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The aesthetics of ECT

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Introduction

In this paper, I intend to take a close look at the formal representation of ECT (electroconvulsive therapy, also known as sismotherapy) in three Hollywood films ranging from 1948 to 2008. By looking at some stylistic techniques employed by filmmakers dealing with electroconvulsive therapy, I will be wondered whether such as thing as an "aesthetics of ECT" can emerge beyond the many judgments associated with this often ill-regarded psychiatric treatment, though one that is still widely in use in the US today as well as in Europe. The thesis of this paper is that although this therapeutic technique as well the public view on it have evolved significantly over six decades, its filmic stylistics have remained pretty much unchanged. In my conclusion, I will endeavor to connect such aesthetics with the ethics of our collective gaze towards mental illness and psychiatric institutions.

In most films in which they can be found, ECT sequences occur at climactic moments of extreme dramatic tension. Consequently, aspects such as cinematography, lighting, shot angles, camera movement and editing choices are mobilized to an unusually high level, resulting in a variety of specific film effects. Besides, as the use of ECT sequences generally allows for an intense focalization on the character who is submitted to it, questions of secondary identification, spectatorial empathy and viewer-response will also arise.

For want of time, I will concentrate my analysis on three ECT sequences, or more exactly two and a half. They are taken, in chronological order, from Anatole Litvak's *The Snake Pit* (1948), Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), and Clint Eastwood's *Changeling* (2008). This sample, though obviously too limited to allow for statistical observations, nonetheless has the

advantage of covering a chronological period of 60 years, with a 30-year lapse between each of the films studied. Enough time, one would suppose, for artistic, cultural and scientific discourses to establish a dialogic exchange with the filmic one, and thus allow for apparent modification. Besides, the three selected films are products of the Hollywood major film industry, starring first-rank actors and having all three competed, more or less successfully, for the Academy awards. One may thus say without too many qualms that the representation of ECT in each of these movies is as faithful a mirror as can be of the general American public conception of ECT not only on the screen, but also beyond as there is no doubt that "some of the better-known movie portrayal of ECT have played a role in shaping attitudes to the treatment" (McDonald and Walter, 2001).

1. *The Snake Pit*

Anatole Litvak's *The Snake Pit*, starring Olivia de Havilland as mental patient Virginia Cunnigham and Leo Genn as good Dr Kik, is based on an a semi-autobiographical story – whatever that means – by the rather aptly named Mary Jane Ward and addresses the complementary uses of psychiatry and psychotherapy in the cure of amnesia and depression. In the end sequence, during a final interview, one of the doctors on the panel observes that Dr Kik's (Leo Glenn) treatment has been remarkably successful despite "applying psychotherapy almost exclusively". Although it is quite true that the film mostly focuses on Dr Kik's benevolent Freudian talking cure, I would like here to linger for a while on the adverb "almost" in the preceding quotation, and look at the way ECT is introduced in the film.

As well as having sent a shockwave through the general public by breaking into a 'real life' asylum, Litvak's film has also remained famous for being the first feature film *ever* to have introduced ECT in its diegesis. Let us look at the sequence in which they are employed:

SHOW sequence 1

In **shot 1**, Virginia walks into the room unaccompanied, looking confused and anxious. The camera slowly zooms in on her, ending in medium close shot. The acting and the character's isolation in the frame emphasize her distress. A low humming string music is heard, its function is here to elicit a feeling of suspense.

Shot 2 is introduced by a cut and shows a close shot of the ECT machine. It is worth noting that the zoom-in continues. Although this primarily suggests the character's mental focus on the machine, it also establishes, through stylistic continuity, a dynamic link between the two diegetic elements (the patient and the machine), uniting them in a fluid, continuous movement.

In **shot 3**, the character is held by the nurse in a somewhat more menacing manner, that is until Dr Kik steps in the frame. The line uttered by Virginia *"you're going to electrocute me"* expresses her intense fear without ambiguity. This is countered by the kindly psychiatrist's reply ("we're your friends")

Shot 4 is a high-angle shot on Virginia's face. She is now alone in the frame and looks helpless as a gel is applied to her temples. Her voiceover can be heard, expressing mounting fear of being executed without a trial.

Shot 5 is a subjective shot of three nurses holding Virginia on her bed. This will become a recurring shot in ECT sequences.

Shot 6: Back to high-angle shot on the patient's face. Voiceover continues. She is then rather forcefully applied a mouthguard and electrodes are placed on her head. This shot certainly conveys an impression of violence. The dramatic tension does increase.

Shot 7 starts on Dr Kik who is in control of the machine (which seems rather odd as the Freudian psychotherapist would not be the most likely candidate to have specialized in ECT machines). The camera then slowly pans to the right to reveal in the same shot the ECT machine and in the foreground, Virginia's face (SLIDE) The camera then zooms in on the machine and dramatic music

bursts (I told you) as the doctor presses the switch. The shock is thus conveyed aurally more powerfully than visually (the two lights flashing on the transformer only have a moderate fear-inducing effect). Evidence of this is that we can hear the patient's moans while she remains **off-screen** at the moment of shock.

The next shots offer an alternation and superimposition of images of the ECT and the typing machine and of Virginia lying in her hospital bed. The shot in which we see her emerge from the room standing and seeming to reconnect with her environment (SLIDE) is particularly significant; the treatment has been successful, the patient is on her way to recovery.

This is to remind us that *the Snake Pit* is one of the only two films[1] in which ECT has been portrayed as a positive adjunct to the psychotherapeutic process, the cinematographic testimony of an age "when psychiatrists could do no harm on celluloid" (McDonald and Walter 2001, 266).

What is particularly noticeable here is that in spite of the focalization on the character's subjectivity and her vulnerable position, the viewer is not led to consider Virginia a victim of psychiatric malevolence. Her expressed fear of being put to death cannot be taken seriously. The film has so far made it clear that Virginia is psychologically unstable, confused, and that ECT are part of a therapeutic protocol. Although the mise-en-scène exploits the dramatic nature of shock therapy, it does not suggest cruelty or inhumanity from the medical team. Andrew McDonald and Garry Walter observe rightly that:

> Apart from the obvious advantage of exploiting the drama of shock therapy, it s well to remember that some practicioners of the treatment at that time considered the psychological 'shock' anticipated and produced by the treatment as essential ingredient for therapeutic effect. (2001, 265)

[1] The other being *fear Strikes out* by Robert Mullighan (1956)

Most significantly, in spite of its ultimate positive therapeutic role in the treatment of mental patients, the filmic representation of ECT in *The Snake Pit* resorts to a number of stylistic techniques which were thereafter going to designate it as a potentially harmful, if not downright malevolent form of therapy, as in *Cuckoo's Nest,* for instance.

I am not suggesting in any way that Litvak's film is responsible for the anti-psychiatry turn of the 1960s. Yet it seems, possibly unconsciously, to have set a cinematographic paradigm which was then going to be exploited for quite a different purpose.

- ***Milos Forman's Cuckoo's Nest* (1975)**

Milos Forman's *Cuckoo's Nest*, adapted from Ken Kesey's 1963 novel, is not the first film to have led the ECT away from their therapeutic function[2], however it is certainly the film which made explicit the misguided and malevolent role of psychiatry in the most powerful and successful manner. More than 35 years after it was released, *Cuckoo's Nest* remains to this day "the biggest beast in the celluloid ECT jungle" (McDonald and Walter, 2009, 202).

The ECT sequence occurs after about 2 thirds of the film. McMurphy has already wreaked havoc in the prison-like asylum and entered into serious conflict with the head nurse Miss Ratched, who is absent from the sequence, set in a high-security ward, where patients are treated as prisoners more than anything else and reminiscent of the early iconographic representations of the psychiatric patients as monsters such as found in Charles Bells' plates (SLIDE), a picture famously commented by Professor Sander L. Gilman in his essential study on the pre-cinematographic iconic representation of madness *Seeing the Insane*.

[2] Samuel Fuller's *Shock Corridor* paved the way for this.

Show Sequence 2

When the scene opens one immediately notices that McMurphy is forcefully led into the room where he will be receiving ECT. Moreover, he will be submitted to ECT as a punishment for having generated a brawl in the preceding scene of the film. Psychiatry has acquired an unequivocally punitive dimension and the viewer cannot but feel that the therapeutic context is by now abolished, even though the scene was actually shot in an ECT suite at Oregon State Hospital. McMurphy is escorted to the bed, and he is handled in a rather manly manner by the nursing staff. As to the psychiatrist, he has the air an undertaker, grim-looking and all dressed in black. As the scene progresses, McMurphy's antics and Nicholson's acting lose their initial comic effect and the atmosphere becomes more oppressive, just as the frame itself becomes congested with shoulders, back, hands (SLIDE). While the handheld camera was at eye level with the protagonist, the high-angle shot recalls that of *The Snake Pit,* and so does the swabbing of the temples. At this point a very slow zoom-in begins. This zooming-in will not stop, and will take the viewer closer and closer to the character's head, the *locus* of his supposedly deranged brain. As the clonic seizure is fully captured in close-up shot, the shock is transferred onto the image, enhanced by mouthguard and the hands that crowd the frame.

Unlike in *The Snake Pit*, there is no extradiegetic music. On the contrary, the sounds are strictly intradiegetic, involving grunts and hard breathing. The machine is only briefly glimpsed. This time, the focus is on the subject turned victim of *furor sanandi*, the destructive desire to cure. The zooming-in goes relentlessly on, as we are forced to endure with McMurphy the electric shock, now turned visual.

Changeling

Clint Eastwood's *Changeling*, released in 2008, tells the story of a mother's struggle to recognize (and, indeed, not to recognize) her abducted son, killed in the hands of a maniac. The storyline was openly inspired from the infamous Wineville Chicken Coop murders which shook California in 1928. In Eastwood film, Angelina Jolie's character is faced with opprobrium as she refuses to accept that the boy returned to her and claiming to be her son is her own offspring. Ultimately, she is sent to a prison-looking psychiatric hospital where she receives a series of psychiatric mistreatments, including physical humiliation, isolation and cold showers. ECT comes at the end of this chain of evil psychiatric paraphernalia, ordered by a manipulative doctor determined to "move on to more strenuous therapies", not unlike what happens in *Cuckoo's Nest.*

At this stage one might mention that the use of ECT in the film is entirely anachronistic, given that the scene is supposed to take place in 1928 while electroconvulsive therapy was introduced in the US in May 1940, spreading rapidly across psychiatric institutions between that moment and 1944 (Breggin, 11). Nonetheless, psychiatric malevolence is thus made explicit, and the use of ECT takes a further turn of the screw, being here portrayed as a form of "capital punishment", not unlike the electric chair.

SHOW SEQUENCE 3

The parallel editing of course fuels the suspenseful nature of the sequence and allows for the last-minute 'rescue' effect. This is all rather exaggerated and certainly not the most brilliant moment in Clint Eastwood's outstanding career as a filmmaker.

Leaving such judgmental considerations aside, what is striking in this sequence is the exact recurrence of shots previously observed in *The Snake Pit*. These shots include the invasive insertion of the mouthguard, the ECT machine being switched on in close-up, as well as a third shot showing both the patient helplessly lying in bed and the ECT machine together in the frame (SLIDE).

CONCLUSION

The history of celluloid ECT thus proves to be a rather disharmonious one that has turned this therapeutic practice into an emblem of 'punitive psychiatry', making it the straightjacket of the twentieth century. Although concerns about the potentially negative effects of ECT were raised as early as the 1940s and the excessive use of electroconvulsive therapy in some hospitals during the 1950s is unquestionable (see Breggin 22-29), the nature of this psychiatric form of treatment has radically changed in the 70 years of its medical use. Modern sismotherapy is currently administered in its 'modified form', involving the patient's general anesthesia and a very finely calibrated protocol, leading to some remarkably positive results in cases of severe depression or melancholia. Yet cinema seems to have disregarded this evolution, preferring instead to rely on shocker effects and often privileging a rather stereotypical view of the psychiatrist as an evil mastermind, aiming at no less than supreme authority over the subject's minds, a means to "put to death the subject in the other", to use Eric le Toullec's words in his recent study on lobotomy in some Hollywood films, another recurrent symbolic motif of medical barbarity, as in *Suddenly Last Summer* or Scorcese's *Shutter Island* and, once again, *Cuckoo's Nest.*

Yet, as I have tried to show, it appears that it may all boil down to the wrong interpretation of a primal scene. It may thus be high time for psychoanalysts, who enjoyed a much greater fame in the Hollywood production than psychiatrists, to come back to the rescue of their fellow keepers of the mental health of the nation.

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