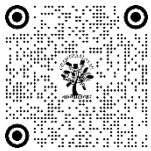


MODERN CINEMA AND THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED: A PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The review investigates where contemporary cinema lays out the psychoanalytic concept of the return of the repressed through fragmented narratives, emotional excess, and depictions of trauma. The study is based on Freudian and Lacanian frameworks, in terms of partly drawing on Freudian and partly on Lacanian frameworks, in which the films dramatize the unconscious desires, the unresolved losses, and the fractured identities. What follows are these works that undermine the classical narrative structures, highlight the intensities of effectual regimes, and create a disjunction/reconstituting engagement of the spectator, in consonance with the workings of repression and its repetition. The review analyzes a genius that has persisted in the generational, thematic, and cinematic continuities that these films provide, but which has been led to remained unconscious, becoming unconsciously operative in its structure and its experience. This discussion continues to address the evolving role of the spectator and its need for incorporating the insights that trauma theory and affect studies can offer in response, particularly to contemporary cinematic subjectivities. Through this lens, the study reaffirms the crucial importance of the studies of psychoanalysis to contemporary film theory and reaffirms the cinema's continued mediation between psychic split, loss, and desire.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Return of the Repressed, Modern Cinema, Trauma and Memory, Spectatorship

1. INTRODUCTION

The Freudian psychoanalytical term for the 'return of the repressed' is the idea of the repressed returning into conscious life in some distorted or symbolically disguised manner. Freud suggested that repression took place to protect the ego from internal conflicts and social prohibitions, though the repressed material had gone on in the unconscious and was seeking another means of expression (Sharma and Spiro, 2023). These repressed contents emerge through narrative structures, ambiguous or symbolic imagery, and character behaviour in the film; the film is a powerful medium for dealing with the repressions and the results of the repressions. The visual and temporal flexibility of cinematic storytelling is extremely well suited for telling out the tensions between keeping conscious defences and unconscious drives (Diamond, 2020). Despite the criticisms that have been levelled at it by postmodernists, psychoanalysis continues to be an important theoretical resource for film studies (in explaining the complexities of subjectivity, desire, and trauma). Ultimately, the coming prominence of the fragmented 21st-century identity, the partial but non-linear telling of stories, and the experience of various effects, all reflect contemporary cinema and psychoanalytic theories of the human mind (Tarzian *et al.*, 2023). Since *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, *Her*, and *The Whale*, there are very good examples of how more contemporary storylines deal with these processes of the unconscious by returning repressed conflicts and unfulfilled desires onto the screen. Aesthetic strategies of emotional excess, temporal dislocation, and bodily

vulnerability serve a useful function in these works in their attempts to extend the psychic tension a bit further. Placing psychoanalysis in the context of this fluidity of the cinematic, this essay explores how film uses pacotille to construct and destroy ideas of selfhood, memory and loss and how, though this film makes psychoanalysis contemporary, psychoanalysis continues to have the skill of interpreting their imaginative landscapes within contemporary visual culture (Busch *et al.*, 2009). This review seeks to interrogate the ways contemporary cinema has employed fragmented narratives alongside affective excess and forms of trauma to put to psychoanalytic use what is referred to as the return of the repressed. About these films, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, *Her*, and *The Whale*, the study employs a psychoanalytic framework to investigate how modern storytelling stages unconscious desires, unresolved losses, and fractured identities. In this review, the work functions to shed light on the way cinematic form has developed its relationship to psychoanalytic theory and continues to speak to or express repressed psychic tensions in a postmodern cultural milieu.

2. FREUD'S CONCEPT OF THE REPRESSED AND ITS CINEMATIC MANIFESTATIONS

There it is, the unconscious: the forbidden desires and traumatic memories that Freud called repression, and which consists of a dynamic reservoir actively, if constantly, fighting against return. This psychic mechanism is usually made visible in cinema through symbolic imagery, disjointed narrative, and characters under the influence of undetectable forces. The repression of material was not an explicit revelation but an indirect expression through dream sequences, repetitions, and uncanny moments that show the conflict between conscious repression and unconscious eruption (Kessler *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, film is made to appear as something much more complex than, say, the ordinary functioning of a movie to create entertainment: it is presented as a site in which hidden conflicts become realized in narrative form, in keeping with Freud's theories (Figure 1).

Figure 1

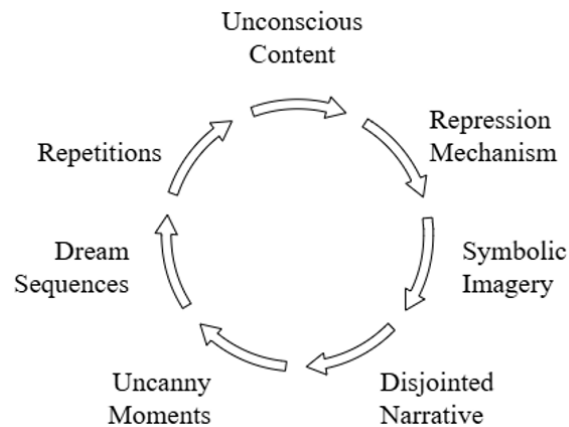


Figure 1 Cinematic Cycle of Repression

3. LACANIAN PERSPECTIVES ON SUBJECTIVITY AND DESIRE IN CINEMA

His reorientation of psychoanalysis emphasized language, the symbolic order, and had primacy of desire. The way films depict identity and fragmentation is informed by Lacan's notion of the "mirror stage," and the cinematic adaptation of it in terms of alienation in the formation of a subject. Characters on screen often take one on a journey involving unattainable objects of desire, or a misrecognition of one's 'self' dramatizing (concretely) Lacanian ideas of lack and the fictional ('CJ') self (Feng, 2022). Films reflect continuous gaps between self-perception and external reality through visual and narrative structures in an invitation to divided subjects.

4. MODERN ADAPTATIONS OF PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY IN FILM CRITICISM

When I speak of contemporary psychoanalytic film criticism in this thesis, I do not mean to simply expand out beyond what is known as traditional Freudian or Lacanian models, I also include insights from trauma studies, affect

theory, and what I believe is a burgeoning, yet less nameable, trunion regarding post-structuralist theory. Modern cinema's susceptibility to non-linear narratives, extreme emotional excess, and vulnerability of the body aligns with a contemporary understanding of repression that is no longer perfectly ordered (Evans and Harbord, 2024).

5. SHIFTS IN NARRATIVE STRUCTURES AND VISUAL LANGUAGE

Since the advent of modern cinema, narrative movies have offered a noticeable variant of their classical coherence in the areas of broken structures, temporal disjunctions, and multiphonic readings. Just as the conscious identity is destabilized and repressed, psychic material is revived by this fragmentation of the narrative, so this fragmentation of the narrative mirrors the narrative. Linearity is disrupted in films like *Everything Everywhere All At Once* to show varying interpretations of the self as different, often opposing, states of desires and fears shoved down in the unconscious. Rapid editing, surreal imagery, and layer diegesis become a vehicle for manifesting the disavowal and the hidden facets of subjectivity and make possible what becomes a cinematic experience resembling the discontinuities of psychic life (Cohn and Bender, 2017).

6. THE ROLE OF TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND DESIRE IN CONTEMPORARY STORYTELLING

The current state of storytelling is preoccupied with trauma, memory, and matters of the unconscious that have become rich in psychoanalytical readings. The films do not describe occurrences, they reconstruct the experience of repressed and deferred affect. *The Whale* constructs a corporeal container for psychic wounds, and movement is more akin to the painful exhumation of traumatic emotions than to external effect. Memory does not remember, rather a reactivated presence of past suffering destabilises the dividing line between past and present. Narrative movement is always propelled by desire, often sublimated or unattainable, as is consistent with Lacanian theory, that is, a subject formed by an irreparable lack (Zoromba *et al.*, 2024).

7. EMOTIONAL EXCESS AND FRAGMENTATION AS CINEMATIC STRATEGIES

In the contemporary film, the expressive mode foregrounds exuberant emotionality that averts their gaze from classical cinema, with which it was restrained into suppressed content that gets articulated. In *Her*, characters travel through landscapes of loneliness and longing, through psychic catharsis, emotions spill over rational control, and, rather than solving psychic conflicts, technology only exacerbates them. If segmentation, in the dimension of narrative structure, of character identity, or visual composition, is a cinematic strategy, it is a counterpart to the division of the subject (Yilmaz *et al.*, 2023). Emotional excess, far from being a source of what Thomas Lalley calls melodrama, is the symptomatic eruption of the unconscious, and it demands an affective engagement from the audience with experiences of loss, alienation, and unresolved psychic tension. Here, fragmentation and affect do not indicate the absence of coherent meaning but rather are beautiful, arbitrary acts of staging the execution and inevitable recurrence of repression (Fernández-Aguilar *et al.*, 2019).

8. EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE: MULTIVERSE AS A METAPHOR FOR REPRESSED SELVES

- 1) **Dissociation, Splitting, and Fragmented Identity:** To understand the multiverse is a chaotic and fractured texture of one, and another, a duality that becomes an externalization of psychic fragmentation—a mode of Infinite Hallucination that is reflected on the screen, not presented with narrative devices. It is through dramatized dissociative mechanisms of splitting and compartmentalisation that one simultaneously 'makes insinuated and escapes unbearable' and the drug shows its seamlessness between two concurrent realities (Mitra and Jain, 2023). Her inability to unite these opposed identities mirrors her psychic injury caused by repression and her battle to maintain a unified ego in contrast to the plurality of unconscious drives.
- 2) **The Unconscious Logic of Chaos and Desire:** The film's non-linear narrative structure reflects the unconscious' illogical, non-linear logic of disparate desires existing without rational order. Evelyn's repressed ambitions, regrets and fears map the extent of each alternate reality as an avenue of lost or unrealized desire. To that extent,

the multiverse is then a metaphorical dreamscape, a site where the repressed come back in overindulging and frequently bizarre fashion, bypassing rational defences (Ponte and Schäfer, 2013).

9. A PSYCHOANALYTIC INTERPRETATION

It is not a resolution that comes in mastery or domination of the multiverse but is a resolution of acceptance and reconciliation with that which one disavows regarding the self. Evelyn's emotional integration implies a psychoanalytic working through, where repressed desires are acknowledged, and psychic reorganisation and healing occur (Solms, 2018) (Figure 2).

Figure 2

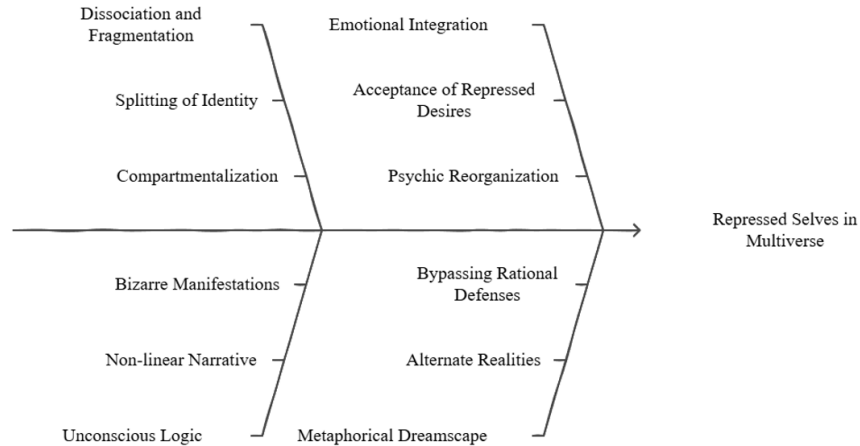


Figure 2 Unveiling Repressed Selves in Multiverse

10. HER: ARTIFICIAL INTIMACY AND THE SPECTER OF LOST DESIRE

- 1) **Technological Mediation of the Unconscious:** The film “Her” explores how technology is a modern mediator of unconscious desires. Theodore’s worship of the technology of the operating system Samantha represents the retreat into a constructed other, acts out the emotional needs that have been disavowed i.e., longings for connection and wholeness without the risks of human relationality (Hamrick, 2023).
- 2) **Emotional Isolation and the Fantasmatic Object:** Theodore and Samantha’s relationship can be read through the fantasmatic object, where desire is projected onto a fantasised figure that is meant to meet unfulfilled emotional needs. The fantasy is intensified by Samantha’s corporeality, which is absent, and the psychic split between conscious loneliness and unconscious yearning (LÓPEZ-CALVO *et al.*, 2023).
- 3) **The Illusion of Wholeness and the Persistence of Lack:** The Lacanian concept of lack is embodied by Samantha despite moments of intimacy. Nothing can compensate for the irreducible absence which structures human desire; whatever the appearance of the object to be situated, even if it seems very adaptive. Theodore’s eventual confrontation with loss reminds us that the gap between self and others is an impossibility to resolve (Rabelo *et al.*, 2024).

11. THE WHALE: CORPOREALITY, SHAME, AND THE RETURN OF REPRESSED TRAUMA

- 1) **The Body as a Site of Psychic Conflict:** In the Whale, Charlie’s beating, repressed trauma and self-hatred are housed in his living body. His obesity is not biological, it is a psychosis, a psychic wound to the psyche in this case; a materialization of psychic pain and symbolic of the heft of the unprocessed grief and internalized shame (Knight, 2019).
- 2) **Melancholia, Self-Destruction, and Unresolved Mourning:** Charlie’s compulsive eating and withdrawal into the world are signs of melancholia rather than mourning, where the loss of a loved object is not processed and is turned inwards against the self. The Freudian logic of melancholia is enacted through his self-destructive

behaviour, where repressed guilt and sadness are expressed through bodily degradation (Carhart-Harris et al, 2008).

- 3) **Redemption and the Impossible Closure of the Repressed:** Charlie's relationship with his daughter brings forth gestures of forgiveness and redemption, but full closure is never achieved. The film offers a resistant ending, concluding instead with the fixation of the repressed trauma on subjectivity despite the efforts at reconciliation (Zawadzki and Adamczyk, 2021).

12. VARIATIONS IN THE REPRESENTATION OF THE REPRESSED ACROSS GENRES

The genre-specific articulation of the repressed is played out in three films: *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, *Her*, and *The Whale*. All of this is employed by *Everything Everywhere All At Once* to make psychedelically kaleidoscopic sense of fragmented identities and long unexpressed desires under the guise of science fiction and absurdist fantasy, as an exercise in psychic disintegration expressed through an ultra kinetic, pop art sprawl of '70s fantastika (Méndez-González *et al.*, 2023). She adopts a melancholic, speculative realism of technological mediation that quietly stages the unattainable longings of the subject. By grounding the *Whale* in stark domestic realism and the return of the repressed through corporeality and claustrophobic spatial settings, it renders the *Whale*. Wherever the cinematic form adapts to the specific texture of psychic disturbance, it does so in one way or another to express repression at work (Klaus *et al.*, 2023) (Table 1).

Table 1 Representation of the Repressed Across Genres

Film	Genre/Style	Representation of the Repressed
<i>Everything Everywhere All at Once</i>	Science fiction and absurdist fantasy with psychedelic fragmentation.	Fragmented identities and unexpressed desires are expressed through hyperkinetic multiverse imagery.
<i>Her</i>	Melancholic speculative realism through technological mediation.	Unattainable longings projected onto technological objects within a melancholic framework.
<i>The Whale</i>	Stark domestic realism emphasises corporeality and spatial claustrophobia.	Psychic disturbance and unresolved trauma materialized through bodily degradation and confined spaces.

13. CONTINUITIES AND RUPTURES IN PSYCHOANALYTIC THEMES

Although these films are of different genres and styles, they have striking continuities in psychoanalytic themes. In each narrative identity is made unstable, loss unresolved, and closure unachievable. At the same time, the modes of resolution on offer are ruptured. All of these films gesture towards a partial reconciliation with multiplicity, *Her* laments the ultimate, inalienable unreachability of true relational fulfilment, and *The Whale* suggests that redemption, while redemption, is entirely out of reach (Altimir and Jiménez, 2021). These play with the elasticity of the psychoanalytic tropes to the extent of negotiating contemporary cinematic subjectivities.

14. MODERN ANXIETY AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

All of these films rest on a deep, profound engagement with contemporary forms of scientification, fear, and alienation. Character pathology is not the only way to render the persistence of the unconscious; narrative disjunctures, emotional excess, and affective intensity also serve this purpose. The unconscious no longer resides as an uncanny core secret, but rather a pervasive shattering of the idea of itself as the storehouse of that which is hidden away from reflection, under interrogation; an idea of rational agency and coherence of the self (Bargh, 2019). The return of the repressed thus becomes a common phenomenon of modern cinematic experience, dramatizing the failure of the desire, lost, to the broken tones of contemporary beings.

15. DEFINING THE ROLE OF THE SPECTATOR, THE SYSTEM OF SPECTATORSHIP, AND SPECTATORSHIP IN FRAGMENTED NARRATIVES

In contemporary cinema, narrative structures are fragmented to move the spectator to a highly active and interpreted position regarding the narrative filmic text. In the context of modern films, traditional psychoanalytic models

have to be examined as predicated on an illusionary spectator consistent with a stable alignment of narrative identification. Other films such as *Her* and *Everything Everywhere All At Once* depart from linear temporality and character unity, and demand the spectator's ways of navigating disjunctive experience and multiple subjectivities (Elman *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, the spectator comes to be less an inactive receptacle of meaning and more an active actor in the restoration of fragmented psychic reality, echoing the troubled and fragmented processes of repression and the return in the films themselves. It thus sets out to question psychoanalytic theories of cinematic identification, fantasy and affect through the repositioning of psychoanalytic approaches to the viewer, text and meaning (Kenwood *et al.*, 2022).

16. THE FUTURE OF PSYCHOANALYTIC FILM CRITICISM IN POSTMODERN CONTEXTS

Two neoanalytic psychoanalytic models that escort cinema into the postmodern moment are advanced in this thesis, as cinema increasingly portrays the multiplicity of postmodern subjectivity. In so doing, films like *The Whale* begin to reflect the rise of films that emphasize the embodied aspects of affect and melancholic states over psychic suffering, which certainly still exists, but emerges under the influence of more complex rather than neat symbolic interpretations. Thus, psychoanalytic criticism is called into question, to integrate into its thinking the insight that unconscious processes are multiple and fluid (Abebaw *et al.*, 2025). Complementing this need to be future approaches that take into account the ever-changing cinematic landscape, a landscape in which fragmentation, the emotional load, and technological mediation all determine how repression works in texts as well as amounts to spectatorship.

17. CONCLUSION

The return of the repressed becomes a critical analytic frame for the study of contemporary cinema when a psychoanalytic lens is used to explore the materiality of contemporary cinema. Films including *Her*, *The Whale*, and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* show us modern approaches to such exteriorisation of hidden grievances to the screen, through fragmentation, excess, and traumatizing representations of trauma, to visualise the inseparability of repression and its resurfacing. While each such film differs in terms of genre and style, it depicts subjectivities characterized by loss, instability, and undecidable desire in psychic rupture, which serves to represent the contemporary condition. It is to distort notions of a coherent identity itself: Modern cinema's engagement with these psychoanalytic themes both destabilises traditional understanding of an identity that can be apprehended from any ostensibly unambiguous external sources of information and repositions the spectator as being obliged to do the work of the spectator, of effectively looking at, reading, interpreting with these disturbed meanings and disjunctive experiences. This undead persistence of unconscious forces within fractured cinematic structures resists classical models of spectatorship and lays the groundwork for new critical stances that combine trauma theory, affect theories, and poststructuralism. This review thus underscores that the operations of repression and its return are still relevant to film criticism by highlighting the ways contemporary films represent how repression operates. At the same time, as cinematic narratives themselves develop in ways that are consonant with the condensed development of the very complexities of postmodern subjectivity, psychoanalytic approaches themselves must expand their imaginative scope by the psychic structures that so film so powerfully evokes.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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