Vlada Petric, November 1994

Survey of Theoretical Concepts

In the vast literature dedicated to the theoretical issues pertaining cinema, little has been written about the phenomeno-logical relationship between experiencing a dream and watching a film. By and large, the movies that deal with dreams, or include sequences representing various altered states of consciousness (ASC) are discussed from a thematic standpoint, and interpreted psychoanalytically, with little concern for the perceptual and sensory-motor similarity between dream imagery and motion picture projection. Paradoxically, some of the earliest theoretical writings about the medium have acknowledged cinema's capacity to visualize mental processes, especially dream imagery and oneiric visions.

Early Ideas About Film and Dreams

The first study to touch upon this problem was written around 1916 by Harvard professor Hugo Munsterberg who, in his lengthy essay The Film: a Psychological Study [1] (its second chapter is entitled "Memory and Imagination"), states that film "acts as our imagination acts: the photoplay obeys laws of our mind rather than those of the outer world." Particularly interesting is Munsterberg's conclusion that "the theater can picture only how real occurrences follow one another, while the photoplay can overcome the interval of the future as well as the interval of the past... The screen may produce not only what we remember or imagine, but what persons in a play see in their own mind." Munsterberg's association of the cinematic process with "the way the human mind works" is historically significant, especially when compared to other contemporary writings about the medium, which saw film merely as an extension of the

[1] Hugo Munsterberg, *The Film: A Psychological Study* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1916). Reprinted by Dover Publications (New York, 1970), **pp.** . Throughout this book, all the quotations that follow a footnote are taken from the source mentioned in that footnote.

Legacy of
Vlada Petric

theater and literature, or a possibility of illustrating literary fantasies and fairy-tales.

Siegfried Kracauer, in his book Theory of Film,[2] quotes a German essayist from the silent era, Hugo von Hofmannstahl, who wrote the article "The Substitute for Dreams" (1921), in which he states that "for the masses to sit in the movie houses and watch the screen... is like the ride through the air with the devil Asmodi, who strips off all the roofs, bares all secrets." Such an outright psychoanalytic equation of cinema with the viewers' unfulfilled desires--prompted by the Freudian concept of popular art consumption as a subliminal replacement for one's repressed libido--has been carried out by other film theorists of the period. The psychoanalytic interpretation has proved extremely effective in explaining the public's fascination with movies, and reading of their narratives as psychoanalytic phenomena. It became evident that cinema functions in many ways like the dream, compensating for the viewer's latent desires, presenting them in an attractive visual manner.

The early French film theorists looked upon cinema from a more perceptual standpoint, emphasizing the aesthetic aspect of a dream-like shot. In 1919, Professor of psychology Henri Diamant-Berger, in his book Le Cinema,[3] writes that film can "construct from tangible elements dreams that are simultaneously real and unreal, materially false and profoundly true." A similar attitude was shared by the famous poet Robert Desnos, who proclaimed cinema as "the ideal vehicle for visualization of the poetic verses." In his 1923 one-page proclamation entitled "Dream and Cinema,"[4] Desnos hailed "dream poetry that is rendered in pure images," inspiring many avant garde filmmakers, including Luis Delluc who introduced the concept of the *photogenic*

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4 Desnos' poem *L'Etoile de Mer* inspired Man Ray to make in 1928 a surrealist film collage of the same title, with multiple imagery that had some oneiric quality. Desnos' article, "Le Reve et le cinema," is included in the anthology *L'occhio taliato: Documenti del cinema dadaista e surrealista*, ed. Gianni Rondolino (Torino: Martano, 1972), pp. 133-134.

Legacy of
Vlada Petric

impact as the unique feature of the motion picture image. A practitioner who was concerned with the theoretical aspects of the medium, Delluc wanted the film to go beyond mere representational depiction of reality in order to accomplish what he called "the miracle of cinema." Delluc's essay La Photogenie [5] had a profound impact on filmmakers who tried to reveal the inner world of the characters.

The early French writings that point to the resemblance between film and dream drew from the Surrealist practice of presenting absurd situations and dream-like symbols on the screen, often as the basis of free association. Among them, the most interesting is a short essay entitled ,[6] written by Jean Goudal in early 1925, in which the author hails the medium's capacity to create "the image that on occasion... drags the tatters of reason behind it." Relating cinema to language, Goudal infers that literary Surrealism "brings the 'matter' of *language* into play at the expense of reality," which prevents a surrealist vision conveyed only by words to be experienced as a dream event. In contrast, Goudal explains, cinema provides "an *experience* [italics added] of merging conscious and unconscious states [while] taking us into a hallucinatory realm" where "our body itself submits to a sort of temporary depersonalization, [so that] we become nothing but two eyes riveted to ten square meters of white sheet." It should be acknowledged that even in contemporary writings dealing with this subject, one can rarely find such a precise definition of the spectator's psychological as well as sensorial experience of film viewing. Unlike other Surrealist theorists who failed to distinguish between the literary and theatrical presentation of the dream, Goudal understood the link between cinema and the dream is in their *concrete visual* nature. Goudal's explanation of the theatrical presentation of dreams and their cinematic transposition emphasizes the perceptual and the hypnagogic nature of the oneiric film:

5

6

Legacy of
Vlada Petric

> The individuals performing on a stage have a physical presence that strengthens the *trompe l'oeil* of their setting--while the camera aspires to give the illusion of reality by means of simulacrum of a uniquely visual kind. An actual hallucination is needed here which the other conditions of cinema tend to reinforce, just as in the dream, moving images which lack three dimentionality follow each other on a single plane artificially delimited by a rectangle which is like a geometrical giving on to the psychic kingdom.

Goudal's acknowledgement that the true oneiric film is a "simulacrum of a *uniquely* [italics added] visual kind," and that cinema provides an "illusion of reality" within a "hallucinatory realm," which "other conditions of cinema tend to reinforce" anticipates, indeed, the core of the modern theory of oneiric cinema.

Even Antonin Artaud lacked the capacity of grasping the specificity of cinematic oneirism, as evident in his essays concerned with the subject. Burdened by the theatrical and literary concepts imposed on cinema. Between 1927-1929, Antonin Artaud published several articles dedicated to Germain Dullac's famous film, The Seashell and the Clergyman (1928),[7] for which he wrote the script. He applied to cinema the surrealist method as practiced in literature and painting, maintaining that a film can reveal "the actual functioning of thought...in the absence of any control exercised by reason, [thus mirroring] the disintegrated play of thought." Artaud's explanation of the analogy between the film and the dream is poetic and metaphorical, concerned with the exploratory nature of the creative process in general, as exemplified in the introduction of his script The Seashell and the Clergyman: "Cinematic searches for the somber truth of the mind in images which emerge exclusively from themselves, and do not draw their meaning from the situation on which they develop, but from the sort of powerful inner necessity that projects them into the light of a merciless evidence."

In 1926, the first issue of the prominent Paris review L'Art cinematographique

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7

Legacy of
Vlada Petric

featured the article "The Psychological Value of the Image" [8] signed by Dr. Rene Allendy, in which he discussed "objective" and subjective" implications of the film image within a narrative context. Although marginally, the essay addresses the dreamlike impact of cinema by claiming that film is capable of expressing the most profound mechanism of our soul... penetrating the caverns of the unconscious where the images, perceived through the association of ideas, undergo a specific classification." Several years later, the most outspoken champion of the "pure cinema," Rene Clair, started his career as a film critic and later turned filmmaker, followed Dr. Allendy's concept, while pointing to the extraordinary hypnotic effect of the cinematographic projection. In his article, "**SOURCE?**," [9] Clair writes:

> The spectator's mind is not unlike that of a dreamer. The darkness of the screening hall, the exhilarating effect of music, the silent shadows gliding across the luminous screen on which the suggestive power of the forms playing before us can become as imperious as the power of the images appearing in our veritable sleep. Next morning, the incoherence of the dream can make us smile, while it seems amazing that we could ever have lent ourselves to such an absurd adventure, incomprehensible to our waking mind. I have often noticed that the filmgoers experience similar emotions. They become playthings of illusion, carried away by a sequence of unpredictable events or irresistible visual currents. When the lights go up, they are astonished at ever having yielded to the suggestion of these crazy shadows. As their critical sense rewakens, they smile at their credulity. Their contact with commonplace reality restores their everyday logic. They may even experience certain contempt for the ventures that few moments previously they followed with a passionate attention. But we should not resent these into ingratitude because they are homages to the suggestive power of cinema which possesses an ability to lure the mind so far beyond its habitual boundaries.

Applying his Dadaist ideas to actual film making, Clair produced two experimental films (Paris Qui Dort, 1923; Entr'Acte, 1924) aimed at proving the oneiric impact of the motion picture image, transcending the representational aspect of the shot, and expanding the aesthetic boundaries of the medium. Clair's contention that the "crazy

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8 Dr. Allendy, "La Valeur psychologique de l'image," *L'Art cinematographique* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1926), No. 1. Reprinted by Arno Press (New York, 1970), pp. 75-103.

9 Rene Clair, *Reflections on the Cinema*, transl. Vera Traill (London: William Kimber, 1953), p.68.?

Legacy of
Vlada Petric

shadows, incomprehensible to our waking mind" exert similar psychological impact ("power") on the viewer's brain/mind as the dream affects the sleeping brain is one of the first statements which directly associates film viewing with dreaming.

Intelligence of a Machine

A more elaborate explanation of the perceptual and hypnagogic similarity between cinema and dream can be found in Jean Epstein's many essays written between 1921 and 1926 **or 1935?** (i.e., Le Cinematographie vu d'Etna, Photogenie de l'imponderable, and Bonjour, Cinema). Unquestionably the most imaginative--and philosophical--theorizing filmmaker of the silent era, Epstein defines cinema as "*supernatural par essence*." In films, he writes, "I see what does not exist, and I perceive the unreal as the concrete," which is the essence of the oneiric vision.[10] **WHO?** subsequently revised (mostly stylistically) Epstein's complete writings, reissued two decades later, confirm his film making imagination and his theoretical understanding of the oneiric nature of the medium. In The Devil's Cinema (1947),[11] Epstein discusses the spatio-temporal inconsistency as "extremely characteristic" for both he film and dream narrative: "This machine [cinema], capable of stretching, condensing or dismantling time (by accelerated or slow motion) is an 'intelligent machine' which functions on all levels, while generating a sort of psychosis (*une sotre de psychisme*)." In his controversial book, characteristically entitled The Intelligence of a Machine (1946),[12] Epstein explicates his romantic--and idealistic--trust in the medium's mysterious force [to convey] visions, ideas and psychotic states in a unique way [that] does not imitate the techniques common to the novel or play." Poetically

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10 This statement is from *Bonjour, cinema*, as quoted in Marcel L'Herbier's anthology, Intelligence du cinematographe (Paris: Correa, 1942), pp. 264-265.

11 This statement is from *Le Cinema du diable*, as quoted in Henri Agel's *Esthetique du cinema* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971), p.20.

12 Jean Epstein, *L'Intelligence d'une machine*, (Paris: Jacques Melot, 1946), p. 142.

Legacy of
Vlada Petric

written, Epstein's essays represent an impressionistic view of oneiric cinema, supported by his own, and highly cinematic achievements, such as The Fall of the House Usher (1928) and Mon Vran (1929), which are saturated with the oneiric air. In the chapter entitled "Le Cinematographe, machine a rever" of his later book The Spirit of Cinema (1955),[13] Epstein applies Freud's hypothesis of the dream formation to cinema, concluding that the two phenomena are "comparable on the structural level, [so that] in the language of cinema, as in the language of dream, images undergo a transformation of meaning and, at the same time, tend toward symbolization." On a practical level, Epstein succeeded to produce the sequences of a true oneiric symbolization through the inventive use of light, multiple exposure, slow motion, soft focus, specially designed lenses, and camera movement, while presenting fantasies, nightmares, phobic recollections, anxious visions, and obsessive desires. Defining "the oneiric vision" in theoretical terms, Epstein wrote in his essay Spirit of Cinema (1955):[14]

> In cinema, the mental images relate to each other by a resemblance and distinction, through their relationship in series that are governed not by a rational order, but by a paradoxical juxtaposition... The oneiric vision endlessly expands and deeply mystifies the signification of the objects appearing on the screen. Like dream, cinema establishes its own time, which considerably differs from the ordinary time... In a filmic presentation, space and time are inseparably unified to form a spatio-temporal frame within which many simultaneous and consecutive events take place in continuous series and rhythms, so variable that they often become contradicting.

Evidently, some of Epstein's ideas have been "appropriated" by the recent French philosophers turned film theorists who have written about the oneiric aspect of the medium from structuralist and semiotic standpoints, expounding the Lacanian theoretical concept of the "mythical connection" between the ordinary and the

13

14

Legacy of
Vlada Petric

irrational.

Among the first psychiatrists who addressed this subject with the professional expertise and the great enthusiasm for the medium, was Dr. Serge Lebovici, a Parisian psychoanalyst interested in art. His 1929 essay, "Psychoanalysis and Cinema,"[15] suggests that "film, because of its linguistic structure and its perceptual impact, in all its aspects, should be studied from the standpoint of the psychology of dreams." Asserting that neither a novel nor a staged play can present an event "so close to the oneiric thinking (*tres proche de la pensee onirique*) as does cinema," Lebovici invites filmmakers and his professional colleagues to undertake "research related to the specifics of the film language in order to confirm its similarity to dream consciousness." Albeit short, Lebovici's text clearly expounds his contention that "like the dream, and unlike literature, the film does not express abstract ideas, but instead communicates, through concrete images, extensively condensed and displaced in time and space." Drawing from his psychiatric practice, Lebovici anticipated certain modes of cinematic abstraction that will become characteristic of modern independent film making, which often achieves a powerful oneiric impact by means of montage condensation and optical manipulation of the (semi)representational shots.

In 1933, a group of French surrealist poets, dramatists, and art critics (known as *Le Grand Jeu*), published a series of articles on film in a special issue of the journal Cahiers Jaune, under a title "Cinema 33."[16] Among the essays, the most pertinent to oneiric cinema is the text written by Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, entitled The Alchemy of the Eye: Cinema, a Form of Mind.[17] In contrast to the then established surrealist concept, concerned mostly with the thematic aspect of the dream analogy, Gilbert-

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15 Serge Lebovici, "Psychoanalyse et Cinema," *Revue International de filmologie,* Tome: II, No. 5 (Paris, 1949-50), pp. 50, 51.

16

17

Legacy of
Vlada Petric

Lecomte points to "something that is not evident in surrealist writing on film: the prevalence of the universal dream world, which functions on the principles established by Jung and Freud." Believing that "the film is similar in nature to the magical ceremonies of primitive societies, and therefore can give us, experimentally, variations of states of consciousness," Gilbert-Lecomte lists the filmic devices that are capable of generating "an alternative rhythm." He describes the events and situations which only cinema can make real, so that:

> the object on the screen would first appear as it is registered by the lens, then assume the shape as it is perceived by human consciousness, through the clouded states of mind which metamorphoses it... The eye of the camera can also become the eye of the nightmare, the gaze of the sorcerer, which is the key of the metamorphoses... It can produce the mysterious paranoic transformation, which the mind imposes on objects, suddenly discovering the secret hallucinatory horror, such as the all-too lucid visions of madness; the curtain which becomes a ghost; the crocodile which takes place of a tree, becoming real, mobile, and then reabsorbed within the lines of the bark to become a tree again; the eye of the cloud, the faces of the sky seen through intertwined branches; and the ragged screaming fauna sculptured by the wind.

Gilbert-Lacomte believed in the "messianic [function] of art" and the "magic power" of special effects. Yet, with all his uncritical enthusiasm for movies and the subjective conclusions about the "mythical and ritualistic" nature of the medium, his text represents one of the most elaborate, non-literary approaches to oneiric cinema in the early days of the talkies. As Phill Powrie concludes, "Lecomte applied certain ideas on film which are commonly seen as surrealist, and pushed them to the extreme, to create disorientation brought to the limits of madness and trance." This kind of impressionistic and associative writing about cinema has become typical of the French film theorists throughout the thirties, forties, and fifties.

There are historical reasons why the two major theorists of the late Twenties and early Thirties, Bela Balazs and Rudolf Arnheim, lacked the interest in the oneiric

Legacy of
Vlada Petric

aspect of the medium. Balazs' seminal book Theory of Film (1922),[18] based on his Marxist view of art, treated the medium as a "form of language whose ultimate function--and capacity--is to reveal the hidden meaning in ordinary objects, landscapes, and human beings." However, the "hidden" meaning for Balazs was ideological and social, rather than oneiric and unconscious. Arnheim's theoretical treatise, Film as Art (1932),[19] resulted from his familiarity with Gestalt psychology, as well as traditional aesthetics, hence concentrated on the representational aspect of the artistic creation.

Russian Formalists (especially Viktor Shklovsky, Alexander Gan, and Boris Eichenbaum) who came to cinema from linguistics, literature, and the Constructivist movement, developed the principle of montage, whose main goal was to promote ideological and political concepts. Yet, on a practical level, the Soviet revolutionary filmmakers created sequences which--in addition to their political message--exert a strong oneiric impact due to their dynamic montage structure. The most prominent Soviet filmmakers extensively wrote about the perceptual aspect of the medium (Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov), recognizing the oneiric nature of the cinematic perception, as Eisenstein explains in his essays.[20] Similarly, Vertov's "Theory of Intervals" intended to intensify the kinesynthetic impact of the juxtaposed shots, is relevant for the study of the relationship between film and dreams.[21]

Overall, the writings about the oneiric aspect of cinema throughout the Thirties and Forties is largely based on the Surrealist tradition in art, which considers dream as a manifestation of the unconscious and the subliminal, presented in the form of the bizarre concatenation of visually distorted objects/events painted on the canvas,

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18

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20 See Introduction, Footnotes 12, 13, 14, and 15.

21

Legacy of
Vlada Petric

described in a novel, or enacted on the stage in a *symbolic* manner. Consequently, the theoretical research in cinema has been concerned with the pictorial resolution of the shot, its thematic reading, and the narrative as a justification for the psychoanalytic interpretation of the "filmic text." As the interest in psychoanalysis increased, especially after the Second World War, literary and art critics reexamined the popular genres, particularly mystery, horror, and science fiction, from the Freudian standpoint. Since many of these "B" movies include sequences depicting dreams, nightmares, and psychotic fantasies, the Freudian approach has proved very useful. However, preoccupied with the narrative aspect of the genre, the theoretical writings about genre issues have not transcended the thematic, literary, and theatrical concept of cinema, and as such is insignificant for the theory of oneiric cinema.

Legacy of
Vlada Petric