

*PSYCHOANALYTIC FILM THEORY AND  
“THE RULES OF THE GAME”*

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Whether infiltrating philosophy, media studies, literature, culture, or politics, psychoanalytic theory leaves no academic stone unturned. Although considered *passé* by the sciences, and sophistic from the vantage of analytic philosophy, psychoanalysis continually provokes, prods, and presents a thorn in the side of many academic disciplines. Despite having been partially eclipsed by the legacies inherited from Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, psychoanalysis has gained traction in recent decades under the auspices of Slavoj Žižek, Joan Copjec, and Alain Badiou, and can be thought of as undergoing yet another renaissance today; although luminaries of the American philosophical tradition such as Noam Chomsky have long maintained that Jacques Lacan was, “an amusing and perfectly self-conscious charlatan,” psychoanalytic theory — the Lacanian vein in particular — is perhaps more influential today than ever before.<sup>1</sup> Todd McGowan’s *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and “The Rules of the Game”* offers a refreshing counterpoint to these and other hasty dismissals of psychoanalytic theory, providing a much-needed catalogue of the crucial concepts of psychoanalytic thought and their application to the study of film.

Equal parts history, theory, and polemic, McGowan has written a book in which he demonstrates what he refers to as the “intrinsic conjunction” between psychoanalysis and the cinema (1). Detailing both their historical as well as the theoretical linkages, McGowan delves into the sub-textual undercurrent connecting these two seemingly disparate fields indelibly to one another. He observes that while historically Freud and Breuer’s *Studies on Hysteria* and the Lumière Brothers’ first films were introduced contemporaneously to the world in 1895, it is within the structure of the dream work elaborated by Freud in his 1901 *Interpretation of Dreams*<sup>2</sup> that McGowan locates the most convincing element adjoining psychoanalysis to the cinema, as he explains how, “Freud takes an interest in dreams because they unlock the unconscious and films, which share the structure of dreams, carry the same promise” (2). For McGowan, unconscious desire functions as the thread suturing

dreams and the cinema together, as both mediums disclose what cannot be shown in the subject's quotidian experience, arousing desire in an array of images, and satisfying desire through the repeated failure to attain objects of desire. Just as dreams function as disguised wish fulfillment for individual subjects, so too films arouse in the public a collective desire — a desire which is always self-limiting and illicit, ensuring that the subject grates up against the written and unwritten rules regulating society. Simply put, for psychoanalytic film theory, desire is never neutral but rather always a disruptive force guiding the subject as it navigates through the texture of socio-symbolic relations. According to McGowan, it is in the structure of both dreams and cinema that these symbolic relations are put on display and highlighted by a desire to attain that which is never fully attainable.

McGowan's focus on desire as the fundamental substance formative of the subject echoes the "party line" of psychoanalysis practiced by names like Žižek, Copjec, and Alenka Zupančič. The preponderance of desire in contemporary psychoanalytic theory in general and psychoanalytic film theory in particular points toward another major thesis in McGowan's book: to wrest the subject from the historicist and deconstructive trends in contemporary theory, which posit power as the focal point of subject formation, inherited from Foucault and Nietzsche before him.<sup>3</sup> Psychoanalytic film theory concentrates its critique toward the unconscious desires permeating the social sphere and the ways in which they may not only serve to reduplicate conditions of authority but as well can serve to resist ideological interpellation. In this way, McGowan elaborates the radical import that understanding and articulating desire has for the study of the cinema as a *dispositif* of social control.

As Associate Professor of Film at the University of Vermont, Todd McGowan has dedicated a generous amount of articles and books to psychoanalytic film theory, including the *Film Theory in Practice* series published by Bloomsbury, for which McGowan serves as editor, and to which the reviewed volume belongs. Perhaps best known for his 2007 title *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*<sup>4</sup> in which he develops the continuing importance of the Lacanian notion of Gaze in cinema theory, McGowan's body of work is in direct correspondence with the work of Joan Copjec, specifically her groundbreaking 1989 essay "Orthopsychic Subject" (since released by Verso in the collection *Read My Desire*). McGowan alludes to Copjec's analysis that "film theory operated a kind of 'Foucauldinization' of Lacanian theory" in the 1970s insofar as applications of Lacan's work toward the

study of film grossly missed their mark theoretically.<sup>5</sup> The progenitors of this unfortunate misstep were the theorists associated with what is known as Screen theory, to which McGowan dedicates a significant portion of the first chapter. McGowan indicts Laura Mulvey, Raymond Bellour, Jean-Luc Baudry, and Christian Metz for their failed attempts to successfully fold psychoanalytic theory into the study of cinema. For example, McGowan discusses Mulvey's famous "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and the way the theorist misapplied Lacan's notion of the Mirror Stage to meet politico-feminist ends. McGowan describes Mulvey's reading of Lacan as a "butchered operation," detailing this and other theoretical pitfalls that Screen theory ushered into film studies that we are still attempting to recover from today (62).

McGowan's book collects the most relevant developments in psychoanalysis and its application toward film theory, condensing its one hundred plus years of history into just fewer than two hundred pages. The book's first chapter features a concise yet detailed explication of the crucial concepts necessary for understanding the coordinates of psychoanalytic film theory today; the unconscious, desire, demand, the three registers of the psyche (the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real), fantasy, and enjoyment to name a few. This section is quite useful, as it not only gives coherence to a discipline which so often falters under its own esoteric weight, but as well this section reads as a glossary of psychoanalytic vocabulary, easily standing in as a reference to supplement other texts on psychoanalytic theory. McGowan's first chapter also includes a detailed reading of Copjec's and Žižek's respective influences on psychoanalytic film theory. McGowan gives mention to the fact that, although influential in the field, Copjec's "Orthopsychic Subject" has still yet to be argued against since Raymond Bellour's epistolary dismissal of it in the 1980s, in which the theorist famously penned the words describing how Copjec failed to follow "the rules of the game" (66). This eponymous phrase alludes to Bellour's failure to apprehend Copjec's critique of Screen theory — what McGowan describes as "indicative of a trauma" — as well as it stands for the title of Jean Renoir's masterpiece *La règle du Jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939), to which McGowan dedicates the bulk of his second chapter.

McGowan's clever connection between Bellour's use of the phrase and Renoir's film is far from accidental, but rather demonstrates the function of social rules of engagement which go unwritten, and thus present the most surreptitious demands upon the subject. In the case of Renoir's film, McGowan explains how audiences and critics were angered

and confused by the film upon its release, applying psychoanalytic film theory in order to decipher the deeper problematic at hand attesting to Renoir's genius as both a filmmaker and leftist political thinker. When social rules are not abided, a traumatic gap opens up in the fabric of social space which threatens to undermine the sanctity and cohesion of what Lacan referred to as the big Other. McGowan describes this feature apropos of the cinema specifically in two sections entitled "Antagonism Elided" and "Antagonism Exposed," highlighting the unique propensity of psychoanalytic film theory to decode the ideological mechanisms inherent to film form which often neutralize the radical transformative potential in spectatorship. In the case of Renoir, McGowan cites a myriad ways in which his film actively exposes the unwritten rules of social authority, from its excess of genre, to its use of depth of field to convey "the underside of democracy," as he explains that, "[b]y making clear visually that everyone has an equal place in the filmic world, Renoir depicts the extent of everyone's investment in the unwritten rules of the social order" (126). Depth of field thus does not merely demonstrate sameness, McGowan observes, but more importantly, emphasizes a lack of difference.<sup>6</sup>

*Psychoanalytic Film Theory and "The Rules of the Game"* covers theoretical as well as practical ground; McGowan is at his best when he balances cogent expository content with analytical application to the film text. Be not fooled by the relatively modest size of this book, it could be said that it is in fact larger on the inside than it is on the outside. Although packed tightly with a wealth of theory, the book can serve as an introduction to both psychoanalysis in general and/or its application to film theory in particular. Perhaps aware of this, McGowan offers a nice list of recommended further reading from Freud and Lacan, to Zupančič and Copjec, organized by their level of difficulty. In sum, McGowan's work serves a vital role in the continuation and further development of psychoanalysis, and is necessary for anyone wishing to grasp the fundamentals of psychoanalytic film theory. If not for McGowan's contribution to the field, it is quite possible that psychoanalytic film theory would be unrecognizable today.

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1. Quoted in Oliver Harris, *Lacan's Return to Antiquity: Between Nature and the Gods* (London: Routledge, 2017), 11.

2. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. Joyce Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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2. McGowan as well cites the conflict between Freud and Adler apropos of the same problem of desire versus power, describing Adler's expulsion from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society due to his notion that the subject quested for power, ostensibly "eliminating the unconscious" (22).

4. McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

3. Ibid., 8.

4. It is curious that McGowan neglects to mention Lacan's own words written on Renoir's film in *Les Séminaires Livre VII*, describing Robert's automaton as an "*objet du fantasme*," however this fact does not seem to remove from his analysis of the film in my estimation.