DREAM AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN A PSYCHOANALYTIC FILM: SECRETS OF A SOUL

By Nick Browne and Bruce McPherson

It is through psychoanalysis that the dream has become a special object of attention and a problem for the disciplines of interpretation. The appearance of Freud's Interpretation of Dreams in Vienna in 1900, within a few years of the first exhibitions of film in Paris in 1896, established a pattern of affinity and convergence between dream and film that has inspired and informed critical and theoretical writing on the cinema almost from the beginning. It was earlier, in July, 1895, with the successful interpretation of the "Specimen Dream," the Dream of Irma's Injection, that Freud could claim that "the Secret of Dreams was revealed" to him. The history of the analogy between the experiential modes of dream and cinema—not just the observations of a line of distinguished German, French, and American critics, whose work constitutes something of an "approach"—has served as a formal and practical model for filmmakers. Wiene's The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Cocteau's Orpheus, and Resnais' Last Year at Marienbad are notable films whose form was more or less explicitly provided by the features of the dream experience.

Most recently, in the field of film theory, the analogy between dream and film has been reformulated as the relation between the image and the spectator. The recent work of Christian Metz (1975, 1976) and Jean Louis Baudry (1976) have concentrated not on the interpretation of individual works but more generally on the description of the "place" of the filmic spectator from within a psychoanalytic, specifically Lacanian, idiom. Each has investigated the mode of imaginary relations that the spectator enjoys with the depicted world. This relation is founded on a central analogy: that between the arrangement of the apparatus (projector, light, screen, spectator) and certain psychoanalytic models of the topology and dynamic of the psyche itself. The functioning of that cinema apparatus implies or inscribes a spectator in such a way as to guarantee a specific "impression of reality," a form of realism that both inherits the Western tradition of painting and inflects it in accord with the contemporary (ideological) requirements of the society in which it is embedded.

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Commentary on Pabst’s film Secrets of a Soul (Germany, 1925) poses problems of a different order: it was the first deliberate conjunction of psychoanalysis and film. The film was made with the cooperation of people close to Freud, Sachs and Abraham, as a demonstration of clinical methods (including dream interpretation) and of the therapeutic powers of psychoanalysis. This context and purpose are important in understanding certain things about the film’s presentation. Freud was skeptical about the project; his principal objection was, as he wrote to Abraham: “I still do not believe that satisfactory plastic representation of our abstractions is at all possible” (Abraham & Freud, 1965, p. 384).

Although Hanns Sachs collaborated closely with the director, G. W. Pabst, and apparently had an unlimited say in the psychoanalytic aspects of the film, the interpretation the film offers is constrained, if not disingenuous. Chodoroff and Baxter (1974) indicate that the social milieu may have constrained the film and that Pabst was confronted with the problem of “how to avoid sensational aspects of psychoanalysis which the masses are drawn to...”; presumably the sexual aetiology of neurosis was considered sensational, and Freud’s own circumspection about such matters was regarded as exemplary. If such was its intention, the film at least succeeded in limiting sexually explicit scenes or explanations; however, this avoidance is at the expense of the psychoanalytic interpretation offered in the film. Notwithstanding, the film, if not the accompanying psychoanalytic explanation, gives a vivid and convincing representation of Martin’s symbolic mental life.

The film emphasizes psychoanalytic technique as a means of recovering significant traces of the past. The narrative form of the film and the treatment of the process of memory determine the film’s dramatic structure. At the crucial moment—and through an act of re-memorization—the film condenses in a single event the origin of the neurosis and an act of seeing, and brings to the fore as a general problem of psychoanalysis the relation between memory, seeing, and the process of therapeutic understanding.

In The Interpretation of Dreams (1895) the elaboration of the theoretical argument through the use of scientific models and various optical apparatuses is well known. In considering the problem of representing psychical locality, the relation between the preconscious and the unconscious systems, Freud suggests:

I propose simply to follow the suggestions that we should picture the instrument which carries out our mental functions as resembling a compound microscope or a photographic apparatus, or something of the kind. On that basis, psychical locality will correspond to a point inside that apparatus at which one of the preliminary stages of an image comes into being. (p. 536)

As Derrida shows in “Freud and the Scene of Writing” (1976), Freud’s theory required an account of memory. This Freud supplies by a mechanical analogy to the process of photography, which has two parts: (a) the registration of the image and (b) the preservation and development of psychical traces. The idea of the activation of a photographic negative and the optical apparatus seems not to have been an adequate model. For Derrida, Freud’s “Note on the Mystic Writing Pad” (1925) was the summarizing statement of a series of problems posed as early as the Project for a Scientific Psychology that required a model of psychical representation, a form of writing capable of combining continuous freshness of surface and depth of retention. In the case of the dream, it is a pictographic script; in other terms, it is the model of memory.

The interesting problem of the film, for us, is not evaluating its status as an aesthetic object, nor its success in conveying a convincing impression of the dream experience. The film presents itself as the report, the narrative, of a clinical case and as such it poses two closely related problems of interpretation, one textual and one cultural. (a) The disjunction in the film between the precise and voluminous
psychological detail and the paucity, even disingenuousness, of its psychoanalytic explanation calls for a more thoroughgoing analysis of the case than either the film or its commentators provide. (b) An interpretation of the significance of photography as event and as metaphor serves as the means and medium of the representation of the neurosis of the family at the end of the 19th century.

Film language is the means of plastically translating the pictorial script of the dream. The filmic sequence in Secrets of a Soul both by its employment of the dissolve, temporal and spatial displacement, and particularly superimposition of one image onto or beside another, visually purports to represent an unmediated dream; it is told to no one. Film language in this instance consists of special effects employed to convey the kaleidoscopic montage of imagery closest in form and content to the dream. The psychic context of the dream, its placement within a disordered set of breaks in a daily routine, a murder, a cut on the wife's neck, refers in one way or another to the announcement of the return of the cousin; and the placement of the dream sequence at the beginning of the film, without preface or (exterior) explanation, marks it as an anxiety dream. Within the narrative schema of the film, it constitutes an enigma in the form of a symptom, a sign whose significance is to be interpreted, and if interpreted correctly, will (happily!) disappear.

The narrative of the film (and in this case the film underlines the extraordinary significance and role of narrative in case histories and in Freud's work in particular) is a summary statement through which the (hidden) truth emerges. In this instance, the end of the film, with the formation of the family and the birth of the child, is an absurd unintentional parody of the optimism of the Hollywood film. One could speculate on the reason this case was chosen as exemplary; the narrative form constitutes something of a psychoanalytic paradigm: namely, the "return" and "working through"—though here, the last phase is much abbreviated—of a trauma, of an early scene.

The film illustrates the case of a couple who are childless yet who want very much to have a child. On the return of the wife's cousin (Eric) from a long absence abroad, Martin (who is also Eric's close boyhood friend) suffers the onset of neurotic symptoms in the form of a knife phobia and a compulsion to kill his wife. The phobia incapacitates his daily life and he seeks treatment from a psychoanalyst who, through free association and dream analysis, helps Martin locate an early event from his childhood that is discovered to be the "kernel of the neurosis." The revelation of his suppressed desires and fears leads to his cure; he resumes his life and becomes a happy father.

The symbolic field of the film is oriented around the childlessness of the couple. Images of impotence and fertility abound in the film. Martin is a wanderer in a landscape of anxious sexual imagery: deep caves, "brooding waters," a litter of pups, the birth of a doll/baby from dark waters, female fertility statues, large towers with rounded tops, a tall handsome man wearing a rounded white pith helmet; iron bars continually block Martin and force him into a watcher/voyeur role while his wife is in compromising situations. There are charged situations: Martin's nervousness at being shaved (and his inability to shave himself), a stalled train with its wheels and pistons churning powerfully, and Martin's being reduced to eating his food with a spoon in his mother's house. At the sentimental end of the film, when Martin is cured, the bucolic life he leads is teeming with fertility: running streams, plentiful fish, and the youthful exuberance of Martin when he runs up a hill to embrace his wife and baby.

Many of these images, however, are overdetermined, especially the central ones of the wound on his wife's neck, knives, and phallic symbols. The ambiguity and interdependence of these images suggest the causes of Martin's impotence. The onset of the knife phobia is linked to a disturbing nightmare that Martin had the night before the cousin returns. He dreamed he saw a tower rising out of the ground.
in the Italian village where he and his wife honeymooned. Bells ring in the tower in a mocking tone (as the script tells us) and, as the bells transpose into the faces of three women in his life (his wife, their maid, and his lab assistant), the faces rock back and forth in a mocking, overtly sexual, derision. Martin runs up the stairs on the outside of the tower; when he gets to the top, the bells are still ringing but the women's faces have disappeared. He is left slumped over the tower railing after yelling and waving his cane in rage at his tormentors. The latent content of that dream deals with Martin's continued exclusion from others and of the (imagined) mocking by the women around him of his inability to have a child. The dream also represents his symbolic failure in the sex act; in the face of the dominating phallic imagery of the tower, Martin's dejected figure is eloquently expressive. It is apparent from this dream that he had been impotent from the beginning of the honeymoon.

Knife, too, are overdetermined images: the crisis of his dream, and, as it turns out, of his analysis, is the frantic stabbing of a phantom of the wife; the knife is both murder weapon and phallicus; he is both killing her and possessing her. The "accidental" wound Martin makes on his wife's neck is another overdetermined image; it is both a sign of his unconscious wish to murder her and of his inability to do so.

Knife and wound are also linked together. The linkage of knife to penis requires the linkage of wound to vagina, for in the psychoanalytic mode at the time the film was made, the vagina was the primal "wound" of the castrated female. Martin's fear of causing a wound in his wife (of murdering her) is his fear of penetrating her "wound" (of possessing her); and his fear of receiving his own "wound"—the symbolic castration by his father (who is now displaced into the cousin)—results in his impotence. The knife phobia acts as a defense against his compulsion to kill; it displaces onto his wife his fear of the father and of his power to castrate him. Because Martin's phobia is centered on a knife, it is at once the means of enacting his jealousy and it is the "cause" of his impotence (the symbolic castration).

The interpretation offered by Sachs focuses on the knife phobia and on Martin's compulsion to kill his wife. His unconscious jealousy is the presumed cause of the compulsion. In his dream a scene took place, with him as the barred watcher/ voyeur, in which the cousin and the wife are in a boat on dark waters; a doll/baby emerges from the water into the arms of his wife, who then passes it to the cousin. In the course of the analysis Martin remembers the event in his childhood "to which the dream points." The event is crucial to his analysis and it is the scene that ties the whole action of the film together and presents its meaning. Sachs' description of the event is as follows:

It was Christmas, the time of gifts, a particularly significant day for the child, because just before a little sister had arrived and he had been told that the mother had "given her as a present" to the father. Naturally the three children played with their dolls "Father and Mother" too, and the little girl usually gave him the proud privilege of being the "father." On Christmas Eve, when he intended to continue his play the mother came, showed him the small, living doll—his little sister—and allowed him to play with her. Thus he forgot to play with the doll for a while and the little girlfriend, who had become impatient in the meantime, gave the doll—"the child"—to the rival, the cousin (1926, pp. 12-13).

At the opening of the scene a photographer faces the film camera; behind the photographer is a large mirror in which he is reflected (Figure 1). The photographer is taking the photograph of Martin, his girlfriend, and her cousin Eric. His presence, the art of photography, and the photograph that resulted, link the remembered scene to the present drama. The photograph—of the three children posed formally—is an important device: it evokes the past and serves in this
instance to point to the distortions of recollected scenes. When Martin re-views that photograph on the occasion of Eric's return, he is visibly disturbed by the feelings it arouses.

However, in his memory of the event he had distorted it. The actual photograph (Figure 6) shows the three children, but the girl is not holding a doll as she is in the “photograph” of Martin’s memory (Figure 2). This distortion is a resistance to his contemplation of an even more anxious scene that is the “primal scene” when his own parents “play mothers and fathers” with him as a child. This scene is reenacted in memory when the girl gives the doll to the cousin (Figure 3), and when in his dream, his wife “receives” a baby from the water and gives it to the cousin (Figure 5). What we witness in the recreation of Martin’s memory is a scene within a scene and a hint, but only a hint, of Martin’s fear and jealousy of the father who is conspicuous by his absence and who is condensed into the overdetermined figure of the cousin. In the event in childhood, he is displaced by the cousin as “father” of the doll. In the scene in his dream where the baby/doll is born from the water, Martin is again displaced by his cousin as the father. His distorted memory of the photograph is a redoubled resistance to a scene lying behind the actual childhood scene, a scene where his own parents “play mothers and fathers” with him—the “primal scene.”
By these means the film suggests that Martin's impotence is a result of unresolved Oedipal configurations in his childhood. The configuration is composed of contrasting and mirroring symbolic Oedipal triangles:

I.

girl = wife/mother  
Eric = father  
doll = Martin

II.

nurse = wife/mother  
Martin = father  
baby = Martin

Figure 3

Figure 5

Figure 6
Martin, the narrator of the memory, and its central figure, is represented symbolically in the scene as both father and child, but from the point of view of the child. (This question of point of view requires separate consideration.) The syntax of jealousy is represented through this matrix of activity (fathering within unit I) and passivity (being fathered in unit II). The expression of sadness (Figure 4) that coincides with the celebration of a birth and that punctuates the scene (in the form of a downcast glance) raises the question about the ambiguity of the identity of the preferred partner. The overdetermined Martin/Eric/wife triangle brings into question Martin's jealousy and its evident vicissitudes: Martin represents himself in the scene as father, child, and we think—given the complex forms of anxiety that Eric's return occasions—as wife to Eric and mother (as well as father) to himself. It is a representation of the complete matrix of generative possibilities, and designates both heterosexual and homosexual jealousy. Martin's father is absent from the film, even from the "family photograph" of Martin and his mother pasted into the scrapbook shown at the beginning of the film (Figure 7). It is clear from this absence, and the overdetermined significance of his part, that Eric is the representative of the father both in the memory of the early scene and in the drama that is unfolding in the film's present. While the evidence seems to point to the jealousy and fear induced by the event in childhood as the "kernel of his neurosis" (as the analyst in the film suggests), the implied scene within that memory is what gave the impetus to the neurosis. This scene that Martin wishes to avoid is the primal scene involving his

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real father; it leads us to the theme deeper than jealousy—his impotence.

The film's narrative locates the crucial scene in Martin's present through his recollection of a memory. This early scene, we have suggested, has a distinctly Oedipal configuration (though represented in miniature, all parties being children) involving the giving of a doll/baby from one partner to another. Martin stands within this scene in a way exemplary of his situation—distinctly apart and isolated from the couple, casting anxious glances in their direction. He is the third, the figure apart. It is this situation that is replayed in the dream through all the imagery of distance and prohibition, bars, fences, and of sadomasochistic voyeurism. But this scene, about which the psychoanalyst cries, "This childhood reminiscence is identical with your dream vision," is overdetermined at another level.

The drama of this memory is, with Martin as the central spectator, a birth, or rather, the embedded and disguised scene of his own conception as he later might have imagined it or represented it to himself.

Structurally and thematically this case has a striking resemblance to the well-known diagnosis and history of the "Wolf-Man," which Freud published in 1918. In section IV of this history, "The Dream and the Primal Scene," Freud recounts the dream and provides his analysis. There is a striking parallel to Martin's dream and the memory in Secrets of a Soul. Namely, the "Wolf Man" had dreamed at Christmas time of wolves in a tree, an image that carried a strong "impression of reality," and which he believed to be an allusion to a picture he had seen in a story book. In this dream the wolves were motionless and looking directly at him. The picture had activated a phobia against animals, in particular, against wolves. Freud analyzes the dream as the distorted representation of a primal scene actually witnessed by the child. Freud supposes that he had observed his parents copulating, with his father approaching the mother from behind. The phobia is the complex expression of a wish to act the role of woman to his father—the wolves are regarded as father surrogates—and it is evidence, Freud says, of the reality of the fear of castration. The crucial parallels are evident from our previous analysis.

What is particularly interesting in the case of the "Wolf Man" is the gap that exists between the narrative of the dream and the terms of a complex psychoanalytic explanation. The difference between story and interpretation is precisely what the Pabst film's narrative form attempts to convey through its sequencing of daily life, dream, memory, reconciliation. But Freud's case history, he is acutely aware, is not a complete narrative; it lacks something he can't supply.

I am unable to give either a purely historical or purely thematic account of my patient's story. I can write a consecutive history neither of the treatment nor of the disease, but I shall find myself obliged to combine the two methods of presentation. It is well known that no means has been found of in any way introducing into the reproduction of an analysis the sense of conviction which results from the analysis itself.... So analyses such as this are not published in order to produce conviction in the minds of those whose attitude has hitherto been recessant and skeptical (1914, p. 13).

What it lacks (and this is obvious in his exposition) is precisely what Freud is ordinarily so capable of providing: a logical demonstration. At the crucial point in his exposition, where the narrative is to pass over into a different mode of discourse, in order to supply the scene necessary to account for the phobia, he halts before going on to the description of the "picture of a coitus between his parents," that is, "what sprang into activity that night out of the chaos of the dreamer's unconscious memory traces":

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I have now reached the point at which I must abandon the support I have hitherto had from the cause of the analysis. I am afraid it will also be the point at which a reader's belief will abandon me. (Freud, 1914, p. 36)

The supposition of a factual event lying behind a neurosis, namely the "primal scene," has proved to be one of the most problematic areas of Freud's thought, and one that seems the least necessary and the most difficult to adopt. But it is an essential part of Freud's views and it appears elsewhere, in the theory of the parent's literal seduction of the child that preceded the formulation of the theory of the Oedipal complex, and in the theory of the primal horde in *Totem and Taboo*. What is at issue in such a characteristic explanatory gesture is Freud's attempt to mythologize the origin of the human subject, and of neurosis, through an account that supposes an archetypal drama (scene) the "Urphantasien" (primal phantasy). This concept serves in some phases of Freud's thought as a phylogenetic substructure, dramatizing the original point in the history of the emergence of the subject.

What concerns us here is not the validity of this explanation, or even its role in the psychoanalytic schema, but rather how, in the film under discussion, it relates to the technology of the primal scene. The system of the unconscious was elaborated as a scientific model through an analogy to an optical apparatus that considerably antedated the appearance of psychoanalysis. This conjuncture of psychoanalysis and photography, however, raises the question of the social and personal effects of photography in the constitution of images of the self and of the representation of the family. Certainly part of the archeology of psychoanalysis—discovering the operation of the unconscious in its relation to the family matrix—is a product of the 19th century. This discovery extends as well to Freud's transformation of the European idea of childhood through the assertion of childhood sexuality and coalesces around a changing conception of the family and the self. Certainly psychoanalysis emerges as a form of therapy and as a popular movement at the time the bourgeois family is subjected to the pressures of advanced industrial capitalism. *Secrets of a Soul* permits us to entertain a range of questions that it never really formulates: about the condition of the European family as the unit of social reproduction as it enters the 20th century, about the social conditions in which psychoanalysis as a movement was sustained, and about the popular uses and conventionalized forms that photography takes in relation to the family. While the film in some sense contains or raises these questions, it explicitly does so only in relation to the events of the early scene, the giving of the baby, which Martin recounts. It does so then through its evocation of the primal scene.

The specific question of interpretation that Martin's memory of this crucial scene raises is the conspicuous fact of the taking of a photograph. The scene with the photographer opens under the auspices of Martin's narration. The photographer is looking into the movie camera and in this he violates one of the narrative cinema's central prohibitions. A reverse shot shows the children stiffening into poses worthy of the occasion and cuts back to show the photographer smiling and indicating he "got the picture." This series and subsequent shots are framed (cf. Figure 2) so that the children completely occupy the vertical dimension of the frame, cutting an adult at the waist. Though this scene is developed through a shot/reverse shot format, a spatial disjunction, between the angle of the shot and the view it depicts, provides a sense of an objectified first person view. Though the impression conveyed, by scale and choice of angle, strongly asserts the immediacy of a present event from Martin's point of view, the style records, through a kind of distance, the effect of the narration of a memory. Of course this representation is sustained by the convention that there is no actual narrator or audience.
Clearly, the photograph being taken in this scene is meant to find its way into a family album. Indeed, it appears at the beginning of the film as Martin and his wife leaf through an album to prepare to welcome their cousin. In this it functions as a kind of record and even perhaps memorial and commemoration device that evokes and celebrates childhood. But the significance of the photograph in the film is not limited to this mnemonic use; it is attached as well to the act of photographing. It is clear here that the taking of the photograph precipitates, fixes (almost in the technical photographic sense), and condenses the impact of the early trauma of exclusion. It is a kind of singular event within a chain of events of a symbolically significant scene, and its uniqueness is designated as such by its striking prominence as the first shot in the sequence, and by the striking breach of the prohibition against looking at the camera. In this respect it conforms to two key elements in the case of the “Wolf Man”: the direct looking of the wolves at the dreamer and the anxiety and special significance attached to a pictorial image—whether a drawing or, as in this case, a photograph.

The case for this scene as a reenactment of a “primal scene” has a clear enough logic, though its consequence, castration or impotence, has affiliations not restricted to the case depicted by the film, but to the disorder of the social institution of the family as well. This logic is clear: what the sequence represents literally and also symbolically is Martin’s witnessing of the event customarily prohibited to his view. In the case of the “Wolf Man” the interpolation of a picture within the chain of symptoms acted as a kind of screen. The picture found in the story book blocked, and at the same time fixed, the original view in the form of a screened, though concrete, pictorial memory. Blockage, or fixing on this screen, is thus linked to avoidance, in the form of the animal phobia, and to symbolic castration. In the case of the neurosis presented in Secrets of a Soul, the image in the form of the photograph is fixed under similarly provocative conditions: it either repeats an earlier scene or, more probably, fixes an inaugural one. The event of Martin’s being photographed is at the same time the sign and the structure of the situation during which that moment is introduced into the “archive” of his memory. The simultaneity between the childhood event and its being photographed makes the case in the film different from the case of the wolf man.

In the film, being photographed is an integral part of the psychic structure of the dramatic event and not just of its subsequent remodeling. What is recorded as childhood memory in Secrets of a Soul, we suggest, thus belongs to the history of the appearance of the new medium of reproduction, photography, in its novel relation to the dynamics of the family. It introduces the mythic event underlying the formation of the subject into the technologies of the 20th century. The feature of simultaneity, of representation as part of the family drama, is a new and perhaps decisive historical moment in the relations between technology and the autonomous natural image-making capacity of the subject. Martin’s discovery of the source of his phobia in the scene of recognition at the end of the film is like the development of a latent undeveloped or negative image that fixed at the moment it was taken. The psychoanalytic context and the monologue it implies are required in order to animate the frozen image, dissolve the blockage that caused it, and introduce that memory into the flow of a life story.

It is in this connection that a specific cultural dimension of the film appears: the event of photography within the drama of intrapsychic processes of the family. The film concentrates on the dismembered family: the absence of the father is at every point insisted on and affirmed by the displacement and reinvestment of the paternal function in the lost father, or the father who has returned as the cousin. In the situation depicted for psychoanalytic instruction, the representation of the
figure of authority refers to a set of social as well as personal circumstances. The family matrix can be seen as an apparatus of production and reproduction of images, roles, or persona whose “product” is a functioning sexed subject. It is within the disturbance of this “natural” arrangement, linked to a crisis of authority—whatever the opaqueness of its causes—that the media technology and its social action appears.

If the historical configurations that bring together the masterpiece of psychoanalytic thought on dreams and the birth of the filmic apparatus are not regarded as simply coincidental, their relations call for study and documentation. The rise of the psychoanalytic movement, for example, coincides closely with the elaboration of film language. From this vantage point, Bazin’s speculation that “if the visual arts were put under psychoanalysis, at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex,” (1968, p. 9) seems all the more problematic. The relation that recent film theory has brought to the fore, the affinity and analogy between the deceptive operations of dream and the function of modern ideologies, opens a provoking new conceptual space in which these phenomena, dream and film, are historically linked.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. This statement is quoted by Chodoroff and Baxter (1974). Their article gives a full account of the genesis of the project. We wish to acknowledge Professor Chodoroff’s courtesy in supplying an English translation of the script on which the film was based, “Secrets of a soul, a psychoanalytic play,” by Colin Ross and Hans Neumann.

2. We are reading the film according to the psychoanalytic doctrines of the 1920s; Freud’s troublesome iconography of the female was present in the film.

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