48)
   4. *What current thing or things does Sam Spade desire, and how might these things point to something that gave him enjoyment in the past? What bars Spade from his object of desire? What about Walter Neff and Al Roberts? What about Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Phyllis Dietrichson, and Vera?*
8. **Fantasy**
   1. “Fantasy is a compensation for a failure in reality.” (49)
   2. “. . . the Other’s desire is a mystery not only to the subject but also to the Other itself. Confronted with the enigma of the Other’s desire, the subject resorts to fantasy in order to concoct a solution to this unanswerable question.” (49)
   3. “The political danger of filmic fantasy manifests itself whenever a film tries to convince us that the lost object once existed and can be recovered.” (52)
   4. *Respectively, what fantasies do Sam Spade, Walter Neff, and Al Roberts construct to cover over the unanswerable question of what the Other wants from them? Respectively, do* The Maltese Falcon*,* Double Indemnity*, or* Detou*r offer spectators a fantasy?*
9. **Enjoyment**
   1. “For psychoanalysis, there is no ultimate purpose of our actions in the world---in this sense, psychoanalysis agrees with existentialism---but enjoyment offers us a purpose in the absence of an ultimate one. . . . For psychoanalysis, enjoyment is the meaning of life.” (53)
   2. “The difference between pleasure and enjoyment lies in the inherent excessiveness of the latter.” (55)
   3. “Enjoyment is always traumatic enjoyment.” (55)
   4. *What do* The Maltese Falcon*,* Double Indemnity*, and* Detour *say, respectively, about excess, enjoyment, and trauma?*
10. **Screen Theory**
    1. “Two ideas---the screen functioning as a mirror for the subject and the film suturing the subject into its signifying iorder---emerge as the primary takeaway from this initial burst of theorizing. . . .” (57)
    2. “. . . for Screen Theory, the outcome of the mirror stage is not the ego but the subject that conceives itself as a master of what it sees.” (59)
    3. “. . . the gaze functions as the cinematic vehicle for ideology, and it thus demands a ruthless critique. . . . In the foundation of his thought, Lacan doesn’t align vision with a look of mastery as Screen theory does but instead focuses on what disrupts our mastery when we look.” (61)
    4. *Are there scenes in The Maltese Falcon, Double Indemnity, or Detour in which the hero’s gaze is disrupted and disempowered and he falls out of alignment with the symbolic order’s predominant ideology? Does this process happen for spectator’s gaze in any aspect these films?*
11. **Subjectivity**
    1. Subjectivity, as Zizek sees it, is what emerges out of the failure of ideological interpellation, not the result of successful interpellation. The subject is thus not ideological but a form of resistance to ideology. . . . Zizek’s filmic analyses almost always focus on certain pivotal scenes in which film manages to trap and expose the spectator’s desire rather than on entire films.” (68)
    2. *Thinking about your own response to* The Maltese Falcon,Double Indemnity*, and* Detour, *were there scenes in which the films compelled you to recognize and analyze your own desire?*
12. **The Gaze or What Is Not Seen**
    1. “It focuses on how the film formally structures the relationship between plenitude and absence within the image.” (70)
    2. “It is rather the point of a hole within the ideological structure.” (75)
    3. “The gaze is how the subject’s desire distorts the visual field, and, according to Lacan, the voice is how the subject’s desire distorts the aural field.” (76)
    4. “The primary way that ideology operates in the cinema is not (as Screen theory contends) through identification with the camera or with the characters on the screen but through the depiction and subsequent resolution of the gaze.” (79)
    5. “But the possibility exists for films to turn against their ideological function and to create an encounter with the gaze that alerts the spectator to the trauma of the real antagonism rather than obscuring it.” (81)
    6. “The key to a psychoanalytic approach to film lies in theorizing how films formally address the spectator’s desire and enjoyment, how they construct fantasies that appeal to the spectator’s desire and that enable the spectator to enjoy through the confrontation with a real antagonism” (84)
    7. *Thinking about Sam Spades’s last line, “the stuff that dreams are made of,” what does the spectator’s enjoyment of* The Maltese Falcon *say about the spectator’s own ideological fantasies? Thinking about Barton Keyes lighting Walter Neff’s cigarette, what does* Double Indemnity *suggest to the spectator about their paradoxical relationship with the Big Other? In what ways does* Detour *compel the spectator to confront their own relationship with the symbolic order and the Big Other?*