

CINEMA AS A CULTURAL PRODUCT: A PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPLORATION

¹Shiju Joseph

¹Assistant Professor

Department of Psychology

Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

Abstract: This paper examines cinema as a cultural product through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, exploring how cinematic narratives engage with unconscious desires, cultural myths, and ideological structures. Drawing on foundational concepts from Freud, Lacan, and Mulvey, it analyses key psychoanalytic constructs such as scopophilia, the mirror stage, and the male gaze, demonstrating their relevance in interpreting cinematic representation. The study situates film within broader cultural frameworks to reveal how cinema reinforces or subverts societal ideologies. Furthermore, feminist and post-structuralist critiques are integrated to interrogate psychoanalysis's limitations while extending its applicability. By examining the intersection of psychoanalysis, film theory, and cultural studies, the paper highlights cinema's role as both an artistic and ideological apparatus that shapes and reflects human experience.

Keywords: Cinema, Psychoanalysis, Cultural Studies, Film Theory, Ideology

Introduction

Cinema, as a cultural artifact, has long captivated audiences, offering a medium through which societies narrate their myths, desires, anxieties, and aspirations. The interplay between cinema and psychoanalysis has become a fertile ground for theoretical exploration, given the shared focus on the unconscious, desire, and identity formation. While psychoanalysis originated as a clinical tool for understanding individual psychology, its interpretative reach has extended into cultural and artistic domains, including literature, visual arts, and, notably, film.

This paper explores cinema as a cultural product through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, arguing that psychoanalytic concepts provide a critical framework for interpreting the psychological dynamics embedded in cinematic narratives. Drawing primarily on the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, along with contributions from feminist film theory and cultural criticism, the analysis highlights how cinema serves as a site for the projection, repression, and resolution of unconscious desires. The discussion is organized into sections examining psychoanalysis as an interpretative tool, film experience through psychoanalytic lenses, and the broader cultural implications of cinematic narratives.

By applying psychoanalytic theory, this paper seeks to uncover how cinema functions both as a reflection of cultural anxieties and as a mechanism of ideological reinforcement, while also considering critiques of psychoanalytic interpretations in cultural studies. Through a critical analysis of theoretical perspectives, the discussion aims to conceptualise the process of how cinematic texts negotiate the unconscious, shaping audience engagement and cultural meaning.

Psychoanalysis as an Interpretative Enterprise

Freud used psychoanalysis as an interpretive science applicable to cultural objects like art and literature, though he never directly analyzed cinema. In fact, Freud often distanced himself from cinema, expressing apprehension toward this emerging art form (Marinelli, 2004).

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud describes scopophilia, or the pleasure of looking, as a fundamental component of infantile sexuality. He theorizes that adult sexual instinct develops through contributions from various erotogenic zones. The exact origin of scopophilia remains unclear; however, Freud suggests that the act of seeing 'is ultimately derived from touching' (Freud, 1905, p.69). Voyeurism, where the subject's primary form of sexual activity involves observing others, derives from infantile scopophilia. Classical psychoanalysis pairs voyeurism with exhibitionism as opposing instincts. Melanie Klein's object theory, which centers on the subject's need to relate to objects, proposes that the voyeur experiences a fantasy

of control over the object viewed (Klein, 1948). Viewing, in this sense, is a precursor to touching and potentially possessing the desired object.

The Film Experience in Terms of Psychoanalysis

Freud never conducted a formal analysis of cinema. Consequently, early film theorists drew on psychoanalytic writings, constructing theories based largely on analogies to explain the psychological dynamics of film viewing. Analysts interpret film through the 'hermeneutic suspicion of psychoanalysis'—the belief that a text can hold meanings beyond its explicit narrative (Kakar, 2009).

As early as 1916, Hugo Munsterberg asserted that in the 'photoplay,' our imagination is projected onto the screen (Dover cited in Altman, 1985). In 1949, Hugo Mauerhofer likened the cinema experience to dreaming, highlighting features such as the viewer's passive state, comfort, anonymity, and receptiveness, which collectively induce a withdrawal from reality. Unlike in sleep, where individuals produce their own dreams, cinema delivers preconstructed dreams. Decades earlier, Ilya Ehrenberg had already labeled Hollywood a 'dream factory' (Altman, 1985). Indeed, the global film industry is often referred to as a 'dream world,' with film stars celebrated as 'dream girls.'

Lacan and Film Theory

Jacques Lacan made significant contributions to film theory, particularly in explaining the spectator's identification process through his concept of the mirror stage (Lacan, 1966/2006). Lacan argued that individuals are 'spoken by' their culture, meaning that identity is shaped through the perception and language imposed by society. In the mirror stage, an infant sees its reflection and misrecognizes this unified image as a superior, coherent self. This 'ideal ego' becomes the foundation for later identifications (Flitterman-Lewis, 2000).

In cinematic terms, spectators identify with on-screen images through similar mechanisms. Techniques such as 'point-of-view' and 'reverse shot' structures reinforce this identification, leading many film theorists to liken the screen to a mirror—perhaps echoing Lacan's view of the mirror as a symbolic screen.

Christian Metz (1985), a pioneer of comprehensive film theory, compared the film spectator to a child watching the primal scene through a keyhole. In this submotor, hyper-receptive state, the passive spectator becomes a voyeur. Metz also linked this viewing position to the child in the mirror stage, suggesting that cinema operates as an 'Imaginary signifier.' On-screen images are mere reflections, devoid of physical reality, yet they sustain a compelling illusion. Metz termed this effect the 'reality illusion,' highlighting cinema's ability to blur the boundaries between the Real and the Imaginary (Altman, 1985).

Cinema as Popular Culture

Cinema has long been a central element of popular culture worldwide. Theoretical analyses of popular culture have evolved significantly, frequently applying frameworks from anthropology, semiotics, and cultural criticism to cinematic studies. These theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights into how cinema shapes and reflects societal norms, cultural myths, and ideological narratives.

Claude Lévi-Strauss used structuralism to reveal the 'unconscious foundations' of culture through recurring patterns in myths across societies. He argued that myths function similarly to dreams but are meant to be remembered rather than forgotten (Lévi-Strauss, 1998). In semiotics, myth represents how societies construct and explain reality. Roland Barthes (1957) explored this in *Mythologies*, asserting that cultural artifacts gain meaning through mythic functions, which 'purify' and 'naturalize' history, rendering ideology invisible (Barthes, 1999, p.58).

The Frankfurt School philosophers, including Adorno and Horkheimer, critiqued popular culture as a commodified 'culture industry.' Adorno argued that mass-produced art suppresses individuality and discourages critical thinking, paving the way for potential political manipulation (Storey, 1993).

Vladimir Propp's narrative analysis of Russian folktales identified recurring narrative functions essential to storytelling. His structuralist model of 31 narrative functions, consistently ordered, remains relevant in film analysis today (Propp & Wagner, 1968).

Louis Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) situates cinema within state-controlled ideological mechanisms. ISAs, including media and cultural institutions, function through ideology rather than force, subtly shaping individual beliefs and ensuring social conformity (Althusser, 1999). Althusser's integration of Lacanian psychoanalysis deepens the understanding of film's ideological roles in modern society.

Umberto Eco (1988) highlighted cinema's narrative flexibility through the concept of 'cult films,' which combine archetypes with historical elements. Films like *Casablanca* resonate because they offer a richly furnished world open to reinterpretation (Geetha, 1990).

Michel Foucault's notion of the 'panoptic gaze' further contextualizes cinema's power dynamics. Inspired by the architectural design of the panopticon—a prison enabling constant surveillance—Foucault (1977) argued that visual control is central to cultural authority. This metaphor has been instrumental in analyzing cinema's regulatory and observational functions in visual culture.

Cinema and Visual Pleasure

By the 1970s, Lacanian theories gained prominence in cultural and artistic analysis. The following decade saw a synthesis of semiotics, post-structuralism, feminism, Althusserian Marxism, and psychoanalytic thought, particularly through the film journal *Screen*. This intellectual paradigm, often labeled 'Lacanian Film Theory,' ironically relied heavily on Freudian concepts, with only selective use of Lacanian ideas (Kaplan, 1990). The feminist critique within this framework led to seminal works like Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1985).

Mulvey's essay applied psychoanalysis to expose how mainstream cinema reinforces patriarchal structures. Drawing on Freud's theories of sexuality and the unconscious, coupled with Lacan's mirror stage, Mulvey argued that cinematic forms encode a phallogentric order. According to her, cinematic pleasure operates through two mechanisms: scopophilia (voyeurism) and narcissistic identification. In the darkened theater, spectators experience voyeuristic pleasure, isolated from one another while projecting desires onto on-screen performers. Additionally, the anthropomorphic conventions of film enable narcissistic identification, akin to the child in Lacan's mirror stage imagining its reflected image as a superior self.

Mulvey posited that mainstream films align visual pleasure with male dominance. The "male gaze" objectifies female characters, casting them as passive subjects of desire. The female form simultaneously evokes fascination and threat, connoting 'lack'—a psychoanalytic symbol of castration anxiety. To resolve this, narratives either punish or fetishize the female figure, a mechanism Mulvey illustrated using the works of Hitchcock and Sternberg. Mulvey identified three cinematic 'looks': the camera's gaze, the audience's view, and characters' interactions on screen. Mainstream films suppress the first two perspectives, privileging the third, ensuring immersive spectator identification.

In a later essay, Mulvey reconsidered her use of the male singular to describe spectatorship (Mulvey, 1990). She acknowledged that female spectators could assume both active and passive viewing positions, rediscovering aspects of pre-Oedipal identity or identifying with female protagonists through conflicted representations.

Another feminist scholar, Claire Johnston (1976), expanded on psychoanalytic film theory. Using Freud and Lacan, she argued that classical cinema reinforces female identity as 'other,' with the phallus as the dominant signifier of desire. Johnston advocated for feminist film practices that subvert this symbolic order, challenging traditional portrayals of women as passive objects.

Theoretical Shifts in Film Criticism

During the 1980s and 1990s, the dominance of psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism in film criticism diminished under the influence of postmodernist thought (Monaco, 2000). Semiotic and dialectical approaches gave way to cognitive film theory and cultural studies, reflecting a broader shift toward post-structuralist interpretations (Stam, 2000; Bordwell, 1989).

Cognitive film theory explores how spectators comprehend and interpret films, focusing on narrative structures, mental processes, and viewer engagement (Bordwell & Thompson, 1997). In contrast, cultural studies investigate the dynamic relationship between popular culture texts and their audiences, emphasizing how cultural products are consumed, interpreted, and reimagined (Fiske, 2010).

Post-structuralist methods reframed film analysis by highlighting the reciprocal ideological interactions between texts and spectators (Stam, 2017). These approaches reject the notion of a film as a transparent or neutral medium. Instead, texts are understood as socially constructed, shaped by contexts and production modes, and always subject to reinterpretation (Barthes, 1977). As post-structuralist critics argue, no text is ever truly innocent; its meaning must be deconstructed through critical engagement, revealing underlying power structures and ideological assumptions (Foucault, 1972).

Contemporary Cultural Theory and Psychoanalysis

Cultural studies is often defined by its emphasis on historical and social specificity. Psychoanalysis, however, has faced criticism from cultural theorists for being 'ahistorical' and 'apolitical,' largely due to its Eurocentric roots and gendered metaphors. Despite these critiques, cultural studies frequently draws upon psychoanalysis for its interpretative power. Contemporary thinkers like Slavoj Žižek (2017) integrate psychoanalysis with social analysis and cultural criticism, demonstrating its continued relevance.

Over the past century, psychoanalysis has evolved while retaining its foundational principles. Discussions about the cultural dimensions of psychoanalysis remain ongoing, though no definitive conclusions have emerged. Cultural psychoanalysts like Sudhir Kakar argue that culture should be considered an 'early' rather than 'late' influence in the formation of the superego, contrasting with more orthodox Freudian perspectives. Modern psychoanalytic approaches increasingly focus on relational dynamics rather than instinctual drives, framing psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic practice centered on meaning-making rather than causal explanations (Kakar, 1989).

Conclusion

Though psychoanalysis began as a clinical tool, it has become a vital framework for interpreting cultural narratives, offering insights into ideological roles of cultural artefacts like cinema, despite persistent critiques of its Eurocentric and patriarchal roots.

Cinema, as both an artistic and ideological apparatus, remains a powerful medium for negotiating cultural myths, desires, and anxieties. The application of psychoanalytic concepts such as the mirror stage, the male gaze, and the unconscious structures of desire illustrates how films construct meaning and shape social identities. By embracing post-structuralist, feminist, and cultural critiques, psychoanalysis has adapted to address broader socio-political contexts, offering a nuanced lens for interpreting the intersections of identity, power, and representation.

In an age marked by rapid cultural shifts, psychoanalytic film theory continues to provoke critical inquiry into how cinema shapes and reflects human experience. As theoretical perspectives evolve, the dynamic dialogue between psychoanalysis and cultural theory underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding media and culture.

References

- Althusser, L. (1999). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In Jessica Evans and Stuart Hill (Eds.) *Visual Culture: The Reader* (pp. 100-138). London: Sage.
- Altman, C.F. (1985). Psychoanalysis and Cinema. In B. Nichols (Ed.) *Movies and Methods Vol. II* (pp. 517-530). London: University of California Press Ltd.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, Music, Text* (S. Heath, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang.
- Barthes, R. (1999). Myth Today. In Jessica Evans and Stuart Hill (Eds.) *Visual Culture: The Reader* (pp. 51-58). London: Sage.

Bordwell, D. (1989). *Making meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bordwell, D. & Thompson, K. (1997). *Film Art: An Introduction* (5th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Eco, U. (1988). Casablanca: Cult Movies and Inter-textual Collage. In David Lodge (Ed.) *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (pp. 121-139). New York: Longman.

Fiske, J. (2010). *Understanding Popular Culture*. Routledge.

Flitterman-Lewis, S. (2000). *Psychoanalysis, Film and Television*. Retrieved January 15, 2005, from jcomm.uoregon.edu/~cbybee/j388/psych.html

Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (A. M. Sheridan Smith, Trans.). New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Freud, S. (1905/1953). *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. London: Penguin Books.

Geetha, J. (1990). The Mutating Mother - From Mother India to Ram Laxman. *Deep Focus*, 3(3), 9-15.

Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Ed.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128-138). London: Routledge.

Johnston, C. (1976). Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema. In B. Nichols (Ed.) *Movies and Methods Vol. I* (pp. 208-222). London: University of California Press Ltd.

Kakar, S. (2009). *Mad and Divine: Spirit and Psyche in the Modern World*. University of Chicago Press.

Kaplan, E.A. (1990). From Plato's Cave to Freud's Screen. In A. E. Kaplan (Ed.) *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (pp. 1-23). New York: Routledge.

Klein, M. (1948). *Contributions to Psychoanalysis*. London: Hogarth Press.

Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits: A Selection* (B. Fink, Trans.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (2008). *Structural Anthropology*. Basic books.

Marinelli, L. (2004). *Smoking, Laughing and the Compulsion to Film - On the Beginnings of Psychoanalytic Documentaries, American Imago* (Electronic Version), 61(1), 35-58. Retrieved March 11, 2005, from muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_imago/v061/61.6_marinelli.html

Metz, C. (1985). Story/Discourse: Notes on Two Kinds of Voyeurism. In B. Nichols (Ed.) *Movies and Methods Vol. II* (pp. 543-548). London: University of California Press Ltd.

Monaco, (2000). *How to Read a Film*, 4th edn. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mulvey, L. (1985). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In B. Nichols (Ed.) *Movies and Methods Vol. II* (pp. 303-314). London: University of California Press Ltd.

Mulvey, L. (1990). After Thoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*. In E. Ann Kaplan (Ed.) *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (pp. 24-35). New York: Routledge.

Propp, V. & Wagner, L.A. (Ed.) (1968). *Morphology of Folktale*. Austin: The American Folklore Society.

Stam, R. (2017). *Film Theory: An Introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.

Storey, J. (1993). *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. London: Harvester Wheat Sheat.