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Of Boxes, Peepholes and Other Perverse Objects

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It could be said that perversion, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. There is little doubt that the leading 'erotogenic zone' is located in the mind!

Joyce McDougall (1991, p. 178)

Let us begin from the beginning - or from the end.

Perhaps the horse-drawn landau coach, with its disturbingly reassuring jingling bells, stands for sexuality and death - the twin pillars of the Gothic component of Romantic tradition, as well as - classically disguised as Eros and Thanatos - of the psychoanalytic edifice itself.

Or does its journey through the countryside indicate an uncanny shift away from conscious reality and into a dream-world of unconscious desires? This would be a twilight space dominated by that same Primary Process mental functioning - disrespectful of the laws of logic and temporality ruling our conscious existence - that also dominates life in the unconscious, in dreaming, and in moments of creativity and madness. Towards the end of *Belle de Jour* Séverine - who so often throughout the film looks dissociated and almost lost in a world of her own - tells her husband Pierre (Jean Sorel): *'I don't dream anymore'*.

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Belle de Jour "was my biggest commercial success," writes Buñuel in his autobiographical *My Last Breath*, to then add with a hint of false modesty, "which I attribute more to the marvelous whores than to my direction" (1982, p. 243). The theme of prostitution, of

course, has been much exploited in the cinema: suffice to mention Federico Fellini's *Le Notti di Cabiria* (1957), Billy Wilder's *Irma la Douce* (1963), John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), Chantal Akermann's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) and Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa* (1986). But we must guess that it is not the 'sex-for-money' aspect of the oldest profession or, *pace* Buñuel, the marvelous bodies of its practitioners to make *Belle de Jour* so unlike anything we have ever seen before, or since.

"*I don't dream anymore*". Was Séverine's story then, we could ask, just a dream? Was it all a fantasy? We shall never know, anymore than we could find out the contents of the magic box with which its Korean owner provokes the curiosity (fear? excitement?) of the girls in the brothel, while Buñuel uses that same box to provoke our own interest - something, by the way, which also happens when patients in psychoanalysis hint at having just had an interesting fantasy, without however being willing to disclose it to their therapist.

Maybe the box, with its intriguing buzzing-bees noise, represents the illusion that there is mystery in life - till one discovers, sometimes through psychoanalysis and usually too late, that there was nothing to be discovered. Indeed, were we to have asked Buñuel himself about it, we would have become one of the countless people ("*particularly women*", he specifies, with a touch of forgivable Latin misogyny) to address him that '*senseless*' question, to which - as he puts it - "since I myself have no idea, I usually reply, 'Whatever you want there to be'" (1982, p. 243). The Emperor is naked. The box is empty.

Unlike, by the way, another famous and rather larger box to be spotted on the silver screen: the one the content of which the Coen Brothers - who could be counted among Buñuel's own many adoptive sons - also do not share with the viewers of their *Barton Fink* (1991). In this case, however, their box looks quite heavy and is about the same size as the one in the terrific final scene of David Fincher's *Seven* (1995) - which, in that instance, we do know contained a severed head...

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Back to Séverine, we are left intrigued by the issue - already touched upon by Buñuel in the first scene of *El* (1952) and in *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964) - of *fetishism*, perhaps the most subtly perverse of all sexual perversions. The classical psychoanalytic interpretation - from Freud's own daring, original and, in the end, surprisingly convincing speculations on this phenomenon - derives from the observation that the little

boy cannot quite accept that female human beings, above all his mother, could be anatomically different from him, as this would evoke in him intolerable castration anxieties. Our boy, therefore, when faced with the reality of the female genitals, reacts by denying, or more precisely, by *disavowing* his perception of this obscure object of his desire and by replacing it with a sort of an hallucination of what he unconsciously wants to believe: *i.e.* that his mother, after all, must have a penis like he does himself.

Interestingly, that same boy would probably use a different defense mechanism, that of *rationalization*, to explain to himself the lack of a penis he may have noticed in his little sister: “*She doesn’t have one now because she is still too young, but of course she will grow one later*”. Either way, the intriguing creation in the boy’s mind of this imaginary female phallus is likely to cause him problems in adjusting to reality and, as a grown-up, in his erotic relationships. A possible solution (statistically infrequent, it must be said, at least in its pathological form of a fully-fledged sexual perversion) consists in his ‘replacing’ this maternal penis with a fetishistic object of his peculiar choice - often another part of the body, a shoe, an item of lingerie - which might have, for whatever personal circumstances, been originally associated in his mind with it. The fetish, then, says Freud in an oft-quoted essay on the subject, is a compromise, a penis turned into something else, “a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it” (1927, p. 154). What happens, in the end, is that ‘the pervert puts an impersonal object between his desire and his accomplice’ (Khan 1979, p. 9).

Two facts are of special interest to us here. The first is that, in this famous scene of *Belle de Jour*, the fetishistic object happens to be a container (often the representation of the female genitals), as well as its mysterious content (symbolically, perhaps, a baby in the womb). For instance, in Freud’s celebrated case history of Dora she had reported a dream in which her mother wanted to save her jewel-case from their house on fire. “‘Perhaps’”, Freud tells his young patient, “‘you do not know that ‘jewel-case’ [‘*Schmuckkästcheri*’] is a favourite expression for the same thing that you alluded to not long ago by means of the reticule you were wearing - for the female genitals, I mean’. Dora replies: ‘I knew you would say that.’ And Freud: ‘That is to say, you knew that it was so’”. (Freud 1905a, p. 69). The second interesting fact is that such a box, and the perverse fantasy that goes with it, belongs to an Oriental man. In the article already

referred to, Freud uses as an example of the mixed feelings of affection and hostility, regularly present in the fetish, “the Chinese custom of mutilating the female foot and then revering it” (1927, p. 157).

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“*Lasciate ogni speranza, o voi che entrate*” [*Leave all hope behind, once you have entered here*] was the warning on the gateway to Dante's Inferno.

After an initial resistance to cross the threshold to the brothel, as if she believed that there could be no return from it, Séverine makes her mind up. Her reasons for attending Madame Anaïs' *maison*, however, remain complex and overdetermined. We would not even dream, of course, to expect a straightforward explanation of them by such a filmmaker as Luis Buñuel, and we must also rule out without hesitation the suggestion he puts in the mouth of the impeccably unscrupulous Monsieur Husson that his friend Séverine does it, like everyone else, just for the money.

Her reasons, instead, probably relate to her need to disappear in this different space - a dreamlike life of inner imagination populated by perverse, and therefore repressed, fantasies of degradation - which ironically may feel safer to her than the depressive normality of her social environment.

Or that she does so for a deep-seated, unprocessed antagonism against the bourgeois system into which, at the same time, she also fits only too well - like in the flashback scene where, as a child, she rebelled against the priest's expectation that she would take Communion.

Or maybe we could come to the conclusion that she is discovering in the course of her journey through sexual desires – a sort of odyssey with a dubious Ithaca at the end of it - that she does not want men to worship her in the way her husband does and that therefore she attends the *modisterie* as a distraction from her boringly chaste marital life.

Or, again, that her unconventional behaviour may be dictated by a sense of insecurity about her feminine identity, which would then need constant confirmation through the variety of erotic activities she is allowed (indeed, expected) to perform in her ‘free’ afternoons. This would be consistent with the view that perversions “are as much pathologies of gender-role identity as pathologies of sexuality” (Kaplan 1991, p. 128), in so far as “what makes a perversion a perversion is a mental strategy that employs some social gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in a manner that

deceives the onlooker about the unconscious meanings of the behaviours she or he is observing” (ibid., p. 130). It should be stressed here that uncertainties in the area of *gender identity* (in this case, whether Séverine feels like a woman) are different from, though not altogether indifferent to, uncertainties in the area of *sexual orientation* (in this case, whether she feels an attraction for other women). In line with the psychoanalytic belief in a universal bisexual disposition in all human beings, Séverine’s behaviour suggests a conflictual attitude in this respect, exemplified by her attempt to kiss a reluctant Madame Anaïs (a mother figure) when leaving her workplace for the last time, in contrast with what had happened on her first day there when she had been the one to turn her face away from Madame’s lips. It would be meaningless, of course, to interpret any sort of heterosexual behaviours, in brothels or anywhere else, as a defense against homoerotic anxieties; nevertheless, when heterosexuality takes on a compulsive quality (like in, say, Don Juan) one begins to wonder what latent desires the manifest behaviour may be concealing.

But perhaps Séverine’s ultimate reason for becoming a prostitute (if only a part-time one) is simply that she cannot help it. “*I am lost...*” she tells Pierre, “*I can't resist*”. Indeed, it is a mixture of seduction and repulsion that prostitution may hold for any woman in Séverine's position. Catherine Deneuve, only twenty-two-year-old at the time, hides both reactions behind her magically frosty expression, thus forcing us, the viewers, into the uncomfortable position of having to explore our own fantasies and draw our own moral conclusions.

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After her first encounter in Madame Anaïs's *maison*, where she looks and behaves more like a virginal Barbie-doll than a real person, Séverine takes a cathartic shower and burns her underwear in the fireplace - though she clumsily moves one of her garments to the side of the fireplace, parapraxically leaving behind the evidence of her sexual activities.

These will soon include a taste of all sorts of perversions, among them incestuous necrophilia with the Duke who, twenty years ahead of the Camcorder revolution, places

a movie-camera in front of his carefully-staged erotic scenario - and in front of Buñuel's own camera. And, crucially, voyeurism: Séverine, who can only let herself visit the brothel wearing dark glasses (the same ones that Pierre, injured to his eyes like an Oedipus who should not see his own murderous and incestuous crimes, will wear after the shooting) and who is constantly concerned about being seen, will look through a peephole in the wall at the gynaecologist's sado-masochistic tragi-comedy - with Buñuel and, of course, with us.

In so far as, in a general sense, all of us cinema-goers - or, more appropriately, *film-lovers* - could legitimately be described as 'voyeurs', a brief *excursus* into scopophilia will not be inappropriate at this point. Christian Metz, answering his own question about where we can locate a film spectator's point of view, states in his seminal essay that all the viewer can do is identify with the camera which has looked before him. But of course there is no camera in the movie theatre, only its "representative consisting of another apparatus, called precisely a 'projector'" (1974, 49). We have then here a perverse situation whereby while "the actor was present when the spectator was not [during the shooting of the film], the spectator is present when the actor is no longer [during its projection]: a failure to meet of the voyeur and the exhibitionist" (ibid., p. 63).

We can identify two contrasting and complementary kinds of voyeurism. I shall call the first one *penetrative voyeurism*; it is a narcissistic form of aggression, directly related to Primal Scene phantasies, and it involves gratification through the furtive watching of objects unaware of being watched (for instance, a man hiding in a girls' changing room). The second one, *reflective voyeurism*, involves instead the experience of pleasure through the watching of objects who are aware that they are being watched (for instance, strippers in nightclubs); this is a more advanced form of perversion because it implies some recognition that others are not just extensions of one's own self, but real persons responding to the voyeuristic activities of the subject and possibly getting themselves exhibitionistic satisfaction from being looked at.

Let us now return to our film-lovers. When the movie we watch happens to be about voyeurism itself - such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) or Krzysztof Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Love* (1988) - or anyway contains explicit scenes of it, such as the one in *Belle de Jour*, we find ourselves faced with an intriguing situation: because "we are no longer just indulging in the scopophilic activity of watching a film, with all the wishes, anticipation, pleasure or disappointments that such an activity involves. What we are watching now is other voyeurs like ourselves. In other words, our identifications on the one hand, and our

visual excitement on the other, have as their objects not only the film itself, but also the subjects and objects of the voyeuristic activities projected on the screen - a silver surface which thus turns into the disturbing, distorting mirror of our own suppressed desires” (Sabbadini 2000a).

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What about the nature of the object of Séverine’s voyeuristic activity, that ‘sado-masochistic tragi-comedy’, as I have called it earlier, to which, unlike her more experienced colleague, she is herself unable to contribute other than from behind a hole in the wall as an unseen passive spectator? While the scene that we, those other passive spectators, are allowed to watch in identification with Séverine is explicit in all its grotesque physicality, I am reminded of a joke that emphasizes instead the more subtle, and paradoxical, nature that emotional cruelty can take in such perverse relationships. Being begged by a masochist to *please, please*, really hurt him, a dominatrix looks long and hard at her partner, smiles at him with satisfied contempt and then, triumphantly, replies a simple *sottovoce*: “No”.

On the surface, of course, the essence of sado-masochistic relationships is power; not only, as it is more obvious, on the part of the sadist who can get away with causing pain and, even more importantly, humiliation on a consenting partner, but also on the part of the masochist who has the mutually agreed, and consistently respected, authority of putting an end to the game at any time. It is, in other words, the masochist (the gynaecologist in *Belle de Jour*) who turns passivity into activity by calling the shots. His mistress, who appears to give the orders, in effect just receives them.

According to Otto Kernberg “sexual excitement incorporates aggression in the service of love [while] perversity is the recruitment of love in the service of aggression, the consequence of a predominance of hatred over love; its essential expression is the breakdown of boundaries that normally protect the love relationship” (1991, pp. 153-154). However, if we care to look below the surface, we discover that the fascination in such perverse relationships is not so much in the physical or even in the emotional pain which

is being caused, or suffered, through this ‘predominance of hatred over love’, but in the artificiality, in the theatricality itself of the scenario being played out. Or, better perhaps, in the tension between the unconscious script and its external manifestation, between the fantasies in the minds of its participants and their realization in the external world. Some contemporary psychoanalysts, by the way, would describe the complex ways in which perverse fantasies interact with their enactments, and impinge on one another, as “adaptive and defensive compromise formations that may serve multiple functions” (Fogel 1991, p. 2). Other authors, however, question the very notion of a ‘perverse fantasy’ on the grounds that there can only be perverse behaviour, since all fantasy, by definition, is about the objectionable and the unobtainable (McDougall 1991).

It could be argued, of course, that the tension between fantasies and their actualization I have referred to above applies to all sexual relationships, or even to all relationships *tout court*. However, it is precisely the emphasis on the more theatrical aspects of the sado-masochistic play - to the point of almost requiring for its successful accomplishment an imaginary, if not a real, ‘third’ as a spectator - which distinguishes it (and, indeed, other such perverse games) from other intimate rapports; which connotes its extremely limited, almost claustrophobic nature, whereby the experiential range of feelings and sensations is reduced to the compulsive repetition *ad libitum* of an almost identical pattern of stimuli followed by an almost identical pattern of responses. This, which from behind Madame Anaïs's peephole can look like an exciting erotic comedy, from the participants’ viewpoints can ultimately only feel like a depressing tragedy.

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We may wonder whether Freud's original ‘seduction theory’, according to which adult neurotic symptoms are caused by childhood sexual abuse, may also, or even better, apply to perversions inasmuch as these are, in his own words, the ‘negative of neurosis’ (1905b, p. 165). Indeed, modern psychoanalysis tends to locate the psychogenesis of perversions in early traumatic experiences. For instance, Glasser (1986) has identified what he calls a ‘core complex’, characterized by a tension between dread and fascination for a sort of ‘black hole’ associated with a powerful pulling back towards the mother's body. I have argued elsewhere that these psychodynamics are also fundamental to the personality and behaviour of such film characters as Scottie (James Stewart), the protagonist of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958), dominated as they are by an internal conflict consisting of a magnetic pull towards a deadly trap: “The perverse activity is

understood as a solution to the dilemma faced by those individuals who feel a tragic attraction for regressive dependence towards an engulfing, both protective and destructive, object - from which they cannot separate, nor let themselves be swallowed, while trying to achieve both things at the same time” (Sabbadini 2000b). According to Arnold Cooper, “the core trauma [...] is the experience of terrifying passivity in relation to the preoedipal mother perceived as dangerously malignant [...]. The development of a perversion is a miscarried repair of this injury, basically through dehumanization of the body” (1991, p. 23).

Now: Séverine's flashback memory of sexual molestation when she was a young girl - a story paralleled in the present by the brothel's chambermaid's daughter who seems doomed, after finishing her studies, to become herself a whore - is exorcized by being replayed again and again *chez* Madame Anaïs. Relevant in this respect are also the view that “perversion, the erotic form of hatred, [...] serves to convert childhood trauma to adult triumph” (Stoller 1975, quoted in Fogel and Myers 1991, p. 36); and Chasseguet-Smirgel's (1983) theory that perversions result from a confusion, taking place in the early years of development and often encouraged by adults, between the genders and between the generations; so that, for instance, a girl may be expected to fantasize that her own sexual body includes the male genitals, or to behave towards her father as if she were his wife.

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Let us come back once more to *Belle de Jour*. If there is a schizoid split between the bourgeois order of Séverine's marital relationship (or lack of it), skiing holidays, games at the tennis club and dinner parties on the one hand, and the deviant, perverse, disruptive sexual depravity of her afternoons in the brothel on the other, at the same time there is, I would like to suggest, a striking continuity between these two apparently contrasting worlds. Whereby Séverine's (and Deneuve's) austere elegance - mirrored in the formal coolness of Buñuel's *mise-en-scene* and of Sacha Vierny's photography - fits as easily in the sordid ambiance of Madame Anaïs's establishment as corruption and hypocrisy belong to her middle-class existence.

We could speculate that the house of prostitution, as the metaphoric antithesis of marriage, has the unconscious function of keeping the latter alive and, with it, the normality it symbolizes. After all, as McDougall points out, “most sexual perversions [...] are attempts to achieve and maintain a heterosexual relationship” (1991, p. 190). The link, the *trait d'union*, the go-between is Monsieur Husson. Belonging, more than Séverine does, to both worlds almost by nature, he quite concretely crosses the boundaries by coming into the brothel, by contemptuously leaving her as payment some money to buy chocolates for Pierre, and finally by revealing to him what his wife is up to every afternoon between two and five o'clock.

A reference perhaps, this last one, to Shakespeare's Mrs. Alice Ford's free hour for Falstaff's visit ‘*between ten and eleven*’ (or, in Arrigo Boito's libretto for Verdi's opera, ‘*dalle due alle tre*’). Like in ancient Rome, where *Semel in anno licet insanire* [*Once a year (that is only once a year, for Carnival), going crazy is allowed*], such a temporal restriction, and indeed the whole mostly unspoken set of rules regulating life in the house of prostitution, provides a containment to the dangers represented by sexual deviancy. In other words, it is the presence of such boundaries that allows behaviour disruptive of the social order to occur without spilling over into madness or into tragedy - which is of course what happens when Marcel forces them to be trespassed. Indeed, our protagonist's emotional involvement with Marcel is by far more threatening to her psychological equilibrium and fragile marriage to Pierre than either her asexual behaviour as Séverine in the marital bedroom, or her sexual one as ‘Belle de Jour’ in the brothel.

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Let us end at the end - or at the beginning.

Perhaps the landau horse-drawn coach, with its disturbingly reassuring jingling bells, indicates that everything we have seen projected on the screen was but a dream all along. That fantasy and reality, like desire and its fulfillment, draw their *raison d'être* from each other and always merge. And that works of art - a good film for instance - have the function of reminding us that they are ultimately indistinguishable.

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