

The Dream Interpretation of the Film An Andalusian Dog

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Abstract: *Un Chien Andalou*, a surrealist short film co-created by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, has exerted a profound influence on the art of cinema with its distinctive narrative style and symbolic imagery. Rejecting traditional linear storytelling, the film employs non-linear techniques such as flashbacks, interpolations, symbolism, and free association to explore themes of the subconscious and psychological depths. Through the dreams of the male and female protagonists, it presents gender archetypes rooted in Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Its stream-of-consciousness narrative and richly metaphorical imagery not only sparked widespread discussion at the time of release but continue to be studied and interpreted by film scholars and critics, securing its status as a classic in the history of cinema^[1].

Keywords: Surrealism; Oedipus Complex; Freud

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1. The transformation of boys and the “Oedipus complex”

In Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, the “Oedipus complex” occupies a central and subtle position. This concept initially described a boy’s deep emotions towards his mother and hostility towards his father. With the development of theory, it has been expanded to a complex emotional mixture of young children’s attachment and closeness to opposite-sex parents, as well as jealousy and hostility towards same-sex parents. Freud further explained that boys’ subconscious fear of their fathers, especially the fear of being castrated, drives them to gradually abandon this Oedipus complex, thereby promoting individual psychological growth and the establishment of gender identity.

In the field of film art, Freud’s theory has also inspired rich visual symbolism and metaphor. Taking the film ‘An Andalusian Dog’ as an example, the repeated use of the image of ‘hands’ in the film is not only a metaphor for individual needs, but also implies power and control at a deeper level. In the film, close-up shots of the hand appear four times, each cleverly echoing the plot of the boy’s dream of “killing his father and marrying his mother”, symbolizing the conflict and transformation deep inside his heart. These four close ups not only reveal the psychological development process of boys from childhood to adulthood, but also reflect the inner struggles and transformations experienced by individuals during their growth journey.

This artistic expression technique presents Freud’s theory to the audience in a visual and symbolic way, making abstract psychological concepts concrete and deepening people’s understanding and comprehension of the complexity of human psychology^[2].

When the image of the hand first appeared in the movie ‘An Andalusian Dog’, it was accompanied by a symbolic

scene: a boy dressed in maid attire riding a bicycle, which metaphorically represents the infancy stage of the human soul, an unconscious period. During this period, individuals have not yet formed a complete self-awareness, and their cognition and response to the world are instinctive and unconscious. Subsequently, the death of a man symbolizes the individual's transition from infancy, marking the beginning of growth and change.

The director cleverly uses male characters to represent babies, which echoes Freud's view that individual needs are universal pursuits rooted in the human subconscious and run through everyone's life. In this scene, a girl gently kisses the boy's forehead, which endows her with maternal qualities and symbolizes the warmth and care of motherhood. Subsequently, the boy took off his maid outfit and put on a suit, symbolizing the transition from childhood to adulthood and also foreshadowing the social roles and responsibilities he was about to face^[3].

In the climax of this scene, the boy gazes at the ants in his hand, symbolizing disaster and chaos, foreshadowing the upcoming conflicts and challenges. This laid the groundwork for the subsequent "killing father and marrying mother" sentiment in the film. As Freud said, there is a hidden "killing father and marrying mother" complex in every male's subconscious, and this theory is deeply reflected in the film.

In the narrative context of 'An Andalusian Dog', when the image of the hand appears for the second time, a shocking scene is presented: a broken hand lying alone on the street, surrounded by a large crowd of onlookers. On the high ground of a building, the boy and girl quietly gazed down at the scene, with an uncontrollable excitement on the boy's face. Here, the hand is no longer just a simple body part, it has transformed into a symbol of individual needs, marking a leap and transformation in the boy's sexual consciousness, and he begins to experience the impulses and desires of humanity.

This scene cleverly reflects the second stage of the Oedipus complex described by Freud, which is the psychological development of individuals after entering puberty. At this stage, the attachment to biological parents gradually shifts and is replaced by emotional projection towards the surrogate parents. These substitutes are usually two elders outside the family, who have become the new focus of emotions and desires for teenagers.

In the film, the relatively mature girl gradually becomes the 'substitute for parents'. Her image and behavior have sparked a new emotion and desire in the boy's heart, which is not only an attraction to a peer, but also a desire and imitation of a maternal image. Through such artistic expression, the film deeply explores the psychological changes of adolescent individuals during the process of sexual awakening, and how these changes interact with individual identity recognition and emotional development.

Overall, the film not only creates a strong visual impact through the imagery of hands and the setting of the surrounding environment, but also deeply explores the complex emotions and desires in the human subconscious through this symbolic technique, presenting Freud's theory to the audience in a poetic and philosophical way.

When the image of hands appears for the third time in 'An Andalusian Dog', the scene becomes more complex and profound. The boy chased after the girl, pulling a rope from the ground while dragging the piano, animal carcasses, monk, and melon on the other end of the rope. These items each symbolize social constructs such as morality and humanity, and they become shackles on the boy's actions and limit his freedom in his pursuit. When the chase reached its climax, the girl closed the door, and the closing of the door caught the boy's hand. This action not only caused physical pain, but also symbolized the suppression of the boy's individual desires^[4].

At this moment, the image of "ants" reappeared in the boy's hand, representing his desires. This is not only a display of the boy's third Oedipus complex, but also a reflection of his inner conflict. The film cleverly employs the narrative technique of reverse chronological order, interweaving the passage of time with individual growth. Through the pursuit and conflict between men and women, it presents a scene of three hours and sixteen years. After this dreamlike chase, the boy woke up from the bed dressed as a maid, symbolizing the transition from dream to reality.

Subsequently, a man threw the boy's maid costume out of the window and made him stand in a corner as a punishment, symbolizing the punishment and exclusion of individuals by social norms. The man handed the boy two books, but the boy turned them into two pistols, symbolizing the transformation of knowledge into power and also foreshadowing the boy's challenge to authority. In the end, the boy shot the man with a gun, which in Freud's theory was a

recognition and transcendence of the “father” image, while in Lacan’s theory, it was a breaking of the original authoritative structure, achieving individual self-identity and social subjectivity through “patricide”.

At the end of the film, the ‘father’ reaches out and touches the woman’s back before dying, which is the fourth time the image of the hand appears. This action not only marks the end of the “killing father and marrying mother” complex, but also symbolizes the disappearance of “father” as a heterosexual model. Through this series of imagery and symbolism, the film deeply explores the complex relationship between individuals and social norms, as well as individuals’ recognition, challenge, and transcendence of authority during their growth process.

2. Doubts about gender and the Oedipus complex

Under Freud’s psychoanalytic framework, the age range of 3 to 6 is a critical stage for children’s psychological development. During this period, children develop emotional conflicts with same-sex parents due to their preference for opposite-sex parents, a phenomenon known as the Oedipus complex. To resolve this internal conflict, boys often achieve reconciliation by identifying with and imitating their authoritative fathers. This process not only led them to adopt masculine roles in their behavior, but also internalized their father’s moral standards as part of themselves. On the other hand, if boys fail to successfully pass through this identification process, they may develop a feminized psychological identity and develop personality conflicts and so-called ‘Oedipus plotlines’ within themselves.

At the beginning of the film, a shocking image is presented to the audience: a man uses a razor to cut open a girl’s eyeball. This behavior implies that everything witnessed by the girl is illusory and unreal through the metaphor of clouds obscuring the moon. The image of a girl’s eyeballs being cut can be interpreted as a symbol that she has transcended the ‘Ilicher complex’. At the same time, the boy’s anxiety has not been resolved, and he still faces challenges in gender role conflicts and identification. The film explores the complexity of gender identity and the psychological struggles individuals experience during their growth process through these strong visual symbols and metaphors.

When exploring the boy’s Oedipus complex, the text reveals three stages of this psychological development process, each of which is filled with profound symbolic meanings and internal conflicts.

In the first stage, the boy’s attire and the items he wears become metaphors for gender cognition and role-playing. The maid costume symbolizes his imitation and recognition of female characters, while the suit represents his identification with male characters. The action of the girl putting the maid and box on the bed implies that gender cognitive conflicts may be resolved or alleviated through heterosexual behavior. When a girl opens the tie in the box with a key and places it on the maid’s bag, this behavior is considered a sign of masculinity in psychoanalysis, laying the groundwork for the subsequent boy’s feelings for the girl.

In the second stage, the director used the technique of breaking the logic of time and space to show the scene of a short haired woman playing with her hands on the ground with a cane, surrounded by onlookers, and then putting her hands into a box, symbolizing the boy’s exploration of unknown things during adolescence. The short haired woman represents the “mother” of the boy here, and her image and behavior reveal the excessive criticism and repression that the boy may experience during his growth process, which may lead to his mental illness.

Therefore, boys must face and solve the psychological distress caused by the Oedipus complex during their growth process. The death of the “mother” in the film is not only a turning point in the plot, but also the fundamental reason for the boy’s demand for the girl. In order to complete the self-shaping of transforming into a social person, the boy blocks the conflict of the “Oedipus complex” in his subconscious, attempting to resolve this conflict by internalizing his father’s image and moral standards^[5].

In Freud’s theory, the id is the most primitive part of personality, operating according to the “pleasure only principle” and seeking immediate satisfaction and pleasure. The ego regulates and controls the id subconsciously to ensure that the individual’s behavior conforms to the requirements of the real world and social norms. Through this process, the boy not only underwent a psychological transformation from the id to the self, but also deeply explored and integrated his social

roles and gender identity. As the 'father' id also disappeared, the boy's psychological identity completely shifted to a female role, and the boy's gender doubts had come to an end.

3. Metaphorical implications and 'eternal philosophical questions'

The visual manipulation of 'An Andalusian Dog' can be defined as a kind of 'deconstruction' - not a rational synthesis of the traditional montage of '1+1>2', but a violent dismantling of the materiality of the film: close-up shots of a razor cutting the eyeball, ants crawling out of the black hole in their palm, and dead donkeys dragging on the belly of the piano, all with an absolute break in the 'signifier signified' relationship, forcing the image to return to a nomadic state of 'pure signifier'. Christian Metz distinguishes film symbols into the "eight major combination segments" in "The Imaginary Finger," while Manuel Dali presents the "anti combination segment" here: the time chain is cut into causal "symptomatic" fragments, and space is compressed into Lacanian "real world" wounds - the audience cannot stitch visual materials into any symbolic order, only experiencing a "traumatic sublimity."

Freud's so-called "death drive" - the entropic impulse that brings life back to inorganic silence - weaves a topologically equivalent "drive surface" in the film consisting of ants, holes, and moths: ants, as an anonymous group, obey the black hole in their palm and spray, declaring the tearing of the Lacan "original object" on the body container; The palm crack, balcony gap, and sand hole box are flipped inside and outside continuously like a Möbius strip, making the symbolic world and the real world indistinguishable; The non-European trajectory of moths following light is the ultimate unfolding of Deleuze's "folds" - flapping towards death, and the day when the folds are flattened is the time when life returns to zero. Thus, the boy's "death" is not a given narrative, but rather a retrospective fixation of the driving force of death in the visual economy: the audience is forced to fill in the earlier symbol gap with the "corpse" afterwards, revealing the temporal cracks in psychoanalysis.

In the seaside scene, the decaying maid costume and mysterious box serve as the corrupt form of "object a", announcing the disintegration of the support of desire; when a new couple bury themselves in the sand and juxtapose themselves with bones and flowers, the flowers - organic life and bones - inorganic death occur on the beach in this 'zero degree space', forcing excess life energy to dissipate through death. Although the subtitle "In Spring" cites the myth of seasonal cycles, it is not a "historical redemption" in the sense of Benjamin, but a mechanical repetition of Nietzsche's "eternal return": the new life promised by the union of the sexes is just a prepaid voucher for the next round of death. Therefore, the film elevates the tragedy of both sexes to what Lacan called an ethical proposition - that when the subject faces the real world, they must be absolutely responsible for their desires; The male and female protagonists actively embrace death through self-burial, completing the ethical posture of tragic heroes: no longer projecting death onto the big other, but internalizing it as the core of love, making the driving force of death constantly circulate in the scene of love.

Although Buñuel and Dali claim to use "automatic writing" as a banner and allow the subconscious to overflow directly on film, the physical time difference between photography, development, and editing has dragged every "instant" shot into the inevitable trajectory of "secondary revision": the director re-encounters his own desires on the editing stage and can only stitch a post-fantasy framework for the fragmented original fragments. So the film is no longer a pure dream text, but a triple condensation of dreams, symptoms, and fantasies. - Buñuel translates the personal traumas of childhood religious violence and sexual repression into universally shared structural symptoms, completing an impossible self-analysis in the paradoxical position of the analyst and the analyzed. Because this operation cannot be closed, the film rejects any ultimate interpretation: subconscious conflict is set as a traumatic core that continues to return, and the audience is forced to become a secondary analyst every time they watch it again, experiencing the indescribable crack once again.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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