Article

Role of Cinema and Psychoanalysis in Affective Experience

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Abstract: This paper focuses on a peculiar aspect of film viewing, specifically the way in which—interacting with the viewer and their own story—visual images create identifications that can make the viewing a more or less disturbing affective experience. Psychoanalysis and cinema have an indissoluble connection. In particular, the language of cinema comes very close to that of psychoanalysis, given that movies are made according to our psychism. On the basis of this relationship, filmic narration often becomes part of patients’ session, especially teenagers, allowing us to explore areas of the mind hitherto silent.

Keywords: cinema; psychoanalysis; horror; adolescence; affective experience

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on a peculiar feature of the experience of film viewing, specifically the way in which—interacting with the viewer and their own story—visual images create identifications that can make the viewing a more or less disturbing affective experience. Indeed, the impact of specific film images can activate uncharted feelings in the individual, giving voice to silent experiences. Damasio (2004) claimed that cinema is the expressive medium which most accurately reproduces the functioning of the human mind, consisting of interrupted, alternate sequences. One only need to think of how the language of cinema and that of psychoanalysis overlap (projection, representation, field, and image) as the structure of movies resembles that of our psychism.

Cinema and psychoanalysis were both born at the end of the 19th century, and film scholars and psychoanalysts alike have often engaged in a stimulating interdisciplinary dialogue over the years. Studies in film semiotics with a psychoanalytic approach are one example of this interdisciplinary dialogue. In this regard, Metz (1980) argues that psychoanalysis can contribute toward understanding the relationships that occur between the viewer and the filmic object in film enjoyment.

Cinema has always been defined as a vehicle of communicative art, which shapes complex identification and projection processes through its multifaceted messages, instilling cognitive, affective and behavioral responses in the viewer. Cinema is psychical, states Epstein (1921), and it can provide accurate descriptions for the understanding of mental life, due to “its inherent narrative methods” (Eusebio 2017, p. 6). In particular, a movie is a “cultural product capable of creating a text whose meanings are based on narrative, visual and sound elements” (ivi: 8) which can be observed according to different disciplinary angles, and the theme of feelings related to the film experience has increasingly taken shape precisely at the junction of different areas of knowledge. This perspective attributes to movies the role of “emotional devices” (Malavasi 2009, p. 36), giving life to an ensemble of feelings within the viewer.

The set of images and sounds which make up movies nearly always take on a narrative dimension, cinema being “by its very nature a tale, a story” (Lotman 1973, p. 71), and it is the perception of these images which activates conscious and unconscious processes in the mind of the viewer, prompting emotional content.
The very nature of darkness, passivity and immobility and the strength of the moving images before their eyes—connected through a fictional plot necessary to the processes of identification and projection—unconsciously push the viewers towards an earlier stage in their development, towards a kind of primary narcissism. “Film viewing, like day dreaming, is rooted in contemplation and not in action. Both suppose a temporary, largely voluntary, change in economy, by which the subject [...] with draws for a time to a more narcissistic base (more introverted, to the extent that the phantasies remain concerned with objects), as sleeping and dreaming cause him to a greater degree. Both have a certain power to relax [...]. Both are performed in a certain solitude(correlative of the re-narcissification)that circumstances can make pleasurable or painful” (Metz 1980, p. 143).

The tendency to break down the frontiers between real and imaginary, the impact of reality, the experienced presence and real absence of the object on screen, the existence of the double, and the identification with the other are characteristics that belong to every film. The imagery of filmic perception relates between the image and its double, which comes to life: “The world of images doubles life relentlessly. The image and the double are models of each other. [...] Areal dialectic binds them. A psychic, projective power creates a double of everything so as to expand it into the imaginary” (Morin 1956, p. 47).

Based on the psychic quality of the image, the viewer engaging in fiction is driven to attribute a reality to the moving things he perceives onscreen.

2. The Affective Experience

Several succeeding theories over time—ranging from the aesthetic to the philosophical, psychological and neuroscientific—support the ability of cinema to prompt a state of perceptive, cognitive and emotional activity/engagement in the viewer. For example, Morin (1956) compares a movie to “a skilled acupuncturist”, capable of stimulating the viewer’s affective participation (111), and Lotman highlights how the viewer “reacts emotionally, as if it were a real-life occurrence” (Lotman 1973, p. 31) to the filmic images. The emotional engagement triggered by the viewing creates an imaginative activity in the individual that merges with the flow of images coming from the screen, creating an intersubjective co-construction of filmic meaning. Indeed, images acquire meaning through the encounter or experience of a subject (Terrone 2014).

However, today, the new configuration of cinema redesigned by the digital revolution has produced a shift to new devices, and the movie screen has been replaced by monitors, which have brought about changes compared to the classical viewing in the movie theatre, characterized by adark room, animposition of a rigorous temporality and affixed posture in front of the big screen. Thus, the question which arises is how is the movie experience changing? In that regard, Casetti (2015) highlights how the lack of darkness leads the viewer to “building an existential bubble within which he or she can take refuge” to gain back “a sense of intimacy with what he or she is watching” (20), isolating to create an imaginary space, a personal one “where the flow of the external world seems to be suspended” (Ivi: 80–81). Even in the most controversial situations, cinema can provide the underlying conditions so that the experience which characterizes it may continue in new environments and through new devices; therefore, it can literally rebuild itself so as to provide new chances for enchantment even if far away from the dark theatre room. In a decentralized type of viewing, the emotional and passionate elements inherent to its use may thus continue being expressed, perhaps with an even stronger force of attraction. Indeed, film enjoyment through new devices like tablets, phones, earphones and other digital media creates an experience of mental immersion for the viewer in the cinema world. This immersion lowers perception of the external world in favor of an increase in feelings caused by the movie. Consequently, both the experience of physical self and its awareness are diminished.

The bond between psychoanalysis and cinema has become increasingly strong during the twentieth century, with the employment of psychoanalysis in different ways: as a source of inspiration to film-makers who used it more or less consciously for their narratives; as
analysis and interpretation of the cinematic medium, of the cinematic engine (understood as one of the symbolic shapes in which the world was structured), which concerns the complex mechanism of screening and viewing of the film (device), as well as its impact on the viewer; as analysis and interpretation of the filmic text (Eusebio 2017).

Thanks to the features they share and which have been extensively explored, like the common language of the unconscious and the primary process, desire and search for fulfillment and the ability to create perceptual, emotional and memory conditions that facilitate the emergence of mental processes, their relationship has been fruitful from the beginning (Golinelli 2004). Among the many affinities, special attention was given to the similarity between the cinematic experience of the viewer and the therapeutic setting established between the patient and the analyst (Boccara et al. 2000). Examples might be the associative flow underlining both cinema and psychoanalysis, which can be seen in the shift from one scene to the other, from one mental representation to another; the function of mental container, capable of holding together psychic contents, or that of representational space serving as container of the self; the predisposition to construct meaning (Ferruta 2014). Cinema speaks directly to the unconscious, which can echo emotionally within the relationship with the filmic images, thanks to the resemblance with unconscious fantasies (Musatti 1961). The ability of cinema to communicate directly with the unconscious can be observed amongst the most elementary mechanisms of emotional bonding put in place by the viewer: identification and projection. “Not only do the viewers absorb the characters’ behaviour and feelings through identification, they also enrich those characters with psychological elements, lending them emotions and emotional reactions that are only their own. Thus a sort of trade and exchange of psychic elements is established between character and viewer. The mechanism through which viewers provide the characters with thoughts, desires, intensions, attitudes that are exclusively personal, according to which he or she is under the illusion of grasping these same personal elements in the characters as objectively given, is defined as psychological projection. […] Therefore, the conclusion is that as a result of identification, the viewer finds himself in all the characters time after time, while as a result of projection the single characters are always the same viewer. […] Besides, the two mechanisms (identification and projection) do not only act simultaneously, but also interfere with each other” (Musatti 1961, pp. 47–49). Musatti also points out that through these two mechanisms movies ensure the satisfaction of those drives that would not normally be admissible on a social and relational level. The outcome of this satisfaction translates to a cathartic effect in the viewer, aimed at releasing repressed instinctual energies, and to a suggestive effect of prolonged identification with the characters of filmic fiction—a cathartic device capable of regulating and controlling feelings and emotions.

Even if cinema does not have any therapeutic basis, certain aspects of its investigation and its ability to evoke and make aware deeper aspects of the psyche have fostered this debate, so much so that some authors with a psychoanalytic approach have suggested introducing new techniques like film therapy (Mastronardi and Calderaro 2010), which make use of film viewing to mobilize the patients’ emotional structures. The movie images, and consequently cinema, have therefore the power to redeem and heal, and it is safe to say that this is by no means a new idea. One may think, for instance, of neurotic patients, who tend to reproduce the same images without being able to construct new ones when imagination is blocked; in this case, cinema could play a significant role in removing that blockage, allowing emotions to be fully manifested through a kind of psychic induction prompted by the movie.

A movie can be defined as a story told in pictures (Field 1991) “the language of dreams is the language of cinema, movies are dreams” (Fellini 1994, p. 36). The large white screen on which the moving pictures are projected becomes, in fact, the screen of dreams (Lewin 1953), and according to this reading, cinema is the viewer’s dream while he or she is sitting in the dark of the theatre. In this regard, Lebovici (1949) describes the film viewer like a dreamer in front of his or her dream, and just like dreams, cinema can transport the viewer into another world; they are both ways to escape from everyday reality.
Dreams have always been considered by psychoanalysis as a royal road to the unconscious; however, Bion introduced a new perspective, claiming the existence of a waking dream thought shaped by the alpha-function, which implements a continuous transformation of protosensorial and protoemotional stimulation into images/pictograms (Ferro 2006). This implies that the mind operates a constant work of development of dream elements. In this perspective, one may view the movie as a dream, and the thoughts which arise from film-viewing—which emerge from the sequence of the images—as narrative derivatives of waking dream thoughts. Moreover, the viewing of the film can activate not only thoughts, but also an iconic imagination to be considered as an initial passage, a transformation from the asymbolic to the symbolic, the structure of a montage of “film thought” (Hautmann 1993), linked to “the libidinal narcissism as transformative power establishing the Self” (ivi: 18). As Ferro claims, creating through images is expression of the psychic structure’s basic functioning, and pictograms can be considered as primary elements which come before processing.

The iconic configuration typical of film can represent a feeling that is hard to think of as an image, “a protoemotion in search for representability, which finds its way into the world of the individual’s mind through the visual field” (Ferruta 2005). Therefore, the visual experience produced by the movie’s images through iconic symbolization can be understood as a rising self-reflective awareness (Boccar and Riefolo 2002). Taking Schore’s (2022) theory into account, one may consider filmic images as a vehicle for lowering the functionality of the left brain, thereby activating the unconscious emotional and relational functions of the right hemisphere to a greater extent. Thus, connections can emerge between Schore’s theory and Bion’s theory. In short, according to the latter, emotions are experienced initially in their raw state as undigestible beta elements, and thanks to the maternal alpha function (right-brain synchronization), the infant’s emotions become digestible alpha elements (regulated emotions). The vertical axis of the grid (Table A1), in fact, describes the increasing levels of complexity of thought, from the level of sensory impressions to the more abstract one, from β elements to α elements, i.e., visual, auditory, sound, tactile, olfactory images or pictograms, then to dream thoughts and finally to concepts and numbers. Going back to Schore’s theorization, the vertical axis of the grid seems to describe, first of all, the subcortical functions of the right brain (where emotions are generated in the sensory state), and then the cortical functions of that hemisphere which, as described above, allow the processing of emotion from the pre-symbolic to the symbolic stage, and then to the abstraction proper to the left hemisphere. The horizontal axis, on the other hand, concerns the use of thoughts and we can see, for example, how the intersection between row C (dream thought, dreams, myths, and hallucinations) and column 4 (attention) recalls those functions typical of the right hemisphere. Row C5, where column 5 is the investigation, seems to delineate that transition to the borderline between right and left functioning of the mind, a beginning of the investigation on specific and detailed aspects to reach an abstraction.

Cinema has the ability to give shape to fantasies, memories and feelings, and can be compared to a daydream. Through images that flow, the spectator can find affective representation of some of their personal experience. The viewing of the movie can interactively create an emotional flow in the viewer, one that may help him/her to develop an awareness of deeper levels of psychic life. It is as if the viewer found himself or herself in a sort of dreamlike waking state, which fosters the possibility of diving into a situation that facilitates stimulation and evokes images at deeper psychic levels. This state determines the polarization of attention, the emotional identification with the characters and situations connecting us at those deeper levels. In certain situations, the viewer can be helped in projecting those emotional experiences which he or she is not able to process, thereby being provided by cinema with the chance to expand his or her own psychic abilities. In order to be thought, certain feelings use this functional visual register, which therefore becomes the fundamental mechanism on the road to symbolization, even before the verbal register. In this sense, one might say—picking up on Ogden’s theory—that film viewing may aid
us in dreaming dreams which have never been dreamed. Thus, filmic images give life to a powerful emotional experience based on profound identification, or projective identification, through the latent interconnection found in the movie, and they evoke previous experiences as well as conscious and unconscious fantasies in the viewer. Films can be an aid to get in touch with the affective world, with unconscious aspects, with what is known but not thought. Each viewing is a new dream, a possibility of representing aspects of one's inner theatre. Certain images and certain scenes can make various internal emotional chords vibrate, creating a symphony. Because of these resonances, movie scenes that have moved them are often recounted in analysis sessions.

Often, especially with teenagers, therapy sessions deal with stories of movies and TV show characters in which they immerse themselves for many hours a day. As for what they choose to watch, research focuses particularly on their universal passion for horror. Beasts and monsters also appear in children's play and in their drawings. Adolescents love stories and films with beasts and monsters. Imaginary monsters are all over the place. But what is the monster? The Oxford Dictionary defines a monster as a misshapen animal; an imaginary one made up of incongruous elements; an inhumanly wicked person; an inhuman example of cruelty. The word "monster" is derived from the Latin word *monstrum* or the verb *monere* which means "to warn".

Horror movies create images of the uncanny through technology and special effects, with reactions of terror and disgust in the viewer. Horror speaks to the audience on an intimate level, addressing their innermost fears and desires. We are attracted to horror entertainment because of our need to find pleasure in make-believe stories that allow us to experience negative emotions at high levels of intensity, but within a safe context. Monsters can be a warning of various inner, psychic dangers. Fear is the feeling that something terrifying will happen, while not being sure what the threat exactly is and when it will reveal itself (it usually comes forward slowly). Much of the horror is constructed using feelings of tension and terror—the trepidation and anticipation. These feelings are created, for example, through the use of music, as other media perform to heighten dramatic tension (Stobbart 2019).

Horror cinema can be interpreted as a representative-narrative frame which contains the traumatic effects of the changes that teenagers go through. In watching horror movies, the teenager seems to find a mirroring, an emotional identification of his or her inner psychic state (Moroni 2019). Just like the child can approach emotions through games, the teenager can approach his or her identity ordeals through cinema, using an artistic-transitional terrain, a dream-like environment (Carbone et al. 2013) as cinema represents it. Horror movies contain disturbing elements and, particularly during adolescence, there is an attraction for the monstrous, representing “the impulsive aggression threatening the individual as they leave childhood” (Pellizzari 2019, p. 21). The disturbing must be made obvious, like what happens in horror movies when the monster shows itself suddenly, therefore becoming representable. In showing itself, the monster loses all its disturbing omnipotence. The act of making something visible allows what is frightening to gain figurability.

What is disturbing is the known becoming unknown, the familiar becoming foreign. The uncanny evokes disquiet and arouses horror. At the same time, the uncanny evokes an area in which the old which is known and what was meant to remain hidden emerges, creating a state of disorientation and uncertainty. As Sigmund Freud (1919) wrote, “Uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (p. 220). How can the familiar become uncanny and frightening? Freud plays with the German word *heimlich* which turns into *unheimlich*. In horror, the extreme emotions that color this world on the edge between bliss and terror evoke the emotional states typical of teenagers, which constantly swing between opposites. The suspense of what is going to happen recalls the same suspense of what kind of adult the teenager will become. Often, they experience feeling “split”, as well as contradictory behavior. With their characters,
horror movies inhabit the dreams of cinema and then our dreams. They give shape to the bottom of the soul which we work with as therapists.

3. The Clinical Experience

In the therapy room, teenagers often talk about movies that touched them; they get into detail about characters and images which resonated with their inner world. In many ways, movies allow teenagers to talk about themselves and what happens to them, while keeping that safety distance from the Bionian catastrophic change which they fear so much.

The virtual space of cinema allows for the representation of potential emotionally intense situations which may disturb the teenager’s precarious balance. In doing so, film viewing acts as a metabolic container where the individual can host emotional experiences, thoughts, desires and even aggressive impulses that can create extreme emotional turmoil, which are capable of creating a block during the developmental growth process, thereby affecting the regulation of the levels of tension and excitements (X). In this sense, one might compare movies to a sort of psychic incubator which hosts and develops those aspects that teenagers are not ready to integrate within themselves or feel the need to outdistance as they view them as potentially traumatic. Therefore, the movies they talk about in the therapy room allow the therapist to get closer to the teenagers, help the teenagers to know themselves better, and help the rapists to understand the complexity and potential of the teenagers’ development.

In particular, filmic scenes make it possible to assign and communicate meaning, while also taking into account the mental functioning of the patient. Filmic narration can be a tool in moving from a descriptive–narrative level that names and expands meaning to a level of investigation that also offers hypotheses of alternative meanings. In other words, movies can be conceived as a boat used by the analyst, who ferries between the reality of the film and intrapsychic reality, thus activating a transformative process. Their use makes it possible to bring the patient closer to a symbolic way of thinking, useful to organize an initial reflection on intrapsychic aspects that cannot be expressed, as of now, in a logic-directed language. Filmic images facilitate the adolescent’s imaginative activity, and also impact their experienced feelings.

For example, a 13-year-old patient of mine brought images from horror movies to every session, but her favorites were those focusing on dolls coming to life and killing people, like "Annabelle" and "Child’s Play", or houses that turned from dark places into disturbing, unknown, haunted spaces. I will not get into the interpretative theme more closely connected to her own life story, but I would like to provide an overview that affected her, which may relate more generally to any other teenager. The doll suddenly coming to life with an impulsive-aggressive element is the body awakening with its changes, a body that requires attention. In some circumstances, this awakening is experienced as an act of aggression. However, the doll is also a childish object that the teenager must let go of in order to grow up, just like he or she must let go of that body and that infantile sexuality. In this regard, in his book *Il Genio adolescenz*, Gutton (2008) compares the puberty to a lion “jumping on the prey only once” (p. 15) dragging the child into a story with no turning back, thereby dictating a reorganization of his or her life. The atmosphere of suspense created in movies is the startle that teenagers experience in their metamorphosis. How many parents say they do not recognize their own children? Teenagers do not even recognize themselves, they do not know who they are and who they will be, and horror is representative of this. Thoughts related to the body changing, experienced as disturbing, can haunt the mind with ghosts and teenagers may become obsessive, just like what happens in horror movies when the house shifts without warning from a quiet and safe place to one invaded by hostile presences, killers and ghosts which are difficult to run from.

Another 18-year-old teenager wants my help for some significant hypochondriac issues which led him to take several medical examinations and, in some cases, many trips to the emergency room. He believed he had cancer, and he interpreted every bodily symptom as confirmation of this premonition, despite the medical reports declaring him “fit
as a fiddle”. Luca, I will call him, experienced his growth and the changes that went with it as an aggressive tumor which killed him from the inside, but that tumor also represented the scotomization of all his childish rage, which—he feared—could now pervade him to the point of madness.

When the movie “It” was released in cinemas in 2017, he showed a certain curiosity but also a lot of fear at the mere thought of sitting in the theatre and being a viewer, so much so that he was afraid it might lead him to a real panic. Indeed, “It” represented not only his rage and his split hatred, but all the fears he needed to face in order to transition into adulthood. The movie “It”, with its two time-frames, represents the initial process which—like any rite of passage—also carries traumatic and painful aspects. The fears producing terror can be defeated only if acknowledged and confronted. Just as my young patient, who had to face body growth as cancer and self-integrate his rage so that he could evolve into his life project and acquire a bigger sense of well-being. Thanks to the viewing of the movie, which he brought into the session over and over, we could give shape and voice to these experiences that had laid silent within him.

The continuous oscillations in communication and the interpretative register between filmic and internal level, between unrepresented states and the related construction of meaning and significance, help the adolescent instructuring his/her symbolic function, with their ability to oscillate between the two types of mental functioning, characteristic of the schizo-paranoid and the depressive state.

In other words, the film images narrated within the therapeutic process allow the therapist, through transient and adaptive regression, to move dynamically and fluidly towards an intuitive listening of emotional, non-verbal and bodily communications, a listening centered on the right hemisphere. In such a state of mind, the therapist can dream the patient’s undreamt dreams and enter the reverie state. Synchronization between right-lateralized brains is essential for reciprocal regressions to occur, thus enabling a right-brain co-constructed therapeutic implicit communication system.

Emotionally charged, moving words, are processed by the right hemisphere and regulated by it. Only after being expressed and accompanied by a state of intense stimulation can they be communicated to the left hemisphere for further processing. The left hemisphere, processing the subjective communications of the right brain, connects non-verbal unconscious representational domains and verbal conscious domains. The dynamic created is a left–right–left sequence, which is essential during the therapeutic process, as the processing of emotion from a primitive pre-symbolic sensorimotor level of experience to a symbolic level occurs in the right brain. Such memories can come back to light through emotional regression, conceived as an act of returning to the place of origin, a return that can be evoked by the same images and movie scenes.

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Appendix A

Table A1. (Bion 1963) Grid.

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References


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