

**“I am able to touch a knife again ...”:
A Deleuzian Critique of G.W. Pabst’s *Geheimnisse einer Seele* (1926)**

by

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Scholars have largely deployed psychoanalysis in order to dissect the already psychoanalytically-informed case history of a male neurotic in G.W. Pabst’s *Geheimnisse einer Seele* (1926). The film centers on the lives of a troubled middle-class husband and wife who are unable to conceive because of the husband’s implied impotence. When the husband’s troubles are aggravated in response both to a murder next door and the visit of his wife’s cousin, he develops a phobia of knives and a compulsion to murder his wife. Through the assistance of a psychoanalyst, the husband becomes cognizant of the interconnected determinants of his neurosis and impotence. The family is now able to conceive, and the film closes with an image of the completed family. Scholars such as Bernard Chodorkoff & Seymour Baxter,¹ Nick Browne & Bruce McPherson,² and Andrew Webber³ have largely viewed the husband’s neurosis as an unworked-over Oedipus complex that leads him to repeat his childhood trauma of witnessing the primal scene in relation to his wife and her cousin. What is lacking in such accounts, however, is a critical perspective not already favorably predisposed to how psychoanalysis is framed in the film. However, Anne Friedberg,⁴ Eric Rentschler,⁵ and Richard McCormick⁶ all emphasize how the psychoanalyst leaves un-interpreted the rich symbolism of the husband’s dreams and phantasies, a silence that both Rentschler and McCormick sees as undermining the presented psychoanalytic interpretation. Despite such a lead, they forgo a close reading of the husband’s ideational productions, which would be essential in critiquing psychoanalysis.

In order to answer this need, this paper draws on Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s post-Freudian text *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. By means of a comparative reading of Pabst’s *Geheimnisse einer Seele*, it will be argued that the husband uses his wife and

her cousin as social ciphers, projecting irrational race and gender-based anxieties onto them that are intimately tied to what he fears are corrupting influences upon the bourgeoisie during the mid-1920's in Weimar Germany. While he imagines his wife to be a treacherous, hyper-sexualized *Neue Frau*, the cousin is visualized as a fallen German who has been racially corrupted by the "Orient." Despite the larger socio-political significance of the husband's phantasies, the psychoanalyst reterritorializes the husband's desire back onto his family according to the Oedipal model, mystifying in the process the actual genealogy of the husband's neurosis.

It is an error to interpret phantasies by means of a strictly Oedipal framework. Because the Oedipus complex dissimulates its own social embeddedness by focusing on the ideal familial tripartite of father, mother, and son, Deleuze and Guattari maintain that when examining a neurosis or, analogously, a phantasy, one must concentrate on what such productions reveal about the underlying social investments made by a subject. They write:

... the cause of the disorder, neurosis or psychosis, is always in desiring-production, in its relation to social production, in their different or conflicting régimes, and the modes of investment that desiring-production performs in the system of social production.⁷

Accordingly, one must situate the husband's Oedipal investments within the production of social reality in Weimar Germany. This social reality is strongly colored by a feeling of angst among Germans following World War I. Anton Kaes stresses how the middle class reacted to rampant inflation with a "mood of paranoia and xenophobia."⁸ When the insights of both Kaes and Deleuze & Guattari are applied to a phantasy the husband provides during his anamnesis, one discerns that underneath the husband's manifest Oedipal dilemma is an unconscious substratum saturated with petty bourgeois social anxieties.

In this phantasy, the husband is behind a barred window as he peeps into a decadent harem with large mountains in the background and a tropical tree in the foreground. Seated atop one over-sized sofa is his wife's cousin, who is represented as slothful as he lazily smokes a hookah pipe. The husband's wife sits immediately above her cousin. In response to her advances, he tosses his handkerchief at her. Biting it with lust, he slowly brings her down until they exchange a prolonged kiss, the husband watching with agony in the background.

The aesthetics of this sequence align spectators' perspective with that of the husband's gaze. There is the husband's opening point of view shot, the frequent eye-line match cuts from the husband's perspective and the subsequent reaction shots, and, finally, the overall framing of shots, which always situates his wife's adulterous actions in terms of his horrified expression in the background. Thus, not only is the imagery to be analyzed symptomatic of the husband's paranoia, but the sequence seeks to align the spectator's gaze with the husband's resentment.

Despite the psychoanalyst's a-political reading of the kind of exotic imagery used in this sequence, it is clear that the husband's idea of space is thoroughly racialized. At first, the analyst appears to appreciate the juxtaposition of the cousin with the "exotic": when the husband told him earlier about how the cousin's gift of an Indian idol appeared in his previous dream, the analyst inquires "Why is this exotic image in your dream?" Nevertheless, the analyst reduces the statue to its bare facticity, thinking it is merely the representation of the gift given by the cousin; however, such a literal reading of the statue blinds him to how race functions in the psychology of the husband. The stereotypical image of the harem, seen by the husband as representative of the decadent East, is in stark contrast to the bourgeois spaces the husband has occupied throughout the film, such as his middle-class home. The non-diegetic music accompanying this sequence reinforces this division, for unique to this sequence is a languid, sensual composition.

Space is, consequently, racialized by the husband as he codifies a binary relationship between the spaces of the bourgeois German and the spaces of the racialized other.

Working hand-in-hand with the setting is the cousin's characterization and clothing. Although the cousin is pictured as decadent, his attire is over-determined: he wears "Orientalized" clothes, but he is also wearing the pith helmet he is often identified with. While scholars such as Richard McCormick⁹ and Anne Friedberg¹⁰ interpret the helmet as a generalized phallic symbol, one must attend to its specific juxtaposition with the scene's *mise en scène*. The cousin is posited as "Orientalized" via several narrative elements, but he is simultaneously posited as German via the pith helmet. He is, then, a German who has "fallen" and been corrupted by the East since his prior visit to Sumatra. The husband thus uses the cousin as a site to project his xenophobic fears of corrupting influences upon Germany. However, the analyst is oblivious to how the cousin acts as a cipher for trans-Germanic social forces. Instead, the analyst asks at the end of the dream, "What are the characteristics of this man who has appeared to you in these fantasies?" In wanting to tie the cousin's dream representation to his factual identity, the analyst leaves aside the question of how the cousin stands for more than his objective role.

When this fantasy is read in relation to how the husband introduces it to the analyst, another layer of meaning tied to the husband's sexual anxieties can be derived. When the psychoanalyst inquires, "Did something – happen – to cause you to give up hope of progeny?" the husband answers, "I don't know – but lately I have been plagued by terrible fantasies – I have seen my wife in shameful situations –!" While he denies there being any event that undermined his hopes for children, he betrays himself by going on to relate this precise fantasy about his wife's fantasized adultery, an admission overlooked by the analyst. As the phantasy reveals, behind the husband's irrational fears of his wife's adultery is his own skewed estimation

of his sexual adequacy. This fantasy continues the established leitmotiv of division between husband and wife used heretofore by placing the husband behind a barred window, but their spatial separation is given an added dimension in relation to the visual binary between sterility and virility. Hanging over the heads of the cousin and wife is the outstretched arm of a tropical tree. In a close-up just prior to the kiss between the cousin and wife, there is a parrot standing on the branch between two kinds of flowers: those that are wilted (i.e., sterile) and those that are in full bloom (i.e., virile). Thus, that which divides the husband from the cousin is sexual potency—a potency that is framed by the husband according to race insofar as he judges Easterners as possessing a primal sexuality that he lacks.

These flowers also contrast with the other symbolic plant in *Geheimnisse einer Seele*: the young plant that the husband drew upon earlier in the film to symbolize his marriage with his wife. Symbolically bound up, then, within the eastern flowers is not just the husband's irrational fears of sexual adequacy, but also there is a condemnation against his wife, for she repudiates the "sacredness" of her marriage (represented by the plant) by allowing herself to be seduced by the potency of the Orientalized cousin (represented by the flower). Her characterization is further evidence of her imagined lustful sexuality: in stark contrast to her modest bourgeoisie clothing, she now appears only wearing a bed-sheet wrapped around her torso. Such a hyper-sexualized characterization could reflect the danger the husband perceives in the *Neue Frau*, who, according to Richard McCormick, represented "decadent excesses" that threatened men who identified with the scientific rationality of *Neue Sachlichkeit*.¹¹

The husband's paranoia exhibits the mediation of socio-political influences that transcend what is offered as an interpretation by the psychoanalyst. Supposedly, the husband's neurosis was determined by a childhood experience wherein on a Christmas years ago his future wife

gave their doll, or their symbolic “child,” to her cousin, causing the husband to feel not only resentful toward both, but also incapable of having a child later on with his wife. Thus, it was within the Oedipal matrix that the husband developed a neurosis. However, as Deleuze and Guattari stress, desiring production “is completely refractory to a transcription that would transform and mold it into a specifically ternary and triangular schema such as Oedipus.”¹² It is the social nature of desire that makes it “*anoedipal*”—it cannot be bound to Oedipus.¹³ Even if one attempts to codify desiring production according to Oedipus, there still occurs the transgressive “oozing” of flows of desire: “Against the walls of the triangle, toward the outside, flows exert the irresistible pressure of lava or the invincible oozing of water.”¹⁴ With the perennial words “Did you ever experience anything similar in your childhood?” the logic of the analyst’s questions leads the husband inevitably back to his childhood; however, the anchoring of the husband’s desire to a primal childhood scene retroactively scrambles the genealogy of the husband’s current libidinal investments, such that their socio-political nature is mystified. Such an analytic move is politically charged: Deleuze and Guattari write that the Oedipal family acts as a molar arrangement that takes over the larger task of social repression:

*It is in one and the same movement that the repressive social production is replaced by the repressing family, and that the latter offers a displaced image of desiring-production that represents the repressed as incestuous familial drives.*¹⁵

The analyst thus de-radicalizes the husband by displacing his desire onto his familial arrangement, which, in now acting as the horizon of his field of vision, causes him to be blind to the actual social determinants of his paranoia. Thus, his self-repression is ensured.

Andrew Webber aptly describes the analyst’s hermeneutic as grounded on a phallic logic.¹⁶ It is by means of this logic that the husband is “cured” during the penultimate scene

wherein he acts out his misogynistic desires for the analyst by stabbing a fantasized image of his wife. Chodorkoff & Baxter have understood this sequence as signaling the husband's abreaction.¹⁷ However, by naming his actions as curative, one overlooks how his cure is grounded on a psychoanalytically-inspired reconstitution of the husband's misogyny. In light of the repeated series of medium close-ups of the analyst, eyeline match cuts of the husband stabbing, and subsequent medium close-up reaction shots of the analyst, it is under the gaze of the analyst that the husband plays out his fantasies. These fantasies, moreover, signify sexual murder, a point overlooked by Anne Friedberg¹⁸ and Richard McCormick¹⁹: there is a juxtaposition between the husband's genital region and the upward-stabbing motion of the knife. Apparently cured of his knife phobia, the husband remarks, "I am able to touch a knife again" In affirming the husband's sadistic outburst as a sign of recovery, the analyst has also given a scientific legitimacy to the husband's misogyny.

Thus, more than McCormick's observation that psychoanalysis here shores up masculinity in a time of crisis,²⁰ psychoanalysis' deployment in *Geheimnisse einer Seele* reveals it not only as a hegemonic means of disguising self-repression as self-actualization, but also as a scientific justification of phallocentrism. At bottom, then, Freudianism during the Weimar era worked not against, but within the space of the bourgeoisie, especially those inclined toward proto-fascistic tendencies.

Notes

¹ Bernard Chodorkoff and Seymour Baxter, “‘Secrets of a Soul’: An Early Psychoanalytic Film Venture,” *American Imago* 31.4 (1974): 330.

² Nick Browne and Bruce McPherson, “Dream and Photography in a Psychoanalytic Film: Secrets of a Soul,” *Dreamworks: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 1.1 (1980): 40.

³ Andrew Webber, “Secrets and Keys: Psychoanalysis, Modernism, and Film in the Curious Cases of Musil’s *Törless* and Pabst’s *Geheimnisse einer Seele*,” *Oxford German Studies* 38.2 (2009): 197, accessed November 23, 2011, doi: 10.1179/007871909x467967.

⁴ Anne Friedberg, “An *Unheimlich* Maneuver between Psychoanalysis and the Cinema: *Secrets of a Soul* (1926),” in *The Films of G.W. Pabst: An Extraterritorial Cinema*, edited by Eric Rentschler (New Brunswick/London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 49

⁵ Eric Rentschler, “The Problematic Pabst: An *Auteur* Directed by History,” in *The Films of G.W. Pabst: An Extraterritorial Cinema*, edited by Eric Rentschler (New Brunswick/London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 7.

⁶ Richard W. McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity: Film, Literature, and “New Objectivity”* (New York/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 97, accessed December 5, 2011, <http://utxa.eblib.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=735864>.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 128-9.

⁸ Anton Kaes and David Levin, “Modernity and its Discontents: Notes on Alterity in Weimar Cinema,” *Qui Parle* 5.2 (1992): 138, accessed November 23, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20685954>.

⁹ McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity*, 89.

¹⁰ Friedberg, “An *Unheimlich* Maneuver,” 47.

¹¹ Richard McCormick, “Private Anxieties/Public Projections: ‘New Objectivity,’ Male Subjectivity, and Weimar Cinema,” *Women in German Yearbook* 10 (1994): 8, accessed December 5, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688794>.

¹² Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 14-15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴ Ibid., 67.

¹⁵ Ibid., 119.

¹⁶ Webber, “Secrets and Keys,” 198.

¹⁷ Chodorkoff and Baxter, ““Secrets of a Soul,”” 329.

¹⁸ Friedberg, “An *Unheimlich* Maneuver,” 48.

¹⁹ McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity*, 96.

²⁰ McCormick, “Private Anxieties/Public Projections” 8.

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