Film as Personal and Collective Nightmare: The Case of Hitchcock

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Abstract: Suzanne Langer calls film a "virtual dream." This theoretical position is supported by Carl Dreyer (“The artist [in film] must describe inner, not outer life”) and by Hugo Mauerhofer ("The role of the unconscious in film experience cannot be overlooked"). The dream seems to be the individual viewer's, but may better be seen as the dream of the director or the culture or even the camera—that is, the dream of the machine. Seen as dreams, many types of films qualify as nightmares: horror films, disaster movies (2012, The Road and Independence Day), mad-scientist and mechanical holocaust films (Frankenstein, 2001: A Space Odyssey, Bladerunner and The Bride of Frankenstein). The continuing fascination with vampires also figures here. I am interested in film techniques that involve reflexivity and believe reflexivity in film may have a special function in relation to the theory of film as dream. By reflexivity I mean techniques that work against realism and expose the mechanism. I focus on Alfred Hitchcock’s special take on cinema as the dream of a guilty viewer and on his dream-related reflexive techniques in Spellbound and Strangers on a Train.

Keywords: dream, project, image, mechanism, shadow, subjective camera, suture, Dadaist.

1. Theoretical Introduction

I’m someone else. I don’t know who. –“John Brown” in Spellbound

Some film theorists see an important connection between film and dreams. In his 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin quotes the director Abel-Gance: “What art has been granted a dream more poetical and more real at the same time?” (227). Hugo Mauerhofer, in 1949, points out the parallels between dreams and “the cinema situation”: we see films in a dark room, “shut off from everyday reality, waiting . . . in complete passivity and receptiveness.” This makes film “probably the most highly individualized of all experiences” and subject only “to the uncritical interpretation [of] the unconscious mind” (232). Mauerhoffner would have us consider this connection and not to overlook “the role of the unconscious in film experience” (231), since, in his Freudian view, the actors in movies are “representatives of [the viewer’s] most secret wishes” (234). Susanne Langer, in her Feeling and Form (1953), elaborates on the parallels of presentation between film and dream: “[Cinema] creates a virtual present, an order of direct apparition. That is the mode of dream.” As in dreams, time can move forward and backwards; and “like dream, it enthralls and commingles all the senses” (203-4).
Early theorists also see film as analysis, alienation and penetration—pointing towards a psychoanalytic approach. Walter Benjamin, like Herbert Read (166), sees films as acts of analysis. As the most advanced means of mechanical reproduction cinema should be understood as a device that brings about and necessitates a change in human perception and thereby offers a form of analysis by means of a mechanical device. For Benjamin, film is a partner of psychoanalysis: Freud makes us awareness of unconscious motivations, and "film has brought a similar deepening of apperception" to "the entire spectrum of optical, and . . . acoustical, perception" (235). Film analyzes our visual unconscious: "Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. . . . The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses" (237).

For V. I. Pudovkin it is the camera that creates this heightened perception and does so by means of its "power" to penetrate to the depths of human experience:

    The power of filmic representation lies in the fact that, by means of the camera, it continually strives to penetrate as deeply as possible. The camera . . . forces itself . . . into the profoundest deeps of life; it strives thither to penetrate, whither the spectator never reaches. . . . The camera goes deeper. (30)

Pudovkin sees film penetrating "to the mid-point of every image" (30); and in his merging of "the image" with "the profoundest deeps of life," points also towards a Freudian and Lacanian approach to film theory. Notice also his emphasis on the device. The camera as the power of "the film technician," is imaged as a melding of man and machine: "The attention of the spectator is entirely in his hands. The lens of the camera is the eye of the spectator" (31). The camera is the machine that represents man as thing, for it also alienates him from his body according to Pirandello’s ideas about cinema and, according to Pudovkin, it also focuses on man’s relationship with objects.

For Luigi Pirandello and Walter Benjamin, film separates art from its aura, in a kind of mechanical alienation that makes only self-conscious art possible. It separate man from his shadow and from his body. Thus the actor acts "not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance" and "feels as if in exile . . . not only from the stage but from himself. . . . His body loses its corporeality, it evaporates . . . in order to be changed into a mute image" (Benjamin citing Pirandello 229). This represents a kind of a mirror stage of alienation: "The feeling of strangeness . . . is basically the same kind of estrangement felt before one's image in a mirror" (230). Furthermore, Benjamin describes the action of the camera (perhaps unconsciously) in the Jungian language of shadows and projection. The camera steals the actor's shadow, his "reflected image," makes it separable and transportable and places it "before the public" (231): "The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera" (229).

Projection of the shadow is a central idea of Jungian psychoanalysis and a useful one for film analysis. Projection “changes the world into a replica of one’s own face” (Jung 146) because characteristics of other people act as hooks to catch “that factor in yourself, of which you were entirely unconscious” (Harding 74). As in the cinema according to Benjamin and Mauerhoffer,
“the effect of projections is to isolate the subject from his environment, since instead of a real relation to it there is now only an illusory one. . . . They lead to an autoerotic or autistic condition in which one dreams a world whose reality remains forever unattainable” (Jung 9). In specific reference to the projection of the shadow, the film analog seems especially apt:

It is as if in your dream you have made use of a person’s picture to enact a certain role, a role in your own inner drama, representing some factor of which you should be conscious, but of which you are unaware. . . . Your psychic content becomes available to you because it has been mirrored in him. (Harding 74).

One addition needed to this theoretical background is the idea that film explores and exposes the unknown complexities of people’s relationships to objects. Thus Pudovkin alerts us to “the special part played in pictures by objects” (27); and George Bluestone, citing Pudovkin (1957), affirms that in the film frame “the juxtaposition of man and object is crucial” (137) and that this linking can create a dynamism in which “the distinction between man and object is obliterated. . . . And the inanimate joins the animate as actor” (137).

With this theoretical background, I will consider the question of “Whose dream is the film?” Is it the director’s, the markets’, the culture’s, the camera’s or the individual viewer’s? Or, the shadow that the camera steals and the projector projects may be the image of man as mechanism or the mechanism’s image of man—Hal’s dream. As the dream of the camera, film becomes the dream of the machine, which helps account for the many cultural nightmares involving the conquest of man by machine, such as Modern Times, Metropolis, Bladerunner, Dr. Strangelove, 2001: A Space Odyssey, Stepford Wives and Surrogates—films in which the machine becomes the dangerous double of a human being. The idea that the machine is also projecting the personal shadow may explain the great number of vampire films, from Nosferatu through The Twilight Saga—dreams of the shadow as a bloodsucker, living in hell and longing for death; “To be really dead; that must be wonderful!” says Count Dracula in the 1931 film in which Bela Lugosi clearly has no image in the mirror. The remainder of this study will examine the Jungian idea of the shadow and other shadows of psychoanalysis in two of Hitchcock’s films, Strangers on a Train and Spellbound. In Spellbound I will show how the idea of film as dream is elaborately developed.

2. The Shadow in Strangers on a Train

Suture, according to Kaja Silverman (1983), “is the name given to the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers” (195). One method of suture is “the shot/reverse shot formation” by means of which “the gaze which directs our look seems to belong to one of the fictional characters rather than the camera” (202). Another technique to enforce this confusion of identities is the subjective camera, when the audience sees directly from the camera’s viewpoint, enacting Pudovkin’s metaphor of the lens as eye. Hitchcock uses these techniques to project the shadow and include the viewer in the murderer’s guilt.

In Strangers on a Train Bruno is Guy’s powerful and ubiquitous shadow self who wants Guy to kill his father in exchange for Bruno murdering Guy’s promiscuous wife. In Freudian terms, the id conspires with the ego to murder the father. Hitchcock alternately sutures the viewer to Guy's
and to Bruno’s point of view by means of shot/reverse shot when they meet on the train (7:18-7:45). He uses subjective camera to place the viewer squarely in Bruno’s consciousness when Guy socks him in the jaw (1:04:34-1:04:54). The ego and shadow figures grapple for dominance, climactically in the merry-go-round scene near the end of the film. The carousel alludes to the mechanics of the film, as does the imaging of the murder reflected on the glasses of the victim—an insistence on the image in the lens (32:18-33:00). One of several powerful objects in the film, the glasses are Bruno’s proof of the murder to Guy; while Guy’s lighter, which the doubles wrestle for on the carousel, signifies the possession by the shadow of Guy’s identity, sufficient to pin the crime on him.

Many of Hitchcock’s films, including Sabateur and The Wrong Man are guilt dreams or nightmares in which the wrong man stands accused of murder. In Spellbound the wrong man is John Ballantyne, the Gregory Peck character. His innocence is finally established by the analysis of his dream. Psychoanalysis is central to the story; the film concerns the psychoanalysis of the protagonist by the psychoanalyst who loves him, Constance Peterson (Ingrid Bergman) and her teacher, Alex Brulov. The dream they analyze within the film features a sequence shot on a landscape designed by Salvador Dali.

### 3. Dreams within Dreams in Spellbound

Hitchcock's films project a pervasive and obdurate guilt. In Spellbound he uses subjective camera to suture the viewer to the consciousness of John Brown when he believes himself, and appears, to be guilty of the murder of Dr. Edwardes, the new director of the psychiatric hospital, Green Manors. When the murder happens, John assumes Edwardes’ identity, under the unconscious influence of a guilt complex (1:14:00-1:15:35). Constance and John hide from the police at Dr. Brulov’s; there, in a scene in which John appears half in shadow, the viewer looks through John’s eyes, and through the lens of the glass he holds, as he seems to contemplate the murder of Dr. Brulov. Langer notes that the film is not really our dream but rather “an apparition” in the mode of a dream. Deep down, we know that “the camera is in the place of the dreamer” (201), that we are seeing the projections of a device, not a personal nightmare. Hitchcock even reminds us of the fact by placing a lens in the scene. Yet we allow ourselves to believe in the dream although we know it is not our own dream. Thus a sort of meta-analysis becomes necessary. Film is always already concerned with its own image as reproductive device. Like Dadaist art with its "relentless destruction of the aura,” cinema hits the spectator like a bullet, according to Benjamin (237-8); it happens to him, like the Jungian shadow happens to people, like Bruno happens to Guy. Yet, for Benjamin, this most self-conscious form of art is at the same time a “work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity of distraction”; people absorb film “in a state of distraction”--a kind of counterbalance to its bullet-like “shock effect.” The viewer realizes that “my thoughts have been replaced by images” (Benjamin quoting Duchamel 238), but he is in the film’s power. In a Dadaist moment, at the end of Spellbound, Hitchcock uses subjective camera in spectacular fashion when the viewer stares down the barrel of a revolver, watches the bullet move into place and sees the blast as Murchison, the actual murderer, kills himself (1:53:00-1:54:38). The shock of virtual suicide arrives simultaneously with awareness of the device, since we do not die and since the revolver,
like the merry-go-round in Strangers, reminds us of the revolving devices that record and project the movie. It is as if the camera were looking into a mirror and seeing itself as a killing mechanism.

The dream within the film is represented as John's dream to be analyzed by Constance and Dr. Brulov, but it is clearly also Dali's dream as well as Hitchcock's (1:26:10-1:29:30). The wings overhead mean Gabriel Valley, site of the murder, to the analysts within the film. However, the raptor overhead is also part of the viewer's dream of guilt and escape, of alienation from his environment, conflict with the law and general dread. This archetypal meaning fits the film's plot as well, since Brown feels himself to be guilty of a murder as well as bereft of his identity and alienated from himself by his amnesia. He becomes a fugitive from his own identity and from the law. So the frame story mirrors the framed film. Dali's "curtains covered with eyes" suggest the cinema audience as well as the accusing and alienating gaze. The eyes indicate guilt and accusation ("the guards at Green Manors," according to Murchison who takes part in the analysis that proves his guilt); but they also contain the subsequent images in the dream. The misshapen head in the sky, which also appears in Dali's paintings, is a figure of the superego passively watching the murder and its cover-up. The dream ego flees terrified across the alienated landscape pursued by the threat of death and judgment from above.

According to Jung, everyone in your dream is you. The three male figures comprise the ego (John Brown, "I"), the shadow (the proprietor—the faceless and aggressive man) and the ego ideal (the man with a beard who wins the game of 21, Edwardes). In the dream, the shadow vanquishes the ego ideal; in the plot of the film, he kills him. John Ballantyne takes over the identity of the dead Edwardes; but, when his handwriting gives him away, he then takes on the identity of the murderer, the faceless man in his dream. “It's like looking into the mirror and all you see is the mirror,” he tells Constance about his loss of identity. He becomes the shadow, the actor, the vampire, the unintegrated dark side of the self—which in John's particular case is the self who caused his brother's death in a childhood accident. But even that revealing flashback suggests the archetypal crime of Cain. Therefore, for the viewer, the dream reveals the unconscious victory of the shadow (the "proprietor" of John's dream); enacted in the story by the film’s suicidal ending.

Yet the dream of the film also reveals how the device steals and projects the shadow, analyzing the unconscious of the device. The wheel image is central to the dream within and is heightened in importance by its elevated place on the symbolic landscape and by means of a close-up. The wheel represents the revolver, in Constance's analysis, and so previews the self-image of film as a deadly device. The wheel in the dream is crooked. The machine of the psyche is running lopsided in psychic imbalance, with too much power given to the superego to judge and condemn. It also represents, by metonymy, mechanical process and thereby the mechanical reproduction of the camera and projector as a crooked machine that plays with our guilty shadow and projects our inner demons where we can see them clearly. From the viewer’s point of view, conscious of the camera’s trick of subjecting us by suture to a character’s viewpoint, the wheel previews Murchison's shot in our eye and the camera's self-awareness of its guilt-assigning
tricks. In this sense, the wheel, as the proprietor’s instrument at various levels of the film’s reality, is our clue to becoming conscious in this double cinematic dream.

In Spellbound the subjective camera makes our viewpoint progressively more pathological, from that of Constance when she is emotionally repressed, to John Brown’s when he believes himself to be a killer and then to Murchison’s when he is an admitted murderer. The dream is at first our dream of falsely assigned guilt, since we have taken on John Brown’s viewpoint at that point in the film; but the last subjectivity we share is that of an actual killer and a suicide. This is the heart of the viewer’s private nightmare.

When Murchison kills himself, the viewer as camera shoots himself in the eye as lens, as the film dreams of itself as a weapon. The dreamlike long shot of the oversize gun following Constance and then turning to fire in our faces is art as a bullet of self-consciousness of the film’s and of the viewer’s shadow. The camera "shoots" itself and the viewer as shadow (we call them “shots”), a nightmare of death by revolving device that enacts the defeat and victory of the shadow in one shot. The viewer awakens from his cinematic nightmare, just at the point where his dream self would otherwise die, into the psychoanalytic romantic comedy of the final scenes which enact a fantasy of the ego’s simultaneous marriage with the anima (Constance) and the father figure: “Look on me as your father” says Dr. Brulov to John Ballantyne and, in the last words of the film, “Any husband of Constance’s is a husband of mine, so to speak.” Yet, despite this cheery ending, the viewer’s primary apperception at the end of the film is the shock of self-murder and the simultaneous revelation, in the self-awareness of the device, of what the camera does with the human shadows it steals.

As for an answer to my research question, (Whose dream is the film?), there is an integration of various schemes and levels of dreaming in Spellbound. The director creates a dream of guilty subjectivity for the viewer similar to those in others of his films but complicates the picture by the dream within this dream. The set designer creates a universal dreamscape of an oppressive superego, perennial alienation and flight from identity. The viewer is led by the film technician to share his dream identity with the archetypal shadow while passively glimpsing the nightmare side of mechanical reproduction, the dark other to film’s positive social significance, “its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage” (Benjamin 221).

Films make visible the other side. Film is the right dream, the necessary and required dream, of technological culture; it is Hal’s dream that reveals the other in the device. As Mauerhoffer saw in 1949, “the part played by the film in the life of modern man can hardly be over-estimated”; film has a “psychotherapeutic function,” and is “a modern necessity,” making life bearable by offering “compensation for lives which have lost a great deal of their substance” (234). For Benjamin, movies are at once an agent of this loss of substance for which they compensate and a progressive force for higher awareness. Films dream their own image-creating process; they dream the process of subjectivity at its most complex level of self-awareness. They dream the unconscious interchange of humans and objects, especially machines; they dream their
projections of the stolen shadow of machine-man. They constitute the unconscious reflections of the society of the spectacle where the reproduction of images replaces life.

Works Cited