COMPOSITIONAL PSYCHOANALYSIS: CIRCLES AND STRAIGHT LINES IN "SPELLBOUND"

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Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) is a fascinating film for the ways in which it advances the traditional mainstream narrative by borrowing heavily from the experimental film's past. The most obvious borrowing, of course, is in Salvador Dali's stylized approximation of the amnesiac's dream, with its echo of *Andalusian Dog* (the cutting of the eye-balls on the curtain with a pair of scissors), Leger's *Card Players* (the gambling), de Chirico's faces wrapped in masks, Max Ernst (the bird imagery) and other derivative Surrealist imagery. More subtle (but no less borrowed) are Hitchcock's object-transfers, the oversimplification of Freud by way of the dream imagery in Pabst's *Secrets of a Soul* (1926), Man Ray's *L'Etoile de mer* (1928) and Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1944). In particular, the way in which objects are presented, not in their relationships to each other nor in terms of their utilitarian value, but rather in associative clusters which reflect the amnesiac's repressed and traumatic experience of them, derives from these precursor films. My point here is not to diminish Hitchcock's achievement, for in many ways only a mastery of the medium such as his could have assimilated so many experimental techniques into the commercial and traditional narrative (for example, the continuous shot in *Rope*, the "lying" flashback in *Stage Fright*, and so forth).

Spellbound is thus a fascinating film for the how-done-it (Hitchcock's craft, outside the narrative) rather than the who-done-it (resolution within the fiction). In fact, what occupies the spectator's interest in the film is the intricacy of the process of resolving what is already quite obvious to the untrained Freudian analyst. The plot is a conceit, in the Borgesian manner, in which the "labyrinth" of clues both intrigues us and diverts us from the easy (and right) solution. The assumption in the film is that John Ballantine's personal trauma

(killing his brother accidentally) must be resolved before Dr. Edwardes' murder can be solved. Consider, hypothetically, the total absence of Ballantine as a character. Then, nobody shows up as the presumed Dr. Edwardes. His absence (if foul play is suspected) leads to the question of motive, and who else but Dr. Murchison, who is being forced into early retirement by the younger Dr. Edwardes, has more motive for wanting Dr. Edwardes to disappear? In fact, then, *Spellbound* is a subtle put-down of psychoanalysis in that it insists on proving scientifically what can be guessed with common sense all along.

While psychoanalysis presumes to being a method of scientific investigation, the film of fiction aspires to spell-binding (literally, to entrance, to fascinate), so that Hitchcock's subject and his exposition of that subject are cast in antithetical and adversary ways. Specifically, Hitchcock's analogical codification of the oneiric can be seen as a complex pattern of circles and straight lines. Further, the opposition between circles and straight lines suggests a sexual penetration that never takes place. And, lacking that penetration, the straight lines lead to transgressions which are only partially mitigated by the therapeutic circles. A closer look should bear me out.

Dr. Constance Peterson (the first name tempering and contradiciting the last name in a sexually symbolic sense) reviews the mosaic of Ballantine's obsession at several points in the film: the lines drawn by a fork on the white table-linen; the lines on her white robe when they embrace for the first time; the ski lines on white snow. There are other instances in the film that she doesn't delineate: the lines of cutting flesh against a backdrop of surgical masks (white); the train tracks on their trip; the lines upon the white cover on the bed where she sleeps. These cluster-images are, of course, triggers to unlocking his past (which involves two murders), but they also underscore the sexual element, in that Dr. Peterson is the agent of their appearance: she wields the fork in the Green Manors cafeteria and the knife on the train; she wears the robe at their first intimate meeting and again for their "honeymoon" night at the home of her teacher-analyst. In the dream that Ballantine recounts, she is both the naked siren beckoning to his sexuality and the hovering wings of the "angel" that would save him spiritually. These images are emblematic of the sexual dilemma that both of them share. What we know of his sexuality is that he can't remember kissing any other woman and later that he once liked a girl who married his college roommate. What we know of her sexuality is that she is an "iceberg" when kissed by a colleague, that she thinks the poets have done humanity a disservice by promoting love, and that she insists upon a physical separation in the room they share, as though the bedroom were a continuation of psychiatric practice (the patient on the couch, the psychiatrist physically and emotionally distanced from the patient). She can fool the house detective at the Empire State Hotel and two other detectives at the home of her teacher, but she fools neither her mentor nor any of the other doctors in the film, who see her romantic involvement as a charade for the loss of objectivity in her professional involvement. The sexism here is underscored by the fact that she is the only woman-professional in the film: a mannish woman treating an effeminate man, whose most "masculine" outbursts of authoritative

indignation are intimately tied to the oneiric and obsessive image-clusters.

The psychology of gazes and their correspondence with point of view are crucial here. Dr. Peterson goes first to the library to get Anthony Edwardes' book (*Labyrinth of the Guilt Complex*) and then to the room to get the man. She sees him slumped in a chair, sleeping. This unreturned gaze is later refracted when Ballantine awakens from the couch and views Dr. Peterson sleeping in the bed. The held objects are also important. She holds the book in the former example, he holds his straight-edge razor in the latter example. And mirrors, when they reflect a reciprocal gaze between the two, are therapeutic counters to the straight lines of skis, knives, scissors and razors. In his room at Green Manors, Ballantine stares into a circular mirror, seeing not only himself but Constance Peterson looking at him and returning that gaze. The stare creates a bonding moment, both for the couple and for the trust necessary between the psychiatrist and the patient. Similarly, when they are at the home of her mentor, Dr. Peterson looks into a mirror, which also reflects Ballantine's reciprocal gaze. This stare reflects the birth of the "woman" in her consciousness. The opposite of the clinical gaze which goes unreturned by the patient is the lovers' gaze, the moment of simultaneously looking at the being-looked-at as an object, not of scientific inquiry, but of desire. Significantly, she is not wearing glasses in either of these mirror-stares.

The deviation from this codified shared-staring in the mirrors is when Ballantine stares at himself in the mirror. With no one behind him to mediate that stare into what is still the void for him, he turns to the shaving cream and razor and goes off into trance. But even this sequence ends in the wearing of glasses, as I shall point out.

Constance Peterson's glasses are what separate the scientist and the woman. She wears them to play psychiatrist, she takes them off to be looked at as a woman. Visually, there isn't much difference for the spectator either way. But Hitchcock emphasizes the visual difference for characters within the film in the brief shot in which the two detectives pen in glasses on a photograph of her, suddenly "recognizing" the fugitive they hadn't recognized in her role as "woman." Ironically, she is as though "blinded" when she wears her glasses. Without her glasses she inadvertently triggers Ballantine's associations with the past and, so, makes progress with him. With her glasses on, she is as detached (and as useless) as she was with Mary, the man-hater who bites hands. Hitchcock's ironic point is that she functions best as analyst when she is involved as woman. The glasses, "code" for the psychiatrist, are non-functional in that regard. They are, thus, "liberated" from their codified function and work as therapeutic symbol of the circle which "cures" straight lines. How this works is first exemplified in the scene where she sits by his bed at Green Manors, waiting for him to emerge from his faint, so that she can ask him who he really is. Ballantine is a man without an identity who suspects himself of murder and who pretends to be her superior. Because of his amnesia, there is no "past" for the object of his desire, so that Constance Peterson becomes symbolically the first woman in his existence. At the same time, she becomes his doctor, and the well-known transfer of affection by the patient for the doctor compounds his love-focus on her. For her part, he is first of all the Dr. Edwardes

whose book she greatly admires. That admiration gets mixed up with her appreciation of him as a man and then as a patient. The false belief that he is Dr. Edwardes begins the infatuation, but the knowledge that he is someone else is what allows the infatuation to become love. It is as though the author of *Labyrinth of the Guilt Complex* could only be someone who is riddled with guilt. She is sure that he is not guilty when she is sure that he did not write the book. Ironically, the only part of the book she actually reads in the film is the signature on the first page, comparing that signature with one from Ballantine in a note to her. And Hitchcock underscores their romantic involvement through a close-up which doesn't involve either one of them. The close-up is of her glasses on the top of the book: the glasses which aren't being used for looking or reading; the book which isn't being read.

The curative (and not intellectual or scientific) nature of the glasses is reemphasized in the encounter between Ballantine and Constance Peterson's mentor. Ballantine looks in the mirror upstairs and begins to stir the shaving cream with the brush. The combination of the brush and the white cream in the circular cup would seem to constitute, not just a trigger for Ballantine's trance, but also a Freudian symbol for penetration, pubic hair and displaced sperm. I am not so much interested in the Freudian symbolism as in the way in which Hitchcock brackets the sequence with glass of shaving cream and glass of milk. Ballantine goes downstairs, his straight-edge razor at hip-length (symbolic of the erect penis, no doubt), which is seen in close-up and on center-screen by Hitchcock's lowered camera. The doctor keeps moving, keeps talking and emerges from the kitchen with a glass of milk. Hitchcock's subjective point of view aligns the spectator with the suspected murderer, for Ballantine is presumed present, but not physically present, behind the upraised glass. The doctor is seen looking on through the glass as the milk figuratively fills up the screen. The shaving cream and the milk are both associated in this codified way with the snow, but in the case of the milk, the glass becomes a two-way mirror, through which the spectator and the doctor share a reciprocal gaze, ironically by way of the invisible first-person "vision" of Ballantine.

The "glass" also shields Ballantine from the eventual trigger of the snow. Constance Peterson recognizes that the snow is a trigger and goes to the window. She and the spectator see the sled tracks in the snow, a view that is not shared by Ballantine who is not at the window.

Other circle shapes serve to mediate the psychic potential for violence. When Dr. Peterson comes downstairs in search of the missing Ballantine, her first view of the drawing room is of her mentor, slumped in a rocking chair. We and she suspect murder, but the circle shapes defuse that false expectation. In the center of the chair, where the doctor's neck and head would normally be, there is a circular flat pillow that looks like an askew "halo" for the slumped and sleeping doctor. Next to the chair on his desk is a circle-shaped table lamp. The doctor is still wearing his glasses. All those circle shapes form a compositional coding, like a talisman, which suggest that no harm could befall him.

Ballantine's "dream" sequence begins, significantly enough, with the eye-balls on the curtain, which are then cut by the gigantic

scissors. Allusion to *Andalusian Dog* and symbolically indicative of a castration-fear, they are diagnosed as the inmates of Green Manors, cut off from the outside. Within the context of the later-revealed childhood memory (sliding down and kicking his brother forward, impaling him on the spear-tops of the fence), these opening images of Ballantine's dream can also be seen as the Oedipal consequence (blinding) for the family transgression (killing his brother). The entire dream sequence is as beautiful as it is implausible, both in the detail in which the amnesiac remembers it and in the quick and comprehensive interpretations that Dr. Peterson and her mentor give to it. Hitchcock makes no attempt to cloud the issue or accumulate the possible interpretations. But what is fascinating is that he enjoins a visual marvel with a mediocre interpretation. Except for the leap from siren to angel represented by Dr. Peterson in the dream, there is no discussion of the sexual possibilities in the dream.

And yet Hitchcock has made sure that the spectator sees those possibilities. The superiority that we feel toward the dreamer and the interpreters of the dream derives from the divergence in point of view. The spectator alone sees the oneiric possibilities in the sequence. Ballantine, the amnesiac, can only remember (first remove from the real thing) and try to recount (second remove) what occurred in sleep. Christian Metz's fundamental distinction between the film image and the dream image is particularly appropriate here: "Finally, the spectator almost always knows that she or he is watching a film, while the dreamer almost never knows that she or he is dreaming."[1] Metz's distinction explains the falsification in translation: that the dream images in this sequence in *Spellbound* are, in fact, perceived film images, which substitute the "real" for the oneiric. But the distinction also underscores the falsification of the dream's narrator. If the dreamer almost never knows that she or he is dreaming (the exception being the lucid dream), then how can an amnesiac (a kind of waking dreamer) remember the dream in such detail without any clue as to what it all means? As for Dr. Peterson and her mentor, they have neither the dream nor any visuals at their disposal. Their translation, emphasized by the explanatory insert in the last confrontation between Dr. Peterson and Dr. Murchison, is her note-pad with the paraphrase of the dream in words, which constitutes a stripping of both the oneiric image and the film image.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the entire dream sequence bears the signature of Salvador Dali. The sequence begins with the cut eye-balls and ends with the dropped wheel, which, in the narrative of *Spellbound*, is interpreted as a dropped revolver in the snow. Dr. Murchison corrects that interpretation by pulling the murder weapon out of his desk. Thus, the film has not explained the symbolism of the dropped wheel. On one level, it is Dali's end-signature, a compositional allusion to the limp clocks of his "The Persistence of Memory," a particularly appropriate allusion, in light of Ballantine's amnesia. But, on another level, the wheel could suggest the end of a ski pole, an object that, like a pair of glasses, contains both the pointed straight lines and the circle. More likely, the dropped wheel refers symbolically to the sexual dilemma for Peterson and Ballantine. If the hovering wings represent her "uplifting" salvation of him (the psychiatrist-patient paradigm), then the price of that uplift-

ing is the bent and limp wheel, symbolic of the genitalia, that must be dropped. This interpretation is left in limbo in the film when, in the final sequence, the two of them go on a real honeymoon, a repetition of their earlier passage by the same ticket-taker, whose parting look is no less incredulous the second time around.

Psychiatrist and patient reenact the skiing down the slopes, whose final precipice is also "suspended" by the interior reenactment of Ballantine pushing his brother off the ledge and onto the spokes of the fence. Suddenly liberated by the memory of that murder, he remembers everything as they wait for the police to arrive. Significantly, they stand in front of a fire, which is a reminder of his burned hand and arm from a plane crash, a third trauma of falling (besides the two murders).

Finding Dr. Edwardes' body right where Ballantine said it would be tightens the circle, signalling the end of the mentor as a character, the temporary absence of Ballantine and the re-emergence of Dr. Murchison as head of Green Manors, mentor-figure for Dr. Peterson and prime suspect for murder. But before the final confrontation between the two, Hitchcock interjects the episodic jail sequence as a kind of compositional response to Ballantine's dream. The sequence is a mirror reflection of what the "reality" should be. Supposedly, from Ballantine's point of view inside a jail cell, he is not present visually, nor are the bars before Dr. Peterson's face. Instead, the jail bars are reflected, distorted and thrown diagonally against the white wall behind her, a brilliant final reconstruction of Ballantine's trauma of dark lines on white. She wears a hat that she wears only in this sequence: circular but pointed, not unlike the dropped wheel of Ballantine's dream. The photography and editing, the quick cuts with music replacing voice (her lips move, but we don't hear the words) remove this sequence from the time and space of the rest of the narrative and enjoin it with the dream sequence and the subjective reenactment of murdering the brother.

Her return to Green Manors and Dr. Murchison is a necessary return in terms of the narrative, but also a formulaic return, in that every shot of the film is "answered" by a shot somewhere else in the film. This return provides closure in the way that Dali enclosed the dream sequence and in the way that the final shot of leaving on a train "answers" the earlier leaving as fugitives on a train.

Doctors Peterson and Murchison discuss Ballantine's dream, solely in terms of the Edwardes murder. Dr. Murchison aids the charade by allowing that the angry proprietor seems to be him, which would make the menaced card-player Dr. Edwardes. The cards are explained: the seven of clubs becoming twenty-one turns out to be the 721 Club in New York where the two doctors argued. But the symbolism makes more sense when related to Ballantine, whose dream it was. The seven-to-twenty-one jump would then refer to the trauma around the time he was seven (the age of reason) arresting his development at twenty-one (the age of adulthood), and the symbolic luck behind those numbers (seven and twenty-one) would run counter (the clubs, the lowest-ranking of the four suits) to his experience (losing a girl he liked to a roommate; finding himself as a military doctor who hated killing, but, who by nature of being in the military, endorsed that killing; finding himself as a doctor with burned hands; witnessing the murder of the doctor he had gone to for help and thinking himself the murderer, etc.).

Ironically, Dr. Peterson now employs the same intelligence-versus-emotion argument that had been employed so unsuccessfully with her throughout the film in her gamble that Dr. Murchison would not shoot her as she walked out the door to call the police. Brilliantly, Hitchcock "answers" the subjective shot of the drunk milk (when Ballantine was still presumed to be the murderer) with the subjective shot of the gun turning half-circle and firing on the visually absent holder of the gun. This suicide is without a doubt the most violent example of the subjective point-of-view shot in all of cinema, for the gun fires on the camera and the spectator; shooting gun outduels shooting camera (the firing is followed by a quick fade-out); and the phallic straight lines of the gun turn round and inward, becoming the circle of the barrel-end, a symbolic form of lethal onanism, the penetration of the penetrator.

At first glance, it would seem that *Spellbound* provides the perfect source for the new dream-work being done by critics like Metz and others in France. What better text could there be for the come-lately practitioners of Freud (after Lacan) than a film about a Freudian psychiatrist? The answer to that question is Hitchcock's joke, of course. *Spellbound* is a dead-end on Freudian theory, a pretext for Hitchcock's own compositional psychoanalysis. In fact, the title can only refer to Dr. Peterson, who is spell-bound by love, which proves to be the better half of psychoanalysis throughout the film. The two are contrasted at every turn by every character, sometimes for suggested menace (Dr. Murchison: "You're an excellent analyst, Dr. Peterson, but a rather stupid woman"), sometimes for humor (her teacher: "I wish you babies, not phobias."). The brief interlude between Dr. Peterson and Ballantine in the warm weather and wind around Green Manors (a visual contrast to the ski-landscapes) points out the disservice done to love by psychoanalysis, not by poets, when understood in the context of the overall film. Dr. Peterson, in her spell-bound obsession with love, parallels Ballantine at every turn: he is traumatized by the near and remote past, she is traumatized by him and her love for him in the present. And, while the diluted psychoanalysis in *Spellbound* finally explicates all crimes, it is incapable of explaining what a serious Freudian analysis would elucidate: the love feelings between the two protagonists. Hitchcock's final joke, then, more than the cameo self-portrait of the author as signature to all of his films, is that *Spellbound* is an end-game labyrinth for the would-be film (psycho)analyst.

NOTES

[1]Christian Metz, *Le Signifiant imaginaire: Psychanalyse et cinema* (Paris: Editions 10/18, 1977), p. 131. "Il reste que le spectateur sait presque toujours qu'il est au cinema, le reveur presque jamais qu'il reve."