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Psychoanalytical Culture in the American Film Noir

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Summary

In the American Film Noir from the classic period (1930-1960), it is possible to perceive the influence of psychoanalytical culture and of Freud's most widely read works. The theory of drives involves the consideration of the perpetrator of criminal activity as a sick person. This is reflected in the films, where morals are relegated to a secondary plane. The importance of sexuality is reflected in the figure of the "femme fatale" and in behaviours in which the principle of pleasure overarches that of reality. The conscious/unconscious duality and the place of dreams in psychoanalysis are the cornerstones of films addressing the split personality and nightmares that plague essentially decent people. The solution to certain criminal conflicts is not found through police work but through medicine: in such situations the therapist manages to solve the problem of the delinquent behaviour born of sick minds.

Keywords: Film Noir, Psychoanalysis, Femme fatale, Detective, Police intrigue.

Introduction

We know that the work of Sigmund Freud and of other authors (Jung, Reich, Adler… up to Lacan, lumped together under the conventional term of the "Psychoanalytical School", despite their noteworthy divergences) encompasses very varied dimensions and interests. So much so, indeed, that they escape the specific field of Medicine –whence they originated- and enter far more wide-ranging, and even diffuse, fields such as Anthropology or the Theory of Culture. Certainly, psychoanalysis is a theory about the functioning of the psyche and does of course address certain mental diseases. But mainly it is a therapeutic method that offers an alternative to medical-psychiatric orthodoxy. Nevertheless, Freudianism exceeds the territory of medicine in the sense that, from the perspectives of philosophy and social theory (that is beyond the protocols of the scientific methodology used in Medicine), it attempts to elucidate the structure of the human being and offer a theory of society, religious beliefs and the course of history. Precisely because we are dealing with a theory or a cultural issue that transcends the medical field, above we have preferred to refer to it above as "psychoanalytical theory". Developed along the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the next, psychoanalysis expanded and kindled further interest in the forties and fifties, precisely at the time when in the United States the phenomenon known as the *film noir* was beginning to emerge.

The *film noir* was awarded its *Magna Carta* when in 1946, in France, five films – *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), by John Huston; *Laura* (1044), by Otto Preminger; *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), by Edward Dmytryk; *Double Indemnity* (1944), by Billy Wilder, and *The Woman in the Window* (1944), by Fritz Lang – were shown for the first time. These were baptised by critics, first in French and then in English, as *film noir*, owing to their resemblance as regards the climate and criminals underpinning of the novels of Gallimard's *Serie noir,* whose covers were also black. Although this dated back to the previous decade, thus encompassing gangster series, it saw several specialisations and can be included within police-based or criminal cinema (*thriller*). As mentioned elsewhere[1], the films can be characterised as follows:

a.-Stereotyped characters,

b.- Dramas in which death or mortal violence play an important part in the central plot.

c.- Conflicts and crime are determined by a problematic social context, as exemplified both by the Prohibition years and the Depression and in the uncertainty following the Second World War.

d.- The characters act outside the limits of the law and do not always follow the accepted norms of legality and morality in their behaviour.

e.- An exceptionally expressionist visual aesthetics, owing to the Central European origin of several directors (Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Edgard G. Ulmer, Otto Preminger and Robert Siodomak).

f.- Incisive dialogues, highly "cinematographic" and often cynical, and

g.- The stories are based on short novels (*pulp fiction*) and on press articles.

Those familiar with the field will recognise in this series a set of influences and drives that, with no desire to enter into hierarchies or to offer an exhaustive analysis, would include: the organised crime and gangster-style life fed by the prohibition of alcohol and the economic crisis; the *pulp fiction* of authors who later went on to become script writers; investigative journalism and press reports, radio series and comics; German expressionist photography that inspired the contrasted images of black and white illumination, and, finally, psychoanalysis.

It is very difficult to say how much psychoanalytical theory directly inspired some of the most interesting conflicts and characters portrayed in the film noir or whether, by contrast, it was simply that the reflections of Freud were formulated within a moral climate and intellectual "humus" that was shared by the authors of this cinematographic cycle. Almost too certainly, in one of the most recent studies of the film noir Noël Simsolo suggests that psychoanalysis is an issue that obsesses film makers. They know that the audience find in it a perverse attraction, above all when it includes sex, dreams and violence. The spectator believes himself to be a mere *voyeur* of the consequences resulting from neuroses that are generally presented in highly simplified form. Fritz Lang is one of the few directors who work the system in a serious manner, using psychoanalysis outside the exterior realism to explore the mysteries of the sols of his characters; but also to destabilise the audience" [2]. Whether it be causality or convergence, in any case what is relevant is the psychoanalytical background of important examples of the *film noir*.

In particular, psychoanalytical culture is perceived in the following dimensions or levels, to be further addressed below: I the dual structure of society and of the human being; II, the revolutionary discourse about sex; III, the presence of a personal narrator and the fatal evocation of the past; IV, Split personality, and dreams and hallucinations; V Psychic disease as the origin of criminal behaviour, and VI, the role of the therapist in criminal conflict.

The dual structure of society and of the human being

On positing a duality in the structure of human personality –in which the *id* or subconscious may be more determinant than the *ego* itself when attempting to explain certain features and behaviours- and of society and culture, Freud, together with Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, has been considered what Paul Ricoeur has called one of the "masters of suspicion" of the nineteenth century. These thinkers coincide in the consideration of the existence of a *false awareness* in the human being or, equivalently, the idea that the repression of the subconscious (Freud), the resentment of the weak (Nietzsche) or a masking of reality owing to economic interests (Marx) place us in a universe of illusions, of tricks, in a false representation of reality that prevents us from maturing (Kant), vindicated by the Enlightenment. Said another way, the "masters of suspicion" establish a new paradigm for philosophical thought, which now becomes essentially critical in that it reflects on the actual conditions under which it was generated.

In the work cited above, we spoke of the "dual metaphysics of the film noir" to refer to the trait that, in the long run and beyond the evident formal or thematic aspects already mentioned, is the central identity of this cycle. This metaphysics consists of a *dual view of what is real,* the numinous consideration that under the apparent order there is a reality – weightier and of greater import- of a substantially conflictive disposition. Accordingly, a strong dualism is set up between the conformist view of the individual and society and a more profound enquiry (and determinant for the result of dramatic conflicts; hence the bitter, sceptical and pessimistic aftertaste of the films) that highlights police corruption, blind amorous passions, the insanity of the masses, the hunger for power, the mechanisms of the unconscious …, all of which share a destructive and necrophilia-tinged fatality.

This duality obtains at all levels: in the photography (light/shadow); in the nature of the characters (often converted into executioners/victims) and in their personal history (childhood/adulthood); in the results of the plots (death/release); in the physical spaces in which the drama is played out (city/country); in different aspects of ethics (guilt/innocence); in the actual enunciation of the plot (objective/subjective point of view), etc.

This view of the dual-natured (and in the end tragic) world thus runs parallel to that established by psychoanalytical culture, with the conscious/unconscious division and the determinant role of drives (Eros/Thanatos) as the forces underlying human behaviour. Regarding the former (conscious/unconscious), more will be said below. Concerning the latter (Eros/Thanatos) which is a biological, "animal", destructive mechanism, there is no doubt about its presence in the characterisation of the antagonistic characters of the film noir, into whose criminality they are sucked with no moral consideration: they are types that fulfil the roles of both *executioner* and *victim*. Violence and the threat of death are intimately woven into the course of the stories and the behaviour of the characters. In the face of death, there is no hope, either from the forces of law that protect or from some hero prepared to rise to the challenge, above all when death does not emerge as the incarnation of a specific enemy as such but rather in the person of someone close or even in the subjects

themselves, who may intuit that their thirst for power or amorous passion will fatally lead them to a tragic ending. Evil does not have an absolute, stereotyped incarnation, and in no way is it determined by the freedom or will of the individual, where it would be under the moral control of such attributes. Instead, it appears as the fruit of an ambition or thirst for power, of the escape from the poverty of childhood, or of a sick psyche that dominates the will of the individual. In sum, just as psychoanalysis explains the *Thanatos* drive of behaviour in a scientific or medical way and the psychopath is not conceived as immoral but as someone who is sick, so is the fatality or the instinctive nature of the criminal behaviour of the characters emphasised in the film noir. Such behaviour thus escapes the regimen of morality accorded it by traditional society and prevailing morality and thought. As summed up by Borde and Chaumeton, in Freud's appreciations there is a certain cynicism that harmonises well with the moral atmosphere of the series (noir). The psychiatrist no longer believes either in good or evil as traditionally defined[3].

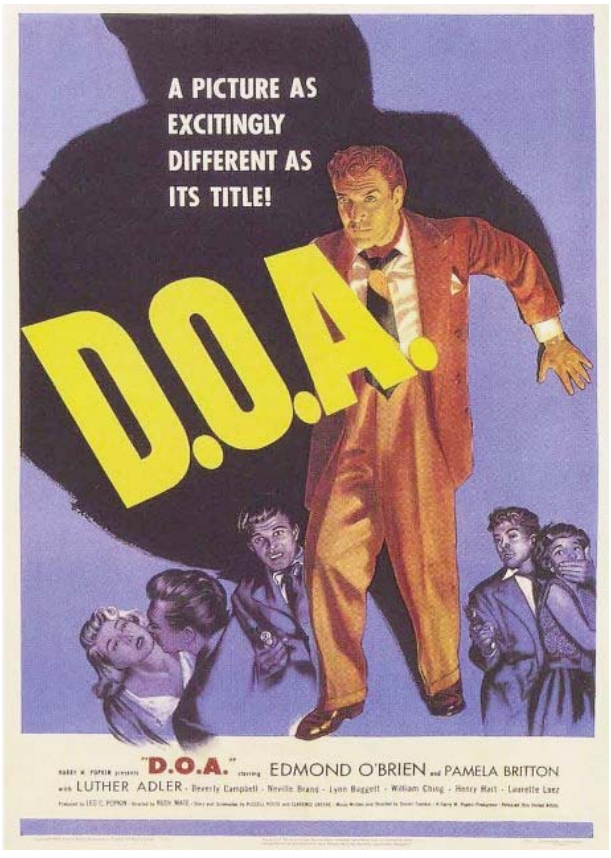
The revolutionary discourse about sex.

Along the same lines, the sex drive proposed by Freud offers a very pertinent novelty for understanding the film noir, since the pre-eminence that the Viennese doctor accords sex within the bounds of human personality and behaviour is quite apparent in the film noir, above all with the figure of the female sexual predator: the *femme fatale*. This woman is intelligent, ambitious, calculating and uses her physical attractiveness as a tool to achieve her own ends; she is an expert at using sex –or the promise of sex- as a favourite weapon. All such women are *maestras* in the art of seduction and falsehood[4]. Depending on her whim, she may appear sweet and delicate or extravagant and authoritarian; her journey through life is made up of a constant imposition of her own will and wherever she goes everything –especially men- must refer back to her, and she therefore manages to manipulate and control the overall course of events. She may seem to be misogynous but her autonomy as a character –apparently for the first time in a cycle or genre a woman does not play a secondary role as a wife, mother, or the daughter of her father- allows her to be considered a protofeminist.

In this type of cinema, the usual romance or love story as the leitmotiv of Hollywood productions is overthrown and, as stated by David Bordwell, sex does not come disguised as love or a parasite of sentimental relations. Indeed, the institution of matrimony is not even compatible with the sexuality of the femme fatale and of the masculine characters abducted by her, such that the instinctive and fatalistic nature of sex, which dominates people's rationality and wills, is further emphasised.

The personal narrator and the fatalistic evocation of the past

In the film noir, the *flashback* (analepsis) allows different aesthetic operations: the fragmented narrative that breaks temporal unity and strict causality affords the story a degree of complexity aimed at propitiating the participation of the spectator, but above all analepsis implies the choice of an aesthetics of fatality since it places the origin of the conflicts of the present in the irrevocable past, such as, among many other stories, is seen paradigmatically in the film *Double Indemnity*, with the confession of guilt of the agonising and main character, impotent to undo the road he has taken to perdition, or the poisoned main character of *D.O.A* (1950), by Rudolph Maté, in one of the most famous flashbacks in the history of the cinema.



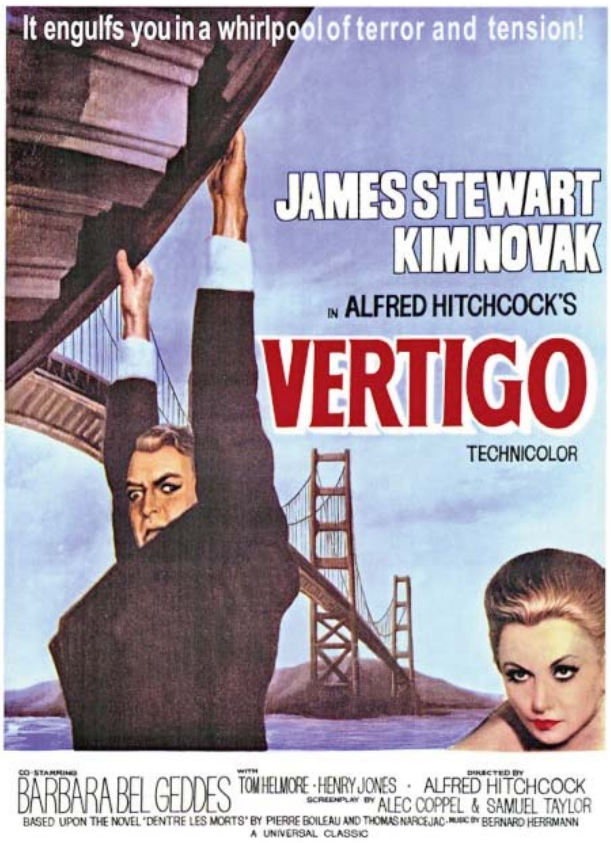
Flashbacks are usually supported by the voice in *off* of the main character and they introduce greater subjectivity into the story and allow the spectator to become identified with the characters. In view of the moral ambivalence of the characters (discredited detectives, remorseful criminals, police involved in shady dealings), such an identification brings as a result the well known amorality of the genre, thereby highlighting the "driven" dimension of their personalities. Moreover, that personal narrative from the present must necessarily be incomplete, since memories are filtered by personal interests and the distortion due to subjective recall, such that the importance of the unconscious in the film noir also emerges through another doorway. In this sense, there are stories in which the segment of the past is not always reliable; there are fractures in causality and the analepsis better reflects a nightmare or a dream than memory itself. This is the case of Jeff (Robet Mitchum) in *Out of the Past* (1947), by Jacques Tourneur, who is condemned to give up his provincial happiness and return to his former gangster world. It is also worth mentioning that the flashbacks in *Laura* reconstruct a past and, as they evoke the absent character, her nebulous existence begins to take form.

Split personality and dreams and hallucinations

On setting up dualities such as the conscious/unconscious or Eros/Thanatos, psychoanalytical theory links up with a tradition of anthropological reflections that, since the days of Plato and the body/soul duality of Judeo-Christianity, underline the tension between the different dimensions of personality, between reality and desire, and between true experience and dreams. The existence of a split personality between an Apollo-like Dr. Jeckyll and a Dionysius-like Mr Hyde is present in the cinematographic versions of the story by Robert L. Stevenson and in other variations that have cultivated the myth or have given rise to similar ones, very present in Gothic tradition, such as Dr. Faust, who sells his soul to the devil[5]. Closer to reality are the stories featuring characters with schizophrenia. This is seen in an especially paradoxical way in the research carried out by the French police inspector in *So Dark the Night* (1946), by Joseph. J. Lewis, who has a split personality and is looking for a murderer, none other but his alter ego, and who must set a trap to catch himself. In *The Dark Mirror* 1946), Robert Siodomak tells the story of

two twins, counterbalanced like the two horses of Plato since one of them is paranoid. The prodigious Debby Marsh, played by Gloria Graham in *The Big Heat* (1953), by Fritz Lang, is a perverse gangster's moll but she finds the opportunity to revive her moral ego when she helps the detective to unravel the truth underlying a murder; with half her face burned off by scalding coffee and the other half of amazing beauty, we see her nature as a two-faced Janus.

The Woman in the Window is also undoubtedly a strong reference in the film noir, as well as being a production that, through the narrative stratagem of the insertion of a secondary story representing a dream, portrays the desire of a conventional Psychology professor to escape his routine life. The end is ironic and leaves the moral integrity of the main character, who in the nightmare may be accused (unjustly) of murder, intact. Memories, dreams and nightmares all conspire to torment the conscience of characters who end up doubting reality and their own ego, such as the case of the main character in *Crime without Passion* (1934), by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, whose false memory about a murder that never took place ends up driving him mad and converts him into a true murderer. And we have the main character of *Moonrise* (1949), by Frank Borzage, blamed for the death of his father and condemned to wander the swamps, or the man in *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* (1945), by Robert Siodmak, who is unable to get married and get rid of his two possessive sisters and whose conscious falls into a nightmarish slough of despond. In the case of *Vertigo* (1958), a major work by Alfred Hitchcock, who was ever ready to dig down into less appetizing dungeons of the human condition, the play with the point of view and the times and levels of the story reaches a degree of complexity in which three characters overlap (Judy, Madeleine and Carlota) in the very desirable body of Kim Novak, leading the investigator Scottie (James Stewart) to have nightmares which he can only escape by entering a mental health institution.



Mental disorders as the origin of criminal behaviour

The idea of childhood trauma or some event that occurred in the past or in general some conflict in the personality of the individual as an explanation for criminal behaviour is very common in the film noir, although also in many American dramas if, like Noël

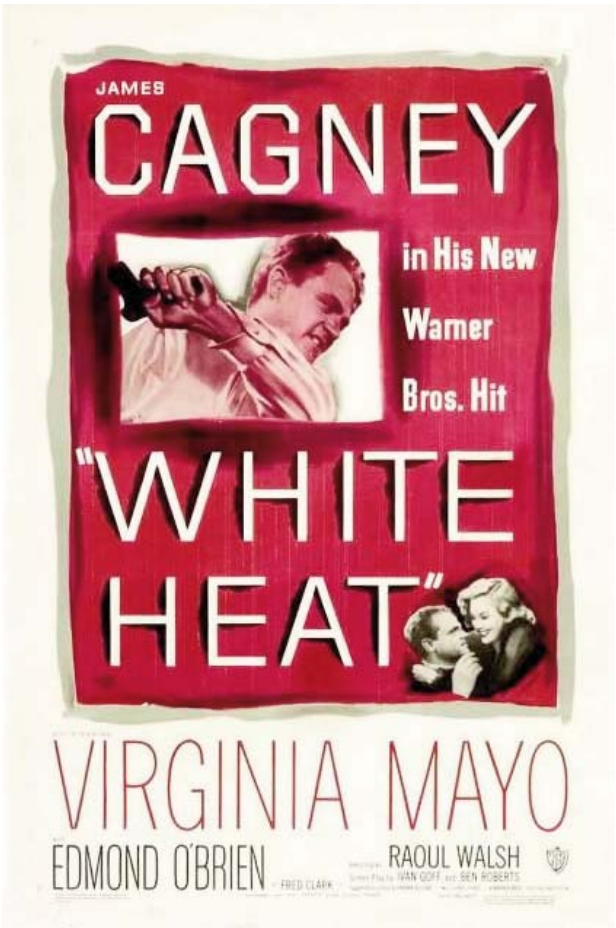
Simsolo, we recall the sledge of Charles Foster Kane. As stated, the existence of instinctive drives accounts for the criminal behaviour in the sphere of medicine, such that the moral paradigm is not suitable for understanding the personality of the delinquent or for his/her rehabilitation.

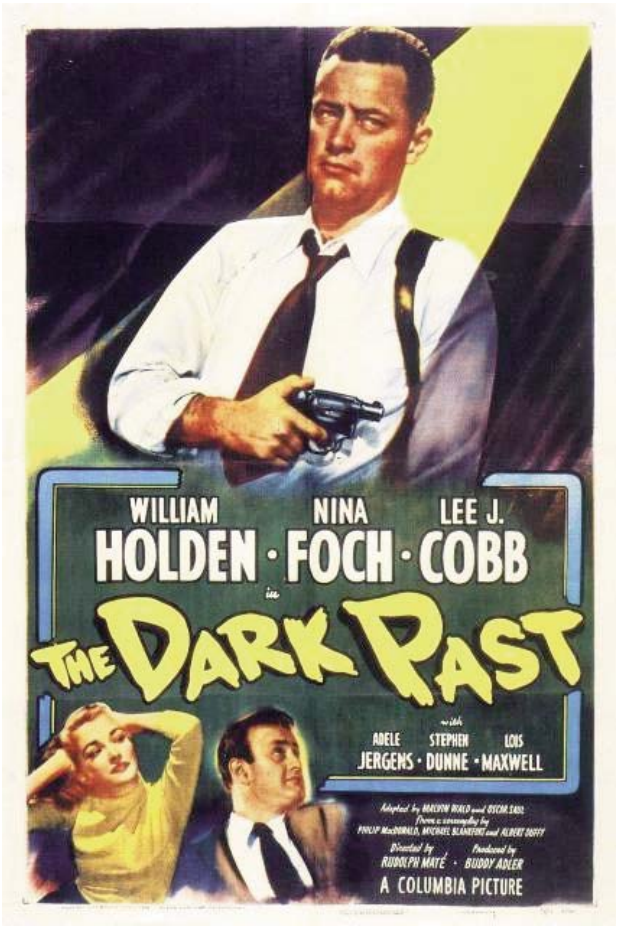
The "Oedipus Complex" and an episode from his childhood in which he felt abandoned explain the criminality of Mark in *Secret beyond the Door* (1948), by Fritz Lang; it also sheds light on why the gangster Cody Jarret (James Cagney) in *White Heat* (1949), by Raoul Walsh, has an Oedipus-like relationship with his mother, after whose death his criminal activities become unbridled. Different mental disorders appear in the antagonists of key works in the film noir, such as the sculptor Marlon in *Phantom Lady* (1944), by Robert Siodmak; the psychopath who falls in love with Rosalind Russell in *Night Must Fall* (1937), by Richard Thorpe, or Nick in *Experiment Perilous* (1944), by Jacques Tourneur, who has also been blasted by a traumatic even that occurred in his past.

In another turn of the screw, the crime may stem from the fact that the psychiatric patient induces madness in an erstwhile sane person, such as happens with the pianist and murderer in *Gaslight* (1944), by George Cukor, or Nick, again, in *Experiment Perilous*, who drives his wife Allida mad and tries to convince his doctor friend of this. In *Sleep my Love* (1949), by Douglas Sirk, a schizophrenic husband uses a false psychiatrist to make his wife go mad.

The role of the therapist resolves criminal conflicts

One of the most didactic films of the film noir genre –*The Dark Past* (1948), directed by Rudolph Maté, shows a police psychiatrist who explains the case of a kidnapping in which he was involved and managed to solve thanks to the kidnapper (who has a recurrent nightmare and fears falling asleep) telling him about his childhood. This film uses psychoanalysis to explain the origin of criminality: all delinquents show antisocial behaviour rooted in a childhood conflict repressed in the unconscious; they are therefore sick. The release from repressions through the verbalization of conflicts results in the disease being cured; emphasis is placed on the therapeutic method employed by the psychoanalysis (interpretation of dreams, free association) to rehabilitate the criminal/patient. A similar story had





appeared a decade previously in *Blind Alley* (1938), by Charles Vidor, in which a murderer hides from the police in the house of a psychiatrist, who explores his unconscious until he manages to cure him. In the said *The Dark Mirror*, the psychiatrist's judgment prevails over the police view when he ascertains the criminal identity of the paranoid woman and solves the underlying murder case. In *Caught,* (1949), by Max Ophuls, the psychoanalyst finds in the unconscious of the millionaire Ohlrig the reasons for his cardiac arrhythmias, which stem simply from the fear that his fiancée might marry him for purely economic reasons[6-13].

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