AN EXPLORATION INTO THE ROLE OF TRANSPERSONAL
PSYCHOLOGY WITHIN EXISTING FILM THEORY

London, England

ABSTRACT: This article offers an exploration into the world of cinema from a psychological perspective. Although much has been written by psychoanalytical film theorists, and more recently from a post-Jungian point-of-view, very little has been written on what amounts to transpersonal film theory. Building upon a brief review of how film and film theory has been addressed from the psychoanalytic and Jungian psychological perspectives, the author investigates the place that the transpersonal may have within existing inquiry into psychology and cinema.

The world of film provides a fertile ground for psychology, and the influence that movies can have on viewers has been widely studied. Historically, it has been the psychoanalytical field that has made the most impact on cinematic film theory. Recently, the post-Jungians have also taken up the mantle and have started to seriously use films as an arena to explore Jung’s psychological theories. In order to have a full view on the psychological impact of movies, however, the transpersonal dimension must be taken into consideration. Use of a transpersonal lens to study the psychological influence of film on the viewer and the use of film to better understand and explore transpersonal theories has the potential to expand the scope of cinematic film theory.

The impact that films have on the spectator or film-viewer, however, is the major focus of this article, with the film itself receiving ancillary attention. In addition, although outside the scope of this study, the complex concept of spectatorship per se, which plays a key part in the study of film, also warrants future exploration from a transpersonal perspective.

For purposes of this article, transpersonal is construed as “experiences in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (trans) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche and cosmos” (Walsh & Vaughn, 1993, p. 203).

THE IMPACT OF MOVIES ON THE SPECTATOR

Watching films can have a positive impact on viewers. Generally, what is reported in the mass media, however, is the negative influence that movies can have. A few
films in fact have made headlines because of their controversial nature. One such film, Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers*, was widely criticised after a number of copycat murders took place after its release in 1994 ("Plugged In Film Review", 1999). The filmmakers were accused of distributing a film they knew, or should have known, would inspire people to commit crimes and both Stone and Time Warner were brought to trial. The case was eventually dismissed (Brooks, 2002).

More recently, in Britain, the influence of movies was called into question again. A newspaper article entitled “Mob Film Fantasies Fuelled Crime Spree” (Hardin, 2002) described how gangsters spent hours watching violent mob films such as *Gone in 60 Seconds* (2000) or *The Untouchables* (1987) before embarking on their criminal activities. After they were caught, however, Detective Inspector Keith Garnish was quoted as saying: “They thought they were The Untouchables but the Metropolitan Police has proved they are not untouchable” (p. 7).

Crowther (1984) stresses that the power of film to influence or condition thought and perceptions should not be underestimated. The glamorisation of criminals, such as Bonnie and Clyde and Al Capone, in Hollywood movies can have an influence on would-be criminals. He also describes how the filmgoer is more likely to believe the historical events shown in movies, even if they are historically inaccurate. For example, the depiction of Native American Indians in American Westerns during the 1940’s and 1950’s failed to show their tragic role in American history.

Negative impact makes headlines, but films can also have a positive influence on the spectator. In a study on the effects of Kurosawa’s 1952 film *Ikiru* on death anxiety, Lu and Heming (1987) recorded:

> The study group audience who viewed *Ikiru* underwent a similar experience [as the film’s protagonist] so that death anxiety was reduced. (pp. 157–158)

Another example of how film can positively influence viewers may be found in the story of Christoph Meili, a Swiss security guard, who accidentally came upon documents that proved Swiss banks had held Jewish assets seized by the Nazis. He took the documents, which were waiting to be shredded by the bank, and turned them over to a Jewish newspaper.

> Only three months earlier, he’d seen *Schindler’s List* and began reflecting on the film, which includes scenes of Nazis stealing valuables from Jews. “I have this in my mind. I remember, too, Schindler did something. I have the feeling I also have to do something.” (Beyette, 1998, p. 1)

According to the article, the inspiration of this film led Meili to play a key role in a US$1.25 billion settlement between Holocaust survivors and Swiss banks.

Moving beyond the purely positive/negative way of looking at film’s effect, we can explore movies from different psychological perspectives, thus offering deeper insights into how movies may affect the spectator. A review of psychoanalytic and Jungian perspectives will be followed by a discussion of the potential role that transpersonal psychology might contribute to existing film theory.
A long history has transpired between cinema and psychoanalysis since both emerged in the late 1800’s, but this relationship initially got off to a shaky start. In 1925, movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn offered Freud US$100,000.00 to consult on the making of a film about famous love stories throughout history and Freud turned him down (Sklar, 2000). However the film, *The Secrets of the Soul* directed by Pabst in 1926, was made and the mechanisms of Freud’s theories around the role of dreams were incorporated into the script with the collaboration of two psychoanalysts from Freud’s inner circle – Karl Abraham and Hanns Sachs (Sklar, 2000). The British press took full advantage to attack Freud even though he had no personal part to play in the making of the film. Ernest Jones (1993/1953) wrote:

They [the British Press] said that Freud, having failed in securing support of his theories among professional circles, had in despair fallen back on the theatrical proceeding of advertising his ideas among the populace through a film. (p. 566)

Despite this initial setback, growing interest has emerged within the psychoanalytical field relevant to the study of film, to such an extent that only a small representation of psychoanalytical contributions can be discussed in this article. For example, Hayward (2000) gives her psychoanalytical view on film:

[Film] projects our desires onto the screen, it functions as a release for our repressed unconscious state and our fantasies. (p. 377)

She continued to describe how film theorists, such as Metz, Bellor, and Baudry, brought psychoanalytical theory to film studies. By drawing on the Freudian premise of *libido drives* and the similarity between the *Lacanian mirror stage* and the silver screen, they were able to explain how films work at an unconscious level. Lacan’s mirror stage, in simple terms, is the period from 6 to 18 months where the child only understands itself through projection and can only see itself in terms of the “other.” Lebeau (1995) explains further:

Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage has been used to support a description of cinema as a source of regressive and hallucinatory satisfaction for a spectator-subject . . . who identifies with his or her own act of perception via primary identification with the camera. (p. 39)

According to this psychoanalytical approach, the purpose of image in Hollywood films is to encourage a regressive or backward movement in the spectator from modes of thinking, such as judgment and rationalisation, to hallucinatory pleasures of wanting and desiring (Metz, 1982). This movement reduces the effects of film to instinctual or sexual identification based on *desire or pleasure* in the spectator. Mulvey (1975) goes one step further by stating that it is the voyeurism and fetishism in men that have objectified women in films. Because the film camera takes the view, or the gaze, of the main character, usually a man, women become sexual objects for the viewers’ desire and pleasure. These theories are important contributions to the
study of film; however, Greenberg (1993) warns psychoanalytical film theorists that their approach can have its drawbacks:

Far too easily an untutored psychoanalysis renders down subtle creativity into a few dreary rubrics – penis envy, faulty bowel training, so forth. (p. 20)

Feelings or emotions beyond pleasure receive little discussion by psychoanalytical film theorists. Plantinga and Smith (1999) point out this obvious absence when they state that psychoanalytical film theorists:

... could appear to be dealing with the question of emotion without having to pay closer attention to the specifics of emotional experience. (p. 11)

With so much attention on sexual or instinctual identification, emotions, such as sadness, love, and fear are left out. Mangin (1999) considers that movies reach us on an emotional level, bypassing the intellect, and can neutralise the instinct to repress. One often hears of people who rarely shed a tear in their everyday life and yet they can cry at the movies. Sprengnether (2002) gives a good example of this phenomenon when she writes about her personal experience of how different movies throughout her life have helped her emotionally:

Film, in a multitude of ways, serves my need to recollect – to go back and pick up – the feelings I suppressed or abandoned in the process of growing up. (p. 15)

She recounts how she repressed her feelings at the death of her father when she was nine years old only for her to cry, uncontrollably, at the movie *Pather Panchali* years later. Smith (1995) believes that our propensity to respond emotionally to characters is a key to the enjoyment and experience of films. Yet, spiritual and other profound experiences that one can have when watching a movie remain unaddressed by the psychoanalytic movement.

**A Jungian Perspective**

More recently, a movement has emerged in the study of film and film theory towards a Jungian perspective although, as Hockley (2001) writes, only a handful of books have been written on this subject. Jung (1966) wrote very little on the role of film; however, he did acknowledge that the cinema had a purpose in the modern world. He said:

The cinema ... like the detective story, makes it possible to experience without danger all the excitement, passion and desirousness which must be repressed in a humanitarian ordering of life. (p. 253)

One aspect of Jungian psychology relevant to this exploration is that Jung (1964) believed that the psyche, or soul, operates not only at an individual level, but there is a collective, or objective psyche also at play in the unconscious. The psyche reveals itself through images and symbols that convey living, subjective meaning (Edinger, 1972). An example of this in film was the impact of *Field of Dreams*,...
made in 1989 by Phil Alden Robinson. One aspect of the film, which was shot in Dyersville, Iowa, was about the healing of a father and son relationship through a common love for baseball. After the film was made, the farmers, whose land was used for filming, decided to keep the baseball field rather than plow it over. According to Hollowitz (Hauke & Alister, 2001), thousands of people came to this field, spending time reflecting, walking around, and playing baseball on the field. This happened year after year despite the fact that the farmers did not advertise. This movie touched the psyche of thousands of film viewers through the symbol of one of America’s best-loved sports, baseball. Baseball is rooted deeply within the objective psyche of America (as opposed to many other countries around the world who are not interested in this sport – England being one of the them) and Field of Dreams reflected back, as Hollowitz believes, an innocence and sentimentality of a time gone by.

Kittelson (1998) asserts that movies, as well as other forms of popular culture (such as art), express the deeper issues of the individual viewer and culture as a whole. Kenevan (1999) also believes that films work at a deeper level on the viewer and that although it seems that outwardly we are only spectators of a film, inwardly there is an inner observer relating and reacting to the film in extremely personal ways. Kenevan states that films:

... bring to our conscious awareness messages from an unconscious depth which find expression through symbols and metaphors at work. (p. 7)

If we, as film-viewers, are responding to the symbols and images in film, Izod (2001) believes, like Smith (1995), that it is through emotions that the deeper levels of the psyche, both personally and collectively, are reached. In other words, perhaps one way we respond to symbols and images is through our feelings about what we are shown on the silver-screen.

In Jung & Film, Hauke & Alister (2001) bring together a collection of essays showing how Jungian concepts, such as archetypes, alchemy, and active imagination, can be used in the analysis of individual films. The authors acknowledge that the experience of cinema has the potential to become a temenos, or imaginal space, which can have a transformative effect on the spectator. Unfortunately, they do not go into more depth on this topic. Berry (2001), in her essay for the same book, believes that it is the act of filming, rather than seeing something in its natural state, which makes the impact on the viewer. She writes:

I think the answer is that the transformation that occurs in the act of filming creates or perhaps releases the “psyche” of the subject. The scene is no longer nature, but art. We experience this transformation from nature to art, and are magnetised by it. (p. 71)

It is also important to discuss what Jung (1995/1963) termed numinous experiences and whether films can bring forth this experience in the viewer. Borrowing this term from Rudolf Otto, Jung defined the numinous as powerful emotional or spiritual experiences from dreams or waking life, which leave a deep impression on the individual. There is a strong link between the Jungian approach to film and the
transpersonal perspective (for example, the impact of myths on the film viewer). Where these two approaches differ is the development of more spiritual or religious experiences of the spectator. There is ample anecdotal evidence for this numinosity in the personal experience of watching a movie (for example, see Lopate and Woolf below). Based on my review, however, the Jungian literature does not appear to address this phenomenon.

TOUCHING ON THE TRANSPERSONAL

Toward the end of the last century writers started to recognise the transpersonal dimension to film theory. Marsha Sinetar (1993) has written about how movies can assist viewers on their spiritual path:

Film, like poetry, is one of our heart’s most subtle agents. It reminds us of what we know, helps us stretch and change, provides us with a sensory catalyst for creative, cutting-edge reflection. (p. 7)

Teague (2000) has described movies as the cultural storyboard for a great awakening. He discussed how films can incorporate the transpersonal:

Movies are increasingly helping us to assimilate an expanded view of reality and new ideas about our inner powers and the nature of matter and energy. (p. 3)

Building upon the contribution to film theory by the psychoanalytical and Jungian fields, at least two areas need consideration in order to shape the transpersonal dimension, and its potential contribution to the study of film and film theory, that is, the role of film in: (a) bringing universal myths to life, and (b) providing transpersonal experiences.

Movies and Myths

In many ways the cinema has taken the place, in the modern world, of the way we communicate myths, which throughout history have been the stories, the history, and the beliefs of the society to which we belong. Myths not only impacted the individual, but also the tribe to which he or she belonged. Rituals, or rites, are the physical enactments of myths (Campbell, 1972). Listening to these stories has captured our attention for centuries. For example, in ancient Rome a “theor” was a person who was delegated by the community to go out into the world and experience holy shrines, and then report the experience back to the tribe (Stanton, 1997). With the creation of celluloid, and the filmmakers as modern day theors, those same stories (except that most films—with the exception of documentaries—are now fiction) are now projected on to a giant screen for the tribe to see (although with the popularity of video and now DVD, some of us have moved away from the tribe, back into our own worlds).

For some, going to the cinema has become like a religious activity. Hill (1992) writes that modern cinema has become the . . .
... collective cathedral of primitive “participation mystique.” It is the tribal dream house of modern civilisation. (p. 4)

What brings these screen myths to life is the participation of the spectator. Hill maintains that filmgoers have a natural tendency to participate in the myths shown to them because of their ability and willingness to suspend disbelief. It is this participation that allows the film, and the myth, to make its impact on the viewer.

Parker (2000) discusses how movies are an interaction between the viewer and the movie. Great movies can bring to life both the personal experience of the viewer and the stories, myths, and legends of his or her culture.

Joseph Campbell (Campbell & Moyers, 1981) gives a specific example of how the movie, Star Wars, written and directed by George Lucas in 1977, relays the message of a myth:

Lucas has put the newest and most powerful spin to the classic story of the hero... the message that technology is not going to save us. We have to rely on our intuition, our true being. (p. xiv)

The Star Wars myth has had a worldwide impact. In both the U.K. and Australia, citizens described their religion as “Jedi” on their census forms. In Australia, more than 70,000 citizens did this in an attempt to make the Jedi faith a recognised religion. Although their attempt failed (Jedi Religion, BBC News, 27 August 2002), their effort shows the power of—and hunger for—myth and film.

Myths are an important aspect of the transpersonal perspective because they can take the viewer into the realm of the collective, as well as the personal, experiences of life. Mythology connects us back to ancient times and keeps us in touch with the cultural and spiritual beliefs that our ancestors set forth. Jung (1995) believed that we all carry relics of the collective unconscious deep within our psyche. It is these primitive myths that have become a staple of cinema since its earliest beginnings. For example, Winkler (2001) discusses how ancient mythology is kept alive through the retelling, in the modern cinema, of the specific stories from ancient Rome and Greece. It is the popularity of this modern-day cinema that helps keep these myths alive. While the Jungian perspective has laid a foundation to help us understand the concept of myth, the transpersonal literature, and lens, provides a framework for understanding the transpersonal experience of the viewer.

Cinema, Spirituality and Religious Experiences

Johnson (2000) believes that, at times, movies have “a sacramental capacity to provide the viewer an experience of transcendence” (p. 57). Martin and Ostwalt (1991) confirm this when describing how films, as well as other forms of popular culture, allow individuals to participate in that which provides meaning. From a transpersonal perspective, we are not only seeking instinctual or emotional release, but also a deeper and more profound experience when we watch films.
This transpersonal view stands in contrast to the psychoanalytical literature on the impact of films. A discussion of cinema that includes religious or spiritual perspectives opens up the possibility of a wider, more holistic view. Martin (1981) states that:

... one must realize that the experience of cinema must be open to integration into the total experience of one’s self. If film is to be taken seriously, one must accept it as having an impact on one’s total integration including the religious dimension of that integration. (pp. 51–52)

In other words, film does not just have an instinctual, emotional, or cognitive impact. For a complete view, one must include the transpersonal. Johnston (2000) reiterates this:

As image, film assumes an artist and a viewer. As story, film assumes a speaker and a hearer. That is, although we might be watching a movie while sitting silently in a theatre, we are still part of a dialogue. For movies seek to engage us, their viewer, as whole human being. (p. 14)

Some filmmakers themselves also acknowledge the need to incorporate the transpersonal dimension in movies. Directors Robert Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu, and Carl Dreyer have been associated with a movement called “transcendental style,” described in Paul Schrader’s (1972) book Transcendental Style in Film. Schrader, a director and screenwriter himself, believes that these filmmakers are purposely making movies that express, what he calls, the “Holy”:

The style is not intrinsically transcendental or religious, but it represents a way (a “tao”, in the broadest sense of the term) to approach the Transcendent. (p. 3)

Finally, an exploration of actual transpersonal experiences reported from watching movies also warrants attention. David John Graham (quoted in Marsh & Ortiz, 1991) shares a personal example of watching Steven Spielberg’s 1993 film Schindler’s List for the first time: “The experience had been like being in the presence of something awesome” (p. 36). Unfortunately, he did not go into more detail.

Phillip Lopate also writes about his spiritual experience of watching Diary of a Country Priest (quoted in Rosenberg, 1991). In describing this movie, Lopate explains how it changed his life:

It did so by putting me in contact with a habit of mind that I may as well call spiritual, and a mental process suspiciously like meditation. (p. 208)

Lopate, like Graham, does not go into great detail about his experience, but he does describe that it was going to the cinema that gave him a sense of sacredness in everyday life. It was in the confines of the dark cinema where he could exercise his sense of spirituality.

Screenwriter, Paul Woolf (1998), had a similar experience from watching the film, Spartacus, when he was 14 years old. After a scene in which Spartacus’s wife...
described how she was not interested in killing, but rather with deeper things such as “why we are here”, Woolf said that all of a sudden there was an:

... incredible flight of questioning about life... On the train back to Brooklyn, I kept thinking, how can this be? Why had I never experienced this in a house of worship? That’s when I made my decision. I said to myself, I’m going to Hollywood to make movies. (p. 116)

Woolf is describing how a cinematic event directed the course his life was to take.

These three accounts give some indication of transpersonal experiences at the movies. The transpersonal dimension has the potential to become an integral part of film theory. We cannot always reduce all of our experiences to fantasy or wish fulfilment. As mentioned above, we can also have expansive, awe-inspiring encounters that, in other words, could be called transpersonal experiences.

While the psychoanalytic and Jungian perspectives have offered a strong foundation to cinematic film theory (from the use of cinema as a way of meeting our basic needs, such as desire and pleasure, to the impact of film on the objective psyche), for a more holistic perspective I believe we must include the transpersonal dimension, which includes a wider, broader perspective on the human experience. The addition of a transpersonal lens has the potential to bring to awareness not only how films might catalyze transpersonal development in the viewer, but also how transpersonal theory might be applied to better understanding films and conversely how films can be used to explore transpersonal theories.

REFERENCES


The Author

Debbie Charles is a registered psychotherapist and supervisor in private practice and a staff member at the Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Education in London, England. Her master’s research, which led to this article, inspired her to think more deeply about the potential role the transpersonal could play in expanding the scope of cinematic film theory. The title of her thesis was Cinema of the Soul: The Transpersonal Experience of Watching a Movie, a phenomenological study where she explored the actual experiences of moviegoers (including her own experience) relating to the transpersonal. She completed her M.A. in Transpersonal Psychotherapy and Counselling, in 2003, through De Montfort University (Leicester, England) and The Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Education (London, England).