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Gordian Maugg Fritz Lang

1. Let me begin with a quotation by Fritz Lang from his interview with Godard (1967, “The Dinosaur and the Baby”).

" …the director...I think he has to be a bit of a psychoanalyst. He has to get beneath an actor ́s skin. He has to know why the characters in the story do what they do.........Perhaps in each of our films, you can find our heart, our desires, everything we love and everything that gives us away. I think if someone someday were to analyze you (Godard) and me, he might figure out, I don ́t know, why I made my films. Do you know? (Godard: "no"). You see, I think that person could find out why we do this or that. So I think a director has to be a bit of a psychoanalyst". Then a scene from "M" fades in.

In this interview Lang, describes himself as a psychoanalyst–director, and at the same time, he asks himself if it is possible for a psychoanalyst to analyze him via his films. Fifty years later, Gordian Maugg, the director, does exactly that. In his film he develops something like a scenic psychoanalysis of Fritz Lang by resonating with the creative process in which Lang created his film „M“ (1931).

2. The Psychoanalytic Method

In this paper, I will refer to the intersubjective-relational psychoanalysis, which means the focus is placed on the structure of relationships and how they are embedded in a personal emotional-sensual experience.

Although psychoanalytic treatment focuses on the patient, at the same time relational structures come into being between analyst and patient bi-directionally, within the field in which complex interactions take place. Some third element evolves between the patient and the analyst which one could call the nascent meaning. It is important to bear in mind that this inter-subjective field is always a part of the social, cultural, and historical background.

Something that is not expressed straightforwardly, is not verbalized, that is acted out awakens special interest because it is here that the unconscious enters the stage. The procedural is decisive, the form which takes shape and gets worked through in treatments, in the sense of “realization“ (Stern, D B 2010 ) facilitates a new understanding of the world and relationships in which form and content are inseparable.

A similar process takes place, when viewing a film which its complex structures, then something emerges and evokes the viewer´s internalized relational structures both emotionally and physically. The film doesn`t react like a patient. But something emerges within an intermediate space, which offers many opportunities to get engaged on a relational level. A third element then emerges from the viewer´s experience as he watches the film arising from the interplay of his inner world with the world outside experience. The film is a work of art, which is why the form is so important. A message is conveyed and at the same time contained, heightened by the aesthetics.

3. Psychoanalyst - Film Director

Undoubtedly, there are many similarities, but there are also differences between psychoanalysts and artists (Lichtenberg 2016).

First of all, the artist has a creative medium; the producer´s medium is the film he works with and creates according to aesthetic principals in a creative process. There is no medium in psychoanalysis; it is not dependent upon a medium even when something develops between analyst and patient, which could be called a third element. But play and rhythm are also important for the development that takes place in analysis, yet are less determined by any particular form.

The second difference concerns the person who is present, the patient with whom the analyst enters into a relationship and communicates. Here, there is a living person, whether sitting face to face or lying on the couch, who actively influences what is going on in the analysis. In this way something new takes place within the analytic space, a scene, that can be only partially verbalized and if verbalized something gets lost and something else emerges. Yet, at the same time, something else is being realized when language plays a role.

In recent years, psychoanalysts have become increasingly aware of the role that the scene plays in our work which we create together with the patient, in which we now and then lose our capacity to observe and reflect from a distance. Perhaps this is why psychoanalysts have increasingly developed an interest in films and can learn a lot from them.

This brings me to the third difference. As psychoanalysts, we are always onstage together with the patient. Our inner relational structure also begins to reverberate and to influence the process through our conscious and unconscious verbal and non-verbal interventions. This is different from a film in which we seldom see the director on stage but can perhaps intuit what sort of person he might be.

In the film discussed here, Gordian Maugg brings Fritz Lang onto the stage. Scene by scene he shows how Lang personally became more and more involved while he was looking for a theme: first, during his nightly wanderings about in Berlin when he witnesses a threatening and powerful demonstration by the Nazis - that´s the social background - , and then when he performs a violent and humiliating sexual act with a prostitute - that´s the personal background.

Taking these background determinants, violence and power, into consideration, the next morning he is riveted while reading an article in the newspaper about a serial killer in Düsseldorf who has caused panic in the public at large. He continues to research the theme in Düsseldorf, where he comes into close contact with several persons in the external reality which causes his own personal traumatic and relationship themes to reverberate even more.

For over 30 years, the psychoanalyst Joseph Lichtenberg chaired "a study group /workshop to study creativity…..What all the creative artists we have studied have in common is the ability to transform the narrative of their actual, imagined, and/or observed lived experience into a work of art that is an aesthetic (metaphoric) variant of issues that deeply preoccupy them" (Lichtenberg 2016).

It´s quite remarkable to see how Gordian Maugg illustrates the way these personal themes surface and find their way into Lang´s film. In this film he puts the creative process on stage and develops a phantasy about how the film “ M“ could have evolved by imagining that he accompanied Fritz Lang on his investigations. He shows how he followed a theme by oscillating back and forth between his inner psychic world and the world outside until he finds images and sound. As the film slowly takes on shape and content according to Lang´s phantasy, Gordian Maugg visually and acoustically blends in scenes from the film “M“.

4. The Film

Fritz Lang is in the middle of a personal and professional crisis; his marriage to the screen playwrite Thea von Harbou has become cold, and he goes his own way alone; films now have sound, and he no longer feels ahead of his time; his producer puts him under pressure. According to his biography, in repeated attempts to stabilize himself he takes to cocaine, visits prostitutes; then he takes to the streets of Berlin until he finds an inspiration that he then explores methodically. His own inner relational structures start to reverberate while he discusses his ideas with other people and also as a reaction to contemporary events as they unfold in the background.

A puzzle emerges, and, just as in the analytic situation, Lang endures the chaos and uncertainty until he finds a narration. He picks up a theme and then researches it intensely; in so doing, his personal experiences begin to reverberate, and at the same time he addresses the Zeitgeist as a background melody and background story. Fritz Lang moves through the world in a state of evenly hovering attention just like an analyst, who, however, in contrast, stays physically in the consultation room.

In „M“, Fritz Lang presents a scenic, artfully created draft of the psychoanalysis of a mass murderer; so doing, he places an emphasis on the police investigation and the public´s hysteric reaction based on current events, which provide a sounding - board for his own biographical themes.

Gordian Maugg in his film focuses on a murder who lived in real life. This is quite different from Lang´s Film "M", in which the murderer is a fictional character, the result of his long investigations of several different criminals who committed different crimes that have been condensed into one character, the child murderer.

In the 1920´s the public became increasingly alarmed by the crimes of serial killers, Gordian Maugg constructed his docu-fiction based on one of those, Peter Kürten, who lived in Düsseldorf and indiscriminately attacked men, women and children, some of whom he murdered, often like a wild beast, occasionally even drinking their blood. This series of murders escalated in 1929 and created uproar among the city residents. Finally, Kürten was accused of committing nine murders and seven attempted murders and was finally sentenced to death.

A second real person in Mauggs film is Gennat, the Berlin detective superintendent who was deeply involved in the investigations; it was he who investigated the unsolved murder of Fritz Lang´s first wife. In Mauggs film, Lang follows the clues. At the same time this takes place: "a continual oscillation between relating to the outside other and the inner object" (Winnicott 1971 a, quoted by Benjamin 2018, P. 5).

Because rooms always play a major role in Fritz Lang´s films, or rather how people are placed inside a room, reflecting the scenic aspect, he inspects the scenes of the crime himself. In the film, Fritz Lang´s own murderous themes resonate with the murder scenes, above all in the fictive conversations with the murderer. Highly emotional and meaningful personal events begin to resonate: a childhood scene, a shooting scene in the First World War in which an eye is lost which led to his wearing a monocle. Associations are made with the same pistol which later haunt different scenes to the box containing monocles which looks like a pistol case that Lang carried around with him during his research trip. The unsolved death of his wife resulting from a gun wound was declared an accident. However, Fritz Lang and his mistress were present at the scene of the crime, which was also investigated by the same police commissioner, Gennat. His feelings of guilt originate here and surface as a result of his thorough research and thus the film "M" emerges.

5. Contemporary Public Events

The Weimar Republic refers to a period in German History between 1918 and 1933 in which for the first time a parliamentary democracy was established. This epoch began with the Declaration of the Republic on the 9th of November, 1918, and ended with the appointment of Hitler as Reichs Chancellor on the 30th of January, 1933 (Wikipedia, accessed on October, 18, 2017). The end of the turbulent Weimar Republic in the 1920´s, with its aesthetic forms of expression, appears astonishingly modern even today. There are similarities even to the extent of the exaggerated nationalism. This might be a good reason to show this film today and to view it as a member of an audience.

Contemporary events are repeatedly faded into the film: we see a society in upheaval, in uproar. The stock market crash in 1929 and the financial disaster that ensued led to an increasingly political radicalization. When Fritz Lang wandered through the streets of Berlin at night, he witnessed a threatening march of National Socialists; later on there was a similar incident at a popular restaurant on the outskirts of the city involving Nazis who once again demonstrated their strength.

These powerful demonstrations of threatened or actual violence provide the background for the murderous activities of Peter Kürten and later on in the film “M”. The underworld court hearings in the film “M” are blended in at the end; the murderer is threatened to be lynched. New structures have developed outside constitutional democracy. Power, the masses, and violence are the themes.

In 1930, the First World War had ended just only 12 years before. In the 1920´s, there was a new mass movement, a desire, almost greed to live and to enjoy one´s own body (see Metzger, R. 2017). Berlin in the 1920´s was the place to have a wild time, full of sexuality, drugs, and violence, but it was also a creative time. Above all, the “Roaring Twenties” was tolerant (Metzger, R. 2017, p. 26). There were many secretaries and young housewives who suddenly had free time in the evenings. Popular Culture developed, some films became box office hits, among them several of Fritz Lang´s.

He sought contact to his fans, young women who were household servants. A dialogue originated from these encounters. The self-determination of women gained ground; even if they were unable to afford to buy a film ticket themselves, they allowed themselves to be invited by men in return for sexual favors - this is where Peter Kürten found his victims.

However, in the increasingly crowded cities, people developed a longing to set themselves apart from the masses. Gordian Maugg depicts this in his film when he has the murderer show up on the sidelines of the investigation and later on when he has him sending out messages to the public at large.

6. The Form

As a result of coming to grips with these themes, Fritz Lang creates a work of art in the film “M”; he calls “M” a documentary ("The Dinosaur and the Baby" 1967). The form reflects the fragmentation of reality in modernity from which both film producers, Lang as well as Maugg, construe a story. Both succeed in creating a narration in a symbolic system, i.e., the film itself.

Gordian Maugg´s film is docu-fiction: screen material is blended into historical film shots, making a mash-up. In this way Gordian Maugg condenses the historical truth, brings it sharply into focus and by that arrives at a psychologically coherent statement, just as scenes are linked, connected together in our psychic reality via chains of association and not as exact 1:1 copies of the reality outside. This is why certain scenes in which Fritz Lang meets Gennat or the interviews with Peter Kürten can be understood more as inner monologues rather than actual dialogues. Fritz Lang works through his own traumatization in the way he creates his film "M".

This method of interweaving the present with the past by fading the actors into old film material contradicts the way our psychic life works, because in our memory past events fade into the present. But it also corresponds to the viewer´s emotional experience when he sees a film and projects himself into the film.

7. The Role of the Viewer´s Response

Meaning gradually emerges as part of a process due to an intense relationship to the art object, which is part of the outside world. But at the same time the art object is experienced in a complex inside-outside relationship which can be felt in a physical, sensual experience, so something new develops. This process takes place in the artists, and also in the recipients, for example the viewers of a film.

Meaning comes about through relatedness, in an unpredictable, uncontrollable way.

 “M” externalizes his inner, tormented relational structures concretely in his actions. But the artist has the ability to use symbolic forms in a creative process; by working through and configuring his themes they attain a more formal, aesthetic Gestalt which the viewer responds to when his own inner relational structure resonate with it.

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