

The Screen : Projection/Protection

A proposal for a paper to be presented at the International Conference on the Cinematic Apparatus

Estimated length of oral presentation : 15 - 20 minutes.

Summary : The paper revises the hypothesis of the dream screen (as represented in film theory and psychoanalysis) to emphasize its defensive functions.

1. I begin with a description of the "good" movie experience (the theatrical situation) adapted from M.Masud R.Khan's hypothesis of the "good dream", emphasizing both a) the spectator's capacity to relax waking defenses vis-a-vis the scene on the screen ("a capacity in the ego for receptiveness and surrender to the id wishes") and b) the ability for "benign distancing" from these wishes ("ability to harness and harmonize the intruding id-impulses: both libidinal and aggressive"; a "corresponding confidence in being able to 'resist' their chaotic and excessive influx").

2. The movie screen is then considered as an arena upon which desire is revealed and concealed. I summarize Lewin's changing views (1946-53) on the function of the dream screen, consider the protective/defensive aspects of the dream screen (the "screening off" emphasized by Pontalis, 1974, and Abse, 1977), and relate these concepts to the dream screen theories developed by Metz, Heath and Baudry.

The screen is not only the surface for projection but it protects the spectator against the "raw" visions of the primal scene which the film promises/threatens to reveal in its show. (the film usually cheats on this promise.) Following Lewin, Abse and Pontalis, I argue that the screen becomes foregrounded (begins to screen-off) when the wish to look at the primal scene is emerging in the manifest film text. From a projective backdrop for the viewing of highly cathected (and anxiety-laden) fantasies it becomes a protective screen which reduces anxiety. It is at this "protective" stage that the screen comes to re-present the maternal breast and renew memories of oral gratification, sleep, and merger with the screen/mother -- regressive tendencies here predominate. I discuss relevant scenes from several films and speculate on the use of screens appearing within the image on the theatre screen.

3. From Dream Screen to Fantasy Screen (revision of the dream screen and "primary identification" (Metz, Baudry) hypotheses in the light of the protective functions discussed above) :

The "normal" screened feature film resembles more a fantasy than a dream by virtue of its highly organized character (the logic of its narrative). I argue against Metz' contention that the film experience is a kind of "lawless seeing, seeing of the Id ungoverned by an Ego", agreeing instead with Laplanche and Pontalis that

"phantasy is also the locus of defensive operations", defenses which are "inseparably bound up with the primary function of phantasy, namely the mise-en-scène of desire -- a mise-en-scène in which what is prohibited (l'interdit) is always present in the actual formation of the wish." And I agree (with Nowell-Smith) that Metz and Baudry have overemphasized the primacy of the viewer's identification with "seeing" (the camera) as such. What Metz calls "secondary identifications" (such as the viewer's identification with characters) may emerge from a kind of break-down in the "primary" identification after the emergence of the defensive screen. I stress with Laplanche and Pontalis that the subject is "invariably present" in fantasy scenes and scenarios "not only as an observer but also as a participant". One should not emphasize the spectator/camera identification at the cost of all other discursive relations (Nowell-Smith). But I fully agree with Metz on the "secret" character of the movie scene and his stress on the voyeuristic aspects of film viewing. The primal scene and its distortions/revisions must remain secret, forbidden. My point is that the spectator is not only a pure viewer (voyeur) but also an actor in the scene. There is no one identification but a complex of identifications.

4. Expanding upon thoughts developed in an earlier paper ("Pornographic Space : The Other Place," 1977 Film Annual , Redgrave publishers); I suggest that the spectator meets the projection on the screen with his own projection (of his recognized desire, yes, but also the wishes which the viewer refuses to recognize in himself and must therefore throw them onto the screen, attributing them to another person, thing or space). This protective projection of the individual complements the defensive aspects of the actual film screening. Examples from pornographic film imply that the screen is often identified with the (introjecting) image of woman as a bottomless hole. The screen is now considered not only as a surface which reflects the image but as a surface/opening of infinite depth ("a pure expanse that can be invested with depth"--Heath, "Narrative Space") which absorbs (introjects) the look of desire. The absorption of the screen proper can be displaced onto various characters through the so-called "secondary identifications". The screen can finally be called an arena (literally, the sand which supports, "screens" and limits a spectacular combat or agon); it both shows and absorbs/hides the struggle between desire and defensive mechanisms which are built in to the "show" of the agon.

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December 4, 1977