

Thinking Clinically with and about Film

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Abstract

This article presents a commonplace clinical event plus a curiosity from the film *The Piano*. It demonstrates how psychoanalysis (the therapy and the concepts) and film analysis can be brought to bear on each other in such a way that new thinking is generated about both. Along the way an overarching theory of communication is presented.

The problem

For over a century psychoanalysis and film have attempted to engage with each other. By clinicians psychoanalysis has characteristically been applied to film as a heuristic, an element of extant analytic theory being used to explain a film. I have suggested that this seems both immodest and meagre (Appel: 2004). First, as therapists our particular strength is not our ability to pronounce on the meaning of our patients and their utterances, but rather to sit with, feel with, and think with them, so why would we treat a film in this know-it-all fashion? Second, surely our clinical work and our theories have something to gain from serious engagement with this art form.

Below I continue that line of thought. I show how all three—the clinical situation, psychoanalytic theory, and film—can be used to produce new thinking about each other as well as thoughts on an overarching problem, the nature of communication.

A clinical illustration

A patient is once again brooding about why many months ago the therapist refrained from hugging her when she was very distressed. She reports two recent dreams in which she and the therapist touch. In one dream they brush against each other in passing; in the other their upper arms touch as they sit side by side on the couch. In both instances, she says, she experienced something electric accompanied by the idea: Good, now he'll see.

The therapist reasons: so, through these dreams she is trying to show me something about how things are for her, but what? His internal process rapidly goes:

she felt something intense—I feel anxious—so the ‘something electric’ is an unpleasant feeling for her too—she is anxious/frightened—things have been getting close between us—she’s feeling impinged upon and sexually stirred up. His thoughts turn to the prevailing discourse of sexual abuse—unprofessional conduct—the possibility of a complaint.

So he says: ‘It felt yuck.’ He imagines that this is an empathic comment. She doesn’t take it up but at the end of the session reports feeling sad. The next sessions she is seems at a distance and says she feels hurt and lonely. Ironically, he realises, despite her conviction/wish in the dreams that he would now understand, clearly he has got it wrong.

Communication?

When Freud wanted to introduce an audience to the theory of unconscious determination he liked to begin by discussing parapraxes ‘to which everyone is liable’ (1915-1916a:25) and which have ‘a high theoretical value’ (1910a:38). Here is a Freudian slip committed by one of his students, Wilhelm Stekel: ‘I entered a house and offered my right hand to my hostess. In a most curious way I contrived in doing so to undo the bow that held her loose morning-gown together. I was conscious of no dishonourable intention; yet I carried out this clumsy movement with the dexterity of a conjurer’ (in Freud:1901b:176). Even the most conventional communication, then, is fraught with mixed wishes.

Harold Bloom has coined the term Uncle Siggy’s Revenge. Teaching a graduate seminar on psychoanalysis, ‘my transference to Freud got more and more dubious,’ he says. Each semester ‘the parapraxes would become so monstrous that in the final two classes everything was an unintended pun or a double-entendre or some terrible self-revelation. I wasn’t saying what I meant to say at all. It became occult!’ (in MacFarquhar:2002:91-92). Or perhaps he was indeed saying what he meant. It does seem to be the case that ‘slips of the tongue are contagious’ (1915-1916a:68). Freud showed that the underlying ‘disturbing ideational content’ (1906:105) continually asserts itself; the more we try to cover it up the more insistent it is.

Communication has three primary and necessary elements in the commonsensical view, and it runs as follows: sender-message-receiver. ‘There is a donor of the narrative and a receiver of the narrative....There can be no narrative without a narrator and a listener (or a reader). Banal, perhaps, but still little developed’ (Barthes:1977:180). In Louis Althusser’s famous example, a policeman calls out: ‘Hey, you there!’, and the hailed individual turns around.

Implied in the banal understanding of communication are at least four notions.

1. Self-knowledge: comprehension by the sender of what is to be said.
2. Volition: the conscious choice to speak. Implied here is the possibility of choosing not to communicate.
3. Transparency: a message with a meaning.
4. Competence: the ability of the recipient to discern what has been sent. It is not hard to come up with attempts at communication that seem to fall well short of these standards.

(Mis)communication

The commonsense, banal view of communication as the transmission of information would have it that the therapeutic session above is a failure of signification, indeed that communication hasn't happened. Psychoanalysis says something different. It proposes that this is precisely how communication happens. On this point Jacques Lacan has provided us with a confounding aphorism. Not sender-message-receiver, but, he says at the very end of his seminar on Poe's story 'The Purloined Letter', 'A letter always arrives at its destination' (1956:53).

No matter what else happens or does not happen when we speak, communication happens. In which case, it may be that instances of 'failed' communication may warrant further study; the apparent anomaly might illuminate something about the nature of all utterances.

Our attempts at communication are out of our control; our acts are more like faulty actions. For psychoanalysis communication does happen, but it is an enigmatic communication. We have a sender who cannot be trusted to know and/or say what s/he means (and yet who nevertheless cannot but tell the truth), a message which seems to have a mind of its own (without having a single meaning), and a recipient who does not have eyes to see and ears to hear. In short, psychoanalysis introduces the radical uncertainty of the unconscious. Lacan insists on the absolute importance of the imperfect nature of communication, the path of the signifier:

If what Freud discovered and rediscovers with a perpetually increasing sense of shock has meaning, it is that the displacement of the signifier determines the subjects in their acts, in their destiny, in their refusals, in their blindness, in their end and in their fate, their innate gifts and social acquisitions not-

withstanding, without regard for character or sex, and that, willingly or not, *everything that might be considered the stuff of psychology, kit and caboodle*, will follow the path of the signifier. (1956:43-44, emphasis added)

To return to that protean sentence, *A letter always arrives at its destination*. Not only does it suggest something about the fraught vicissitudes of communication, but it is also an enactment of the very point(s) it makes. Is it not reminiscent of words heard in a dream? So ‘readerly’—as Barthes might have described it—is the comment that in its koan-like openness it resists summary while providing the impetus for many a profound analysis.

Several writers (see Muller and Richardson:1988) have treated Lacan’s sentence as a conceptual kernel from which rich theoretical propositions and models may be grown. One contrary instance is the analysis by Jacques Derrida: ‘A letter does *not always* arrive at its destination, and from the moment that this possibility belongs to its structure one can say that it never truly arrives, that when it does arrive its capacity not to arrive torments it with an internal drifting’ (1987:194). When faced with communicative misalliances like the clinical one above it is tempting to side with him.

In her account Barbara Johnson comes up with at least seven possible meanings:

The sentence ‘a letter always arrives at its destination’ can...either be simply pleonastic or variously paradoxical; it can mean ‘the only message I can read is the one I send’, ‘wherever the letter is, is its destination’, ‘when a letter is read, it reads the reader’, ‘the repressed always returns’, ‘I exist only as the reader of the other’, ‘the letter has no destination’, ‘and ‘we all die’. It is not any one of these readings, but all of them and others in their incompatibility, which repeat the letter in its way of reading the act of reading. Far from giving us the Seminar’s final truth, these last words enact the impossibility of any ultimate analytic metalanguage. (1988:249)

The Piano

For his part Slavoj Žižek (1992) focuses on the second of Johnson’s interpretations: wherever the letter is, is its destination. As an illustration (1994:192) he gives the curious and gruesome letter episode from Jane Campion’s film *The Piano*.

In this scene, Ada writes a love letter—on an ivory key she has removed from the piano—to her lover Baines, a man who we have learned earlier is illiterate. The messenger, Ada’s daughter Flora, delivers the letter instead to her step-father—Ada’s husband, Stewart. Stewart in a rage chops off one of Ada’s fingers.

Recall that Ada herself cannot speak—she has been an elective mute since childhood. So her letter-writing is all the more intriguing. If this is communication, how curious it is. The sender writes a secret letter to a man who will not be able to read it; she sends the letter with an unreliable messenger; the letter is delivered to the man from whom the secret is being kept, with most dire consequences for the sender.

Nevertheless the letter, says Žižek, has indeed arrived at its destination. ‘Stewart *is* its true addressee’ (1994:192). The letter sets in motion ‘the tragic aggravation of their relationship’ (192).

‘What has to be recognized, as Freud says, is not what is expressed but what is repressed’ (Lacan:1985:209). Or as Žižek puts it, the ‘reverse of the subjects’ message is its *repressed*’ (1992:12). Here the psychoanalytic meaning of the word ‘repression’ is instructive. It is not Stewart who is repressing Ada as a conventional sociology of male power would have it. Rather, it is Ada—whose attempts to realise her desire for Baines—who has repressed Stewart by preferring to ignore him. But we always say more than we intend to say; the return of the repressed—the avenging Stewart—is brought about by the surplus of what is effectively said over the intended meaning.

And what if Flora had not changed her mind? Would Stewart not have found out? Of course not. “‘What if I had taken another route and avoided that scene?’ Such questioning is, of course, deceitful since “a letter *always* arrives at its destination”: it waits for its moment with patience—if not this, then another contingent little bit of reality will sooner or later find itself at this place that awaits it and fire off the trauma’ (Žižek:1992:11-12). One way or another Ada will express her desire to her husband. In this view Ada’s letter-writing has the form of a parapraxis. Just as a slip of the tongue may reveal our hidden intentions, so, despite herself, Ada ends up saying what she means to say. This is a fruitful analysis. It says something about Flora’s betrayal of her mother without removing Ada’s own responsibility.

Lacan adds some valuable complexity here. Rather than concerning ourselves overmuch with the true identity of the addressee, he draws our attention to the action of the letter: ‘As soon as it is speech, it may have several functions’ (1954-1955:198). Referring to the Queen’s letter in Poe’s story, he says:

The letter, which doesn’t have the same meaning everywhere, is a truth which is not to be divulged. As soon as it gets into the pocket of the minister, it is no longer what it was before, whatever it was that it had been. It is no longer a love letter, a letter of trust, the announcement of an event, it is evidence, on

this occasion a court exhibit....We realise that the identity of the recipient of a letter is as problematic as the question of knowing to whom it belongs. In any case, from the moment it falls into the hands of the minister, it has become something else. (1954-1955:198-199)

Let us continue to treat the letter scene from *The Piano* as a paradigmatic instance of communication. There is more—much more—that can be said. Readers who have seen the film will recall that the scene does not end with Stewart chopping off Ada's finger. He wraps up the finger in a white cloth—perhaps the very white cloth in which the piano key had been lovingly wrapped—and instructs Flora to deliver it to Baines. This time the messenger goes directly to the ostensible addressee. Baines immediately understands enough of what has happened to set off to rescue Ada and take her away, thereby taking on the romantic lead-role.

What if we treat the severed finger not in its materiality, but symbolically as a reconstitution of the piano key note? Žižek himself might have expanded his brief analysis of *The Piano's* letter episode along the lines he himself developed elsewhere. In his discussion of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* he says: 'The letter arrives twice at its destination, or, to put it another way, the postman rings twice' (1992:6). Along those lines I am suggesting that the path of the signifier doesn't just end when it arrives at Stewart. The piano key/note becomes the finger; the signifier is altered at each link of the chain of signification. Here the letter, radically transformed (but still recognisable) does get to Baines in the end. But rather than a secret love letter to her lover who would anyway not have understood it, the letter has now fulfilled its transformative function. Its path via Stewart (and via Flora) has meant the end of one relationship and the beginning of another. A wholly successful communication!

Let us make another visit to psychoanalysis and think of this movie as a dream.

Dream

Freud's two most famous statements about the dream are that it is the fulfilment of a wish and (therefore) that dream interpretation is the royal road to the unconscious. As early as *Project for a Scientific Psychology* Freud outlined the function and logic of dreams.

'What happens is not, for instance, that the wish becomes conscious and that its fulfilment is then hallucinated, but only the latter; the intermediate link is left to be inferred' (1895:342). 'If now all this [the dream-thoughts]

is to be turned into a dream, the psychical material will be submitted to a pressure which will condense it greatly, to an internal fragmentation and displacement which will, as it were, create new surfaces, and to a selective operation in favour of those portions of it which are the most appropriate for the construction of situations' (1901a:660).

'Dreams, as everyone knows,' Freud said, 'may be confused, unintelligible or positively nonsensical, what they say may contradict all that we know about reality, and we behave in them like insane people, since, so long as we are dreaming, we attribute objective reality to the contents of the dream (1940[1938]:165). But this is only apparent absurdity: 'Dreams...are often most profound when they seem most crazy'; and 'the dream-thoughts are never absurd' (Freud 1900b:444).

For example, in a dream two people or things can be represented by one, defying everyday rationality, just as one thing or person can stand for more than one. Now if *The Piano* is someone's dream, then for the dreamer the figures of Ada and Flora might not only represent a mother and a daughter, but also both of those characteristics within one person. According to this view, *The Piano* can be understood as a film about female development. This is the way Richard O'Neil Dean (1995) has chosen to read the film.

The figures of Stewart and Baines might also be considered to be two versions of a common element in a dream.

There must be one or more *common elements* in all the components. The dream-work then proceeds just as Francis Galton did in constructing his family photographs. It superimposes, as it were, the different components upon one another. The common element in them then stands out clearly in the composite picture, while contradictory details more or less wipe one another out....Basing itself on this discovery, dream-interpretation has laid down the following rule in analysing a dream: if an uncertainty can be resolved into an 'either-or', we must replace it for purposes of interpretation by an 'and', and take each of the apparent alternatives as an independent starting-point for a series of interpretations. (Freud:1901a:649-650)

So, the letter scene(s) of *The Piano* can be thought of as a dream in which the same dream-thought reappears in more than one form. Stewart and Baines may stand for two aspects of a man or of masculinity. 'The content of the dream merely says as it were: "All these things have an element *x* in common.'" The dissection of these composite structures by means of analysis is often the shortest way to finding the meaning of a dream' (1901a:651).

Equally convincingly, and without losing anything, the scene(s) can be thought of as two consecutive dreams. Freud spoke of this too: 'The content of all dreams that occur during the same night forms part of the same whole; the fact of their being divided into several sections...has a meaning and may be regarded as a piece of information arising from the latent dream-thoughts' (1900a: 333-334). So, perhaps there is a conflict in the dreamer which manifests itself in the cool, un-emotional man who also castrates, and the warm, feeling man who protects.

But the object in raising this is not actually to analyse the letter scene of *The Piano* as a dream. Rather, the point of regarding the letter scene as having the structure of a dream is to borrow the notion of two characters standing for one. The entire literature on transference rests on this tendency of the mind. Freud made it abundantly clear that the only way to interpret a dream is to obtain the associations *of the dreamer* to the elements of the dream. As we do not have access to the dreamer (Campion herself?), any attempt at interpretation must be condemned as 'wild' analysis (Freud:1910b). In any case, an analysis of the dream would not move the discussion about communication forward.

Back to the therapy room

Treating the film in this way helps in thinking about another example of apparently failed communication, the clinical example which started this article. Things do not end there either. Three sessions after the therapist disappointed the patient by demonstrating that he did not in fact 'see', she is able to clarify what it was that in the dreams she had felt convinced that the therapist would at last see. The touching was not yuck, it was wonderful, but it was also a painful reminder of what is missing in her life. She goes on to say that she is frustrated and that eating comfort food is 'plugging the wrong hole'; she has the beginnings of—but won't let herself develop these—sexual fantasies with men she works with; there is still a tension between the good girl and the sexual woman; and so on. She has been rejected before by men because of the intensity of her passions. Crucially, when she reached puberty it was made clear to her by her father that he could not tolerate her sexual development. He withdrew from her as fathers often do, but he also projected the problem on to her: instead of admitting that he was not enough for her, he construed her as being too much.

Now the therapist's thinking goes something like this: just as the father withdrew from his developing daughter, so I have shied away from the patient; despite all I knew about her history, the obvious construction—that we have been reenacting the father/daughter complex—has been unavailable to me. Why? Perhaps the

entire set of interactions (both sessions) has been an instantiation of the patient's desire: 'One could define desire as exactly this process: as the difference between the original message and that which arrives at the end' (Leader:1996:108). Something was needed for the message to arrive.

[An aside. It is vital in the clinical situation—and in *The Piano*—to remember that the particular form of the communication (we can no longer think of it as a *miscommunication*) owes more than a little to the desire of the receiver. It's not that the patient invariably produces anxious sexual withdrawal from every person or even every man she encounters. The man needs to bring to the encounter something which leads him to respond in a way that is familiar to her. (Similar, but not exactly the same: therein lies the hope for change.) He needs to be amenable, in Althusser's (1969) terms, to the interpellation. When he (mis)recognises himself in her letter, he has become a subject of her discourse.]

The patient intends to say one thing (it felt wonderful), the therapist hears another (this is becoming too much); but nevertheless something is being re-enacted in the very stuff of the therapeutic interchange. Her expectation that he would see, his going off on a tangent of sexual anxiety, her disappointment, his guilt—rather than proof of a misalliance, these are all the very stuff of the alliance. Indeed, it would be strange if somehow he and she were able to have a relationship which bore no relationship to her primary relationships. Inscribed as it is in the experiences and fantasies of both parties, this message does eventually arrive at its destination. Now the therapist gets to appreciate something of what her life is like, and, moreover, he is able to retrieve the situation by reversing his anxious retreat from her. How much more elegant of the patient to insert the message into the therapeutic relationship itself. Show, in other words, don't tell.

As with the letter scene in *The Piano*, it is more fruitful to regard this clinical sequence as the delivery of a single message, rather than as two—one failed communication, and one more successful. It's not that we send a message once and for all: 'The repressed is always there—it insists, and it demands to come into being,' says Lacan. And more than that: 'That which insists on being can only be satisfied through recognition' (1985:209). Like a distress signal at sea, the message continues to be emitted until it is responded to. In order to make a difference in the recipient the message may need to be repeated and altered. I want to argue that if one hasn't been heard and changes the message accordingly we would do well to still consider it the same message.

In both the film and the clinical example the messages becomes performative. Ada's love-letter and the patient's reported dreams are personal ads. In order for

the ads to sell, for the messages to arrive, they don't need to be fully understood (how could that possibly occur?). The second part of the patient's communication needed the first in order to strike home—in Malcolm Gladwell's (2000) term, to become 'sticky'. It is true that the second part on its own contains important information. But it doesn't communicate the nature of the entire complex. The way things are for this patient in her relationships is far better apprehended—intellectually and emotionally—if one thinks of the entire sequence as the difficult, troubled delivery and reception of a letter. It could not be otherwise: 'Language is both what transmits a message and what necessarily deforms it' (Leader:1996:108).

One is reminded here of the remarkable pedagogical point made by Freud in his lecture on transference. 'The subject,' he says, 'is one that I cannot withhold from you.' A few lines later he adds: 'You have the indisputable right to learn this. I shall not, however, tell it to you but shall insist on your discovering it for yourself' (1915-1916b:431).

It may be that it is more than coincidence that both the clinical example and the film describe women trying to communicate with a man. There may be something peculiarly feminine about the nature of such attempts, according to Lacan. He has said that a woman always addresses a universal man beyond the man: 'A woman's love, he says, aims at the universal man. Now, by definition, this will be situated beyond the real male partner. How, then, can one send something to him, and is it even necessary that he *knows* that something is being sent?' (Leader:1996:141). But that is a story for another day.

In everyday speech we'd say that the patient said something, the therapist misheard it, so she said it differently, and he heard it better this time. Quite banal. But our analysis of the letter scene in *The Piano* is helpful here too. Just as Stewart and Baines can be thought of two parts of the same one, so the therapist should be thought of as being more than one. The therapist is a 'facsimile' of others, predominantly the parents (Freud:1912). There is something inescapably uncanny about the other (Freud:1919).

Chattering finger-tips

Nevertheless, we must speak. In the case of Dora Freud famously said: 'He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger-tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore' (1905[1901]:77-78). We must speak, even that which is secret to ourselves. And then when we speak it is like playing Chinese Whispers.

For Barthes there are only two systems of signs: personal and apersonal (1977:182). For our purposes let us call these conscious and unconscious (though which of these is best described as personal and which as impersonal is a moot point). 'The dishonest tourniquet of the two systems' produces the enigmatic nature of the letter and its reception.

In order to conclude that the author himself...has 'signs' at his disposal which he sprinkles through his work, it is necessary to assume the existence between this 'person' and his language of a straight descriptive relation which makes the author a full subject and the narrative the instrumental expression of that fullness. Structural analysis is unwilling to accept such an assumption: *who speaks* (in the narrative) is not *who writes* (in real life) and *who writes* is not *who is*. (1977:181)

In this regard Barthes cites Lacan's question, 'Is the subject I speak of when I speak the same as the subject who speaks?' (181n). And we might add, Is the subject to whom I speak when I speak the same as the subject who hears?

To conclude

Why does Ada send a love letter to Baines who cannot read? Whenever we speak we are, like Ada, unable to speak plainly. The recipient, like Baines, is unable to clearly decipher the message. What we say is transformed between us and the one who receives. And in the process both speaker and receiver are transformed.

One cannot agree with Derrida when he says that: 'Contrary to what the Seminar says in its last words...a letter can always not arrive at its destination....Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but that it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving' (1987:187). Žižek (1992) has shown that this commonsensical objection is indeed besides the point; even a message in a bottle arrives at its destination the moment it is thrown into the sea.

Far better to say in response to the underdeveloped sender-message-receiver model: a message never arrives at its destination in that communication is never spotless. But in thoughtful circles this banal model surely no longer has currency. In which case, and in light of the discussion above, an elaboration of Lacan's axiom does suggest itself: a letter, *transformed, transforming, and via a convoluted path*, always arrives at its destination. Or should one say *destinations*?

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