

# THE PHANTOM OF THE RELATIONSHIP, THE POVERTY OF CINEMA AND THE EXCESSES OF HYPNOSIS

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The darkness of the cinema. The light of hypnosis

*Inside, at the back of a pitch-black room with a low ceiling, the six-foot high screen, no bigger than a man, shines on a monstrous audience, a mesmerized mass glued to the seats by this white eye with its fixed gaze. Lovers sit in a corner, embracing tightly, but what they see takes them far away [...] People [...] stare until their eyes almost pop out of their heads.<sup>1</sup>*

By 1909 the metaphor of hypnosis had already been cast on the viewing of films, enlightening those excesses of the gaze that the darkness of the movie theater tends to hide. This was a metaphor that was destined to become clearer and clearer, and more pressing. At the beginning of the Twenties Epstein would speak of a “much more violent hunger for hypnosis than the habit of literature used to produce, because this one modifies the nervous system much less;”<sup>2</sup> while Fritz Lang would realize a vivid cinematic *mise-en-scène* as a hypnotic device during the second part of *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922).

Here, it is not our purpose to draw an outline of the relationship between cinema and hypnosis, but rather to ask two related questions. Firstly, how can viewing a film be seen as a state of hypnosis, even if no hypnotist is actually present in the cinema? Secondly, what are the effects of the overlap between film and hypnosis as far as the social perception of the act of seeing a film is concerned?<sup>3</sup> I will finish with a brief annotation about the models of an “excessive” cinema – and therefore merely imaginary and utopian – which the metaphor of the hypnosis has nourished to feed.

## Archaeology of a metaphor

From the end of the eighteenth century up to about the 1880s, magnetism and hypnosis were practised in fixed and recurrent scenes, even though articulated from inside. We can describe a *classical magnetic scene*. In the middle of the scene, there is the pair magnetized – magnetizer; around them there is an audience which may be large or small. This scene is ambiguous. On one hand it represents an excessively intense and hierarchical *relationship*: the magnetizer assumes the control of the magnetized’s actions and perceptions. On the other hand, we are dealing with a scene of a particular *epiphany*: entering in a state of clear-mind, the magnetized-regains gets back control over his perceptions, but in a wider and more powerful way. The magnetic somnambulist can look into his body, he can look at the scene he is living with his eyes closed, he

can cast himself into other spaces and times till he speaks with spirits and angel-like creatures.

The *clear gaze* is an absolute gaze, one reason being that it overcomes all the other senses, parting from them and, overall, turning the somnambulist's body into a big sensitive surface. Another reason is that, being a form of *optical touch*, it can explore each dimension in the universe, visible or invisible, near or far, past, present or future.

The magnetic setting therefore presents itself as a device composed of viewing and excessive gazes. The main point is that this sort of viewing power is not born of a technological device (on the contrary, it is historically based on Mesmer's refusal to adopt electrical and magnetic devices), but rather through a *relational expedient*: it is the meeting of gazes between magnetiser and magnetized, the tool of the subject's projection towards other worlds and dimensions.

At the end of the eighteenth century this scene loses its definition and internal coherence: it is decomposed, reassembled, and disseminated into the social tissue. Hypnosis is no longer practiced on clearly determined subjects and in clearly determined places: it is to be found everywhere. The leading term is now "suggestion." Suggestion presents two dimensions. On one hand it spreads in a *mutual relationship among the components of the society*: each member of the society can hypnotize another, either with criminal intentions or in terms of the phenomenon of mental contagion typical of psychic epidemics. So one can speak of a *horizontal dimension* of suggestion relationship. On the other hand, suggestion is characterized by the *direct relationship between the magnetizer and the audience*: the hypnotist's magnetic gaze rotates 90 degrees and turns to the audience. Therefore, a *vertical dimension* of the hypnotic relationship can be spoken of.

The visionary component of hypnosis is notably present in the vertical dimension. The orchestra director who keeps the orchestra players clinging, the famous actor or the speaker who dominates his or her audience, the political leader who gives stirring speeches, or simply the stage hypnotist of the turn of the century who can mesmerize whole groups of people, all these actually project images directly into the audience's mind. And that's not all. A similar image-projection happens when the magnetizer and the audience are not simultaneously present, when the contact is through the medium of a text. This is particularly true in the novel: reading is intended as a direct transmission of images from the page to the brain. The physiological mechanist theories of the second half of the century, especially those of neurological reflexes, restore, in the new context, the *motif* – typical of the classical magnetic scene – of the clear, excessive and absolute gaze: the feeling infected by the magnetizer to the magnetized audience is a pure one, it is freed from perceptive senses, it penetrates directly into the subject and only at this point can it present itself to the subject as images or narration.

But note the basic ambiguity that is produced. The classical setting clearly distinguished between the magnetized's *hallucinatory* visions – provided and guided by the magnetizer – and clear *visions*, which are produced directly by the magnetized, without the aid of a magnetizer. Modern forms of the hypnotic scene match the two kinds of visions: the hallucinatory scene is excessive because it is directed by another. In the relationship with the hypnotist, the members of the crowd choose to offer their gazes to the hypnotist so as to get them back serialized (all of them see the same things) and

strengthened (all of them see more and better than a subjective, organic and individual gaze would allow).

It is interesting to notice that on some occasions this specific kind of visionary relationship is enlightened by a peculiar metaphor: the *magic lantern* metaphor. I hereby report only two quotations. The first one is by a little known philosopher, Paul Souriau.<sup>4</sup> Souriau identifies the experience of the fruition of a work of art with the hypnotic ecstasy: the author speaks of an admiring and contemplative ecstasy. As for the description of a similar state, Souriau's words in the passage dedicated to poetry are reported directly:

*Let's try [...] to recover, through memories, the dreaming dimension to which the poetic rhythm can take us, when one gives in to its influence. Amazing phantasmagory! It really is the show from an armchair. The darkness is in the room and the wait for the mystery, exciting my imagination, induces me to see the as yet unprojected images on the white screen. What is about to be performed? For instance Le Crépuscule. The performance starts. I see a roaring pond in the evening breeze, a deep forest; and all of a sudden a star appears through the shady branches which rises and lights up, radiant, resplendant in the sky. And as vaguely seen in a pale light, the shots appear one after the other, melt into each other, while an invisible orchestra accompanies these visions. [...] How sweet these visions are! How lulled are we by this slow music! Sleep, it tells us, dream! After a while we sink more deeply into hypnosis. We don't imagine any more: we see, listen, hear; we are delighted by this evening breeze, by the beautiful summer nights, this pure air, whose freshness seems to be coming from the sky with the brightness of the stars.*

*[...] The passage is over. These magic lantern images fade away. I thus find myself in my armchair, with a book in my hands, and these little black characters on this white page are the ones that led me to this hallucination: I was reading the Contemplations.<sup>5</sup>*

The second quotation is posed by the better known scholar Gustave Le Bon. One of the main ideas of Le Bon's famous book on the psychology of crowds is that the crowds' ideas are images and that their sequence is merely paratactic. The crowds think – and are made to think by their *leaders* – *as if they were watching a magic lantern show*:

*Whatever the ideas suggested to the crowds may be, they cannot become dominant unless they are in a very simple form and are represented through images. These idea-images are not connected by any logical - analogical or subsequent – link, so that each one can replace the other, just like the magic lantern plates that the operator takes, one by one, from the box they were laid one upon another.<sup>6</sup>*

The metaphor of the magic lantern seems to extend implicitly in Le Bon's following reasoning step: what the crowds' reasoning loses in logical coherence is then recovered in the intensity of their interior perception, that is to say, in their hallucinatory power:

*The crowds' representative imagination, like that of people who do not possess the faculty of reasoning, can be profoundly impressed. The images produced in their minds by a character, an event or an accident are as vivid as the real thing[...].*

*Only images, the only element their thought is fed by, can impress, frighten or seduce the crowds, becoming the motive of any of their actions.<sup>7</sup>*

It seems as if all the elements to answering the first of our questions are present: the metaphor of hypnosis is applied to the situation of fruition on the background of the transformations that the hypnotic scene has undergone in modern times; in particular, it is relevant to stress the “vertical” dimension it has taken and the possibility for the magnetizer not to be present, physically, but rather symbolically, through the text. However, one further phenomenon seems to be interesting: the overlap between cinema and hypnosis only fully occurs at the beginning of the Twenties, at the very moment of a twofold recomposition: of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the social hypnosis on one side; of the social and inter-individual on the other. This organic composition is completed with Freud: the leader’s hypnosis of the single subject, seen as a displacement of the subject’s ideal of the Ego onto an external object, implies a mutual identification among hypnotized subjects. This reconnection is where the new modern magnetic scene comes from: it is embodied in the imaginary and removed scene in which

*the father’s gaze – the feared father of the [primordial] horde – the master of life and death in everybody, produced the same paralyzing effect on all the members of the horde and all their life long, the same limitation of every self-sufficient activity and personal intellectual impulse, that today the hypnotist’s gaze still produces in his “medium.”*<sup>8</sup>

The Father-hypnotist watches, the hypnotized subjects look at him spellbound, isolated from the external world, completely mesmerized. Good and evil, the world itself, and the watching subject himself, do not exist but in connection with the Father and his gaze. The stage model of hypnosis is embedded in the origins of every other scene of hypnosis: from now on, the individual magnetic scene will exist only as an adaptation of that scene. In other words, every hypnotized subject is part of an audience, even when he is the only member.

A powerful, mesmerizing eye. An entrapped, isolated, subdued audience. The new hypnotic scene, just recomposed, is ready to enter the darkness of the movie theatre straightaway. Maybe it is not merely a coincidence that *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* was published in 1921: the same year when Epstein published the essay *Grossissement* and Fritz Lang filmed *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*.

## The rule of metaphor

We now come to the second question introduced at the beginning of this chapter – what are the consequences of the overlap between the modern hypnotic setting and the scene of a group of spectators absorbed in the vision of a film?

First of all, it can be observed that the retrieval of the hypnotic scene allows what would otherwise be invisible and unthinkable to be a scene which is thought of and seen because it is entirely new: the scene of film’s fruition. *In other words, the metaphor of hypnosis helps build a social visibility of the film viewing scene and of the film fruition experience*, thanks to the restoration and overlap of categories well known in this period, such as the hypnosis of crowds.

Secondly, and as a consequence, once restored, the hypnotic metaphor *produces a situation of film fruition*: it selects some of its aspects, such as the state of concentration,

fixity and steadiness of gaze required by the screen, the darkness of the movie theater, the opening of a viewing scene shared by the spectators, the audiences' emotional state; at the same time the hypnotic metaphor isolates these elements, highlights them, recomposes them in a unitary design and purpose. In short, the hypnotic metaphor builds the film viewing scene, giving it a meaning, an identity, a model, a way. And this is not all: from these operations, the hypnotic metaphor *creates expectations, desires, willingness in the social bodies*. No less than other social situations, film viewing is subject to such a *symbolic efficacy*<sup>9</sup> that knowledge, learning and social tales determine role-takings, physical states, and emotional reactions.

Thirdly, and finally, not only does the hypnotic metaphor highlight and organize elements present in the film fruition device, it also *brings about, through imagination, what is not present in the device*. This imaginary integration occurs, in particular, through two correlated aspects.

The first aspect is the *spectator's gaze*. The film viewing is destined to receive the semantic load of the somnambulist's clear gaze, with all the ambiguities contained therein in these modern times. Therefore, there is a paradox in the movie spectator's gaze which can be defined thus: on the one hand driven by mass produced and released images; on the other hand exalted in its skills and absolute to the extent that it completely absorbs the spectator's body and senses.

Besides this ambiguous mythology in the spectator's eyes, there is another ambiguous mythology: that of the *relationship between the hypnotized spectator and the hypnotist's gaze*. We have seen how, since its origins, hypnosis emerges as a relationship that awakens images from gazes. Hypnosis is first of all and originally an interpersonal relationship, a kind of interaction. It is primarily expressed through the gaze: hypnosis is triggered at the moment when the hypnotist's gaze becomes absolute to the hypnotized, that is to say, it concentrates and re-absorbs the whole world, together with desires and values, to make render them available again, but only inside oneself and according to one's own desires. This concept is not only found throughout the history of hypnosis it is hypnosis: basically it is to be found from Mesmer to Freud. However, when applied to the situation of film viewing, it has to face a notable difficulty: there is no hypnotist in the movie theater, but only a group of spectators and a screen on which technological equipment projects moving images. The only way to keep the hypnotic metaphor is then *to invent a non-existent relationship*. In order for the metaphor to be effective, and for the fruition scene to consequently have its meaning, it is necessary to turn the imaginary interpersonal relationship between spectator and screen into a personal relationship between the spectator and a person who is there, watches him, talks to him, shows him some images, tells him a story.<sup>10</sup>

Note: the future of an illusion

What is left of this metaphor in the history of cinema? What shape has it taken, what utopias has it fed, what models has it given life to? And what ruins of an unfulfilled future has it caused? It seems as if the answer were to be searched for according to three directions. Firstly, the idea that the vision of the film consists of an experience of dis-possession of the self and of strengthening of one's own gaze is to be found in many "total" or "expanded" movie devices in the history of cinema, up to the contemporary

virtual reality projects. Secondly, the idea that the movie is the place where a hypnotic relation is set off – in more or less concealed forms – goes through the theories of cinema. It would be interesting in this sense, not only to read anew the most explicit declarations (Barthes, Bellour), but – and more into depth – the “relational” theories of the cinema as well, in particular a wide range of reflections on the enunciation. Thirdly, the idea that the movie spectator is absorbed in a hypnotic state goes through the history of films and of the movie representation, with moments of alternate fortune and with a discontinuous availability to make the diegetic representation of the hypnotic relation a model of the relationship between the film and his spectator. Amply simplifying, it is the German Expressionism and in particular the already mentioned Lang’s *Mabuse* that in the Twenties constitutes the starting point for a reflection on the experience of the spectator as hypnotic state. This is destined to surge in some American horror films of the Thirties, subsequently followed by a period of drowsiness. It will be the task of the “psychiatric” and the parapsychiatric movie of the late Fifties to arouse the attention for hypnosis as an object of representation and as a model of relationship between the film and the spectator. After a new period of silence (or, better, a period in which the subject is hidden inside B class horror movies) the theme comes out anew in certain art movies of the Eighties (Von Trier, Bigas Luna), by the time fully aware of their metafictional implications and consequences.

To study the way these three projections of the hypnotic metaphor in the movie have or have not been correlated and synchronized is the concern of a work that still needs to be done.

[Translated from Italian by Antonella Santambrogio and Clive Prest]

- 1 A. Döblin, “Das Theater der kleinen Leute,” *Das Theater*, Jg. 1, H. 8 (Dezember 1909); now in A. Kaes (ed.) *Kino-Debatte. Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909-1929* (Tübingen: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1978), pp. 37-38, our trans.
- 2 J. Epstein, “Grossissement,” *Promenoir*, no. 1-2 (February-March 1921); then in *Bonjour cinéma* (Paris: Editions de la Sirène, 1921); now in *Ecrits sur le cinéma*, ed. by P. Lherminier, vol. 1 (Paris: Seghers, 1975), pp. 119-120, our trans. Epstein will return to the subject elsewhere, particularly in “Ciné-analyse ou poésie en quantité industrielle,” in *Esprit de cinéma* (Genève-Paris: Jeheber, 1955), pp. 69-76.
- 3 This article presents a few conclusions to be found in R. Eugeni, *La relazione d’incanto, studi su cinema e ipnosi* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2002), in particular pp. 65-161. For further in-depth study and bibliography refer to this volume. Special thanks to Raymond Bellour and Francesco Casetti for following this work with attention and encouragement.
- 4 P. Souriau, *La Suggestion dans l’art* (Paris: Alcan, 1893), our trans.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194 of the Italian translation. The reader is reminded that *Les Contemplations* is the title Hugo gave to his poems collection (1856).
- 6 G. Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris: Alcan, 1895), our trans.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 63. The main model of such an imaginative force is no longer identified by Le Bon in the magic lantern shows, but rather in plays. One should not be surprised by the conclusion of this theory concerning the relationship between hallucination, hypnosis and crowds. When, at the beginning of the 1920s, Le Bon goes back to his previous ideas and explores the

means through which it is possible to defend the French democracy from its enemies, he again uses the term “propaganda,” introduced after the war. And most of all, he will see the *cinema* as the new instrument of propaganda: the instrument that, more than others, works through images, lending itself to the crowd’s thought processes in mime, penetration and direction better than the others do. The government itself, as Le Bon concludes, has to buy some movie theatres and become film distributor and producer. See G. Le Bon, “La vie politique: genèse et propagation des idées,” *Annales littéraires et politiques*, no. 81 (1923), pp. 62-63.

- 8 S. Ferenczi, “Der individualpsychologische Fortschritt in Freuds ‘Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse’,” (1922) in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 1919-1926 (Paris: Payot, 1974), p. 183 and following, our trans.
- 9 C. Lévi-Strauss, “L’efficacité symbolique,” (1949), in *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1964).
- 10 We are hereby linked through another way to Metz’s last phase matters: Ch. Metz, *L’Énonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1991).