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**Lost memories. Regressions of time and style in filmic representations of hypnotic
apparatus**

Working paper

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Abstract

Since the 1920s, the connection between the filmic and the hypnotic apparatuses becomes extremely clear both in theoretical discussion and in the movies themselves (just think of Lang’s movies on Caligari’s character). On the one hand, it is the culmination of a process that began with the eighteenth-century mesmerism – that is with the development of a non-technological mechanism of visionary induction -; on the other hand, it is the starting point of a new era of success of hypnosis as related to the Twentieth Century media.

One of the most interesting consequences of the strong connection between cinema and hypnosis is the meta-theoretical nature of many films. In this case, the *mise en scène* of the hypnotic apparatus is both a metaphor of and a reflection on the cinematic apparatus itself. Even more interesting is the fact that when these films portray memorial regressions induced by hypnosis, they often reflect on the memory of the film as a medium: indeed, the memorial regression of the characters is accompanied by a regression of film style and language.

The paper illustrates this thesis through the analysis of two examples, namely, *The search for Bridey Murphy* (Noel Langley, 1956) and *The Undead* (Roger Corman, 1957).

Key words: apparatus, cinema, hypnotism, memory

1. Figures of the mirage

Over the last decade, several studies investigated the link that seems to unite cinema to hypnosis. Raymond Bellour, who has been analyzing this topic for at least thirty years, has proposed to consider the basic film emotion as "a form of hypnosis."¹ Stefan Andriopoulos has documented the similarities between cinema and hypnosis that emerges between the Nineteenth and the Twentieth century; following the Author, this similarity is based both on the visionary character of the new medium and on its ability to create "corporate bodies" and collective identities.² Actually, Rae Beth Gordon had already indicated the foundations of the relationship between cinema and hypnosis in the common culture of the hysterical body.³ I myself have sketched an archaeology of the hypnotic apparatus, since its introduction by Franz Mesmer in the late Eighteenth century up to the arrangement of the relationship between psychoanalysis, hypnosis and mass reached by Freud in 1921; moreover, I considered how a convergence between the hypnotic and the cinematic apparatus was produced in the early twenties of the twentieth century.⁴

In this presentation I shall draw on these studies, but I will tackle a slight different task. I intend to argue that the filmic representation of hypnosis always involves at a certain degree a representation of the cinematic apparatus, and therefore a *theoretical orientation* of the film. In particular, films representing hypnosis construct theories of cinema as a *cultural form of living and lived experience*: i.e. a kind of experience both rooted in historical and cultural situations, and able to effectively regulate the

¹ R. Bellour, *Le Corps du cinéma. Hypnoses, émotions, animalités*, POL Traffic, Paris 2009, p. 15.

² Andriopoulos Stefan, *Besessene Körper. Hypnose, Körperschaften und die Erfindung des Kinos*, München, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2000 (*Possessed. Hypnotic Crimes, Corporate Fiction, and the Invention of Cinema*, Chicago – London, University of Chicago Press, 2008). Cfr. anche Id. "Suggestion, "Hypnosis, and Crime. Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)", in Isemberg William Noah, *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era*, New York : Columbia University Press, 2009, pp. 13-32

³ Gordon Rae Beth, "Hypnotism, Sonnambulism, and Early Cinema", in Ead., *Why the French love Jerry Lewis : from cabaret to early cinema*, Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 127 – 166. Sulle relazioni tra cinema delle origini e ipnosi cfr. anche il più recente Pasi Väliaho, *Mapping the Moving Image: Gesture, Thought and Cinema Circa 1900*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam U. P., 2010.

⁴ Ruggero Eugeni, *La relazione d'incanto. Studi su cinema e ipnosi*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2002; see also "The Phantom of the Relationship, the Poverty of Cinema and the Excesses of Hypnosis", in Leonardo Quaresima (ed.), "Dead Ends/Impasses", *Cinema & Cie, International Film Studies Journal*, n. 2, spring 2003, pp. 47-53, available on line at <http://ruggeroeugeni.files.wordpress.com/2009/04/hypnosis.pdf>. With regard to the revival of Apparatus theory over the last years, see *Le dispositif entre usage et concept*, special issue of *Hermès*, 25, 1999; *Les dispositifs*, special issue of *Cahiers Louis – Lumière*, 4, 2007; Giorgio Agamben, *What is an apparatus?*, Stanford, Stanford U.P., 2009; François Albera, Maria Tortajada (eds.), *Ciné-dispositifs. Spectacles, cinéma, télévision, littérature*, Lausanne, L'âge d'homme, 2011; and many papers presented at the Conference "The Impact of Technological Innovations on the Historiography and Theory of Cinema", Montreal, novembre 2011.

spectator's bodily reactions.⁵ I intend to analyse from this point of view two films that deal with the problem of the relationship between hypnosis and memory, what were released between 1956 and 1957.

2. Surviving images

In 1952, Colorado businessman and amateur hypnotist Morey Bernstein put housewife Virginia Tighe of Pueblo, Colorado, in a trance that sparked off startling revelations about Tighe's alleged past life as a Nineteenth century Irish woman (whose name was Bridey Murphy) and her rebirth in the United States 59 years later. In 1956, Bernstein published a case report in the book *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, that immediately became a best seller. In the same year the book became a film directed by Noel Langley and starring Teresa Wright and Louis Hayward. The film was a success, so much so that it solicited a male movie version (*I've lived before*, Richard Bartlett, 1956) and it inspired several other productions⁶.

After being shown what hypnotism can do, a Doctor becomes an amateur hypnotizer and sets out to study it in depth. When experimenting on his friend's wife, Ruth Simmons, she regresses back to an earlier life- that of Bridey Murphy. Several hypnotic sessions explore the life and death of Murphy, a 19th Century Irish lady who lived in Cork and Belfast from 1798 to 1864.

In the sequence I analyze, Ruth Simmons is immersed in a hypnotic trance from which emerges for the first time the identity of Bridey Murphy; along with it, a series of visions illustrating what the woman says, are displayed. The references to the cinematic apparatus are numerous: the trance is induced by a candle moved before the eyes of the woman; the session is audio recorded, and the big microphone is in sight in the hands of the hypnotist; a small audience follows attentively the scene; the result of hypnosis is ultimately the production of cinematic images.

⁵ Miriam B. Hansen, *Cinema and Experience. Sigfried Krakauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London, California U.P., 2012. See also Francesco Casetti, *Filmic Experience*, in "Screen", No. 50 (1), 2009, pp. 56-66, and Ruggero Eugeni, *Semiotica dei media. Le forme dell'esperienza*, Roma, Carocci, 2010.

⁶ "By the 1950s, pop culture had transformed the elixir-wielding fairground barker into a psychiatric sorcerer. Many horror plots of the mid 1950s contained a central motif either of reincarnation or of the regression of the protagonist into monstrosity. The immediate source of this plot was the best-selling *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, which recounted the supposed regression of a young woman to a past life. *The Search for Bridey Murphy* (1956) was brought to the screen by Paramount, and many topical exploitation films adopted the reincarnation motif. Even prestige pictures such as *Vertigo* (1958) contained elements of the Bridey Murphy motif [...]" (Kevin Heffernan, "The Hypnosis Horror Films of the 1950s: Genre Texts and Industrial Context", in *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 54, No. 2/3, 2002, pp. 56-70).

I want to emphasize the ambiguity of the hypnotic - cinematic apparatus as it is represented in the film. On the one hand, its aim is that of recovering a well defined past, based on a temporal distance. In this respect, it is important to note that the images of the ancestral memory of the woman are displayed through cinematic images that simulate the modes of expression of an old film of the silent period (theatrical setting, eloquent gestures, iris filters with blurred edges, etc..). On the other hand, however, the cinematic apparatus deletes this distance of time. The images of the cinema of the past are still present on the screen; moreover, the representation of hypnosis borrows many visual elements from the past: for example, a friend of the protagonist uses a small shiny object to induce hypnotic trance, exactly like Fritz Lang's *Mabuse* (1921); and the images of the past that look like old film images emerging from a cloud of smoke are borrowed from Karl Freund's *The Mummy* (1931) - a case of reincarnation similar to that narrated by Bernstein.

The film thus depicts cinema as an ambiguous apparatus, capable of reactivating a cultural memory that is never actually passed, and to bring to life "surviving images" (Aby Warburg) that thanks to the movies have never ceased to exist.

3. Other spaces, other accesses

In 1957, a year after the release of *The Search for Bridey Murphy* and his followers, the interest in stories of reincarnation is still in the air. Roger Corman rides the wave by producing and directing *The Undead*. Filmed in 6 days inside a converted supermarket, by recycling many leftovers from Roger Corman's earlier film *It Conquered the World* (the prop bats), the film was released by AIP on a double feature with *Voodoo Woman*. Although this is a typical Corman B movie, the film contains a powerful representation of hypnotical apparatus.

The film begins with researcher Richard Garland hypnotizing streetwalker Pamela Duncan in an attempt to record her past-life experiences as a condemned witch in the Dark Ages. After numerous silly attempts by Garland to save her -- including regressing himself into the same period - Duncan decides not to alter the course of history, and she resigns herself to her fate.

Once again, the cinematic apparatus - and, consequently, the cinematic experience – are represented through the metaphor of hypnosis: low lights, lowered blinds, and especially the progressive induction of a visionary trance, are evident clues. Even more clear the junction between the bodily apparatus of hypnotism and the technological one of cinema, that allows the passage of the hypnotist himself into the hallucinatory world of the female protagonist.

I want to highlight two aspects of the Corman representation. First, the recollected world of the ancestral memory is in this case the diegetic world of the fiction movie; as a consequence, its main

feature is the “otherness”: it is a place and a time that is located "elsewhere". Only hypnosis - possibly combined with technology - makes it possible to move from the here-and-now situation to these "other scenes" and these “other places”.⁷ The passage is long, smooth and gradual, and it involves crossing an undefined place, just like the dark movie theater at the instant when the lights are switched off and the film has not yet begun. Finally, this is a place where you could not come back (this is the fate of the hypnotist who has carelessly dropped), or from which you could return only at the cost of death (it is the fate of the female protagonist).

The second crucial aspect in Corman’s film is the embodied nature of the cinematic experience. Not only the hypnotized woman manifests her ongoing allucinator experience by means of a reproduction of the fictional states in her own body, but also the method followed for the induction of the state of hypnosis is symptomatic: it consists in a narrativization of the hypnotist’s hand, in the form of a journey on its surface. A hand - screen that indicates the sensorimotor nature of film experience.

4. Conclusions

My two analyses were intended to point out how in the late 1950s film productions of different level, within and through the representation of the hypnotic trance, we find the definition of different and complementary theories of the cinematic apparatus. *The Search for Bridey Murphy* sketches a theory of the film spectator’s memory in which otherness and distance overlap with the timeless presence of the memory. The film thus carries a dual memory: a linear and progressive one and a circular or spiral shaped one, which assumes the model of Aby Warburg “surviving image”. Corman's *The Undead* works on a different register: it identifies ancestral memory with fictional world, and depicts it as a radically “other” place and time. The cinematic apparatus then becomes an instrument of “eterotopy”, i.e. of transfer to this "other scene"; a transfer involving the spectator’s body as well as his or her gaze.

⁷ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986), 22-27 (“Des espaces autres”, conférence au Cercle d'études architecturales, 14 mars 1967, in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, n°5, octobre 1984, pp. 46-49 ; republished en in *Dits et écrits*, vol. IV, Gallimard, Paris 1994, pp. 752 – 762.): “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that [...] the the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space [...] Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable”.