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Human Nature through Freudian Lenses. A Reading of Ordinary People *(Robert Redford, 1980)*

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Abstract: The article highlights the Freudian approach applied in depicting the events ensuing in a family after a tragic accident – and the related psychoanalysis case, determined by a case of traumatic neurosis – as illustrated in Robert Redford's movie *Ordinary People*. The elder son in the family dies in a boat accident, while his brother survives, unable to save him. Ridden with unconscious guilt, the brother tries to commit suicide. Later, he eventually starts an analysis that will bring to the surface his interpretation of the accident, unknown to himself, as the actual traumatic event. The emphasis is placed on a suggestion-free direction of the cure, as promoted by both Freud and Lacan, where the analyzand finds his own words and brings the trauma to memory, moving from a traumatic and compulsory reliving in the present to a remembering of something in the past which liberates the present.

Keywords: traumatic neurosis, Freudian analysis, Jacques Lacan, direction of the cure, suggestion, variable-length session.

Ordinary People is a movie that marks Robert Redford's directorial debut and stars Timothy Hutton, Donald Sutherland, Mary Tyler Moore and Judd Hirsh. It won four Academy Awards and five Golden Globe Awards (Donald Sutherland was the only star neglected for an Oscar nomination,

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although he was nominated for a Golden Globe). The movie was very well received and was also praised in the psychiatric community for depicting the profession in a positive light – "a study in successful therapy" – as an article from *The New York Times* phrased it at the time[1].

The screenplay is based on the homonymous 1976 novel written by Judith Guest and depicts the events taking place in a family living in Lake Forest, Illinois (part of the Chicago metropolitan area), after the death of their first son ("Buck") and the attempted suicide of the other one ("Conrad" – Timothy Hutton).

Synopsis

An important part of the story, including the most afflicting events, takes place in the past: the elder son, Buck, dies in a boat accident, during a storm, while his brother Conrad survives. Later, Conrad tries to kill himself with a razor, but luckily his father ("Calvin" – Donald Sutherland) is at home and manages to get his son to a hospital in time. Conrad is kept under psychiatric care for a number of months, then he is sent back home, where he still has nightmares about the accident. He now has difficulties with school grades and his friends, he is absent minded, permanently tired, and his answers are automatic, usually mirroring the words used to question him. In short, he seems to live and walk like an "empty shell", devoid of any desire. His father is quite worried about Conrad, and tries to convince him more than once to visit a psychiatrist, although without pressing the issue. Eventually, the son engages in an analysis with Dr. Berger (Judd Hirsch), and the sessions prove to have visible beneficial effects in time.

The resolution finally comes after Conrad finds out that a girl he befriended when he was in hospital took her own life: he rushes to the bathroom and, close to a second suicide attempt, has a *cathartic* moment and calls Dr. Berger; they meet and Conrad, with the help of the analyst, finds the words and the understanding of what was happening to him. The father, who also visited Dr. Berger once, finally realizes that his wife is emotionally

[1] Linda B. Martin, "The Psychiatrist in Today's Movies. He's Everywhere and in Deep Trouble", *The New York Times*, January 25, 1981.

stuck after Buck's death and that she is not capable anymore of loving her present family; he confronts Beth (the wife – Mary Tyler Moore) and the following morning she leaves the house in a taxi, carrying only a briefcase with a change of clothes.

The movie ends with father and son embracing each other. The following sections will focus on several selected scenes, more suitable for psychoanalytical interpretation.

The Choir Scene

The movie opens with a school choir, in which Conrad is also singing. After filming the entire choir, the camera moves left and right and finally closes in on Conrad's haggard figure: he has gray circles around his eyes, and he is staring at nothing, showing no emotion; but somewhere inside his voice, and in the words that he sings, there seems to be some hidden hope (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1. Conrad singing in the school choir

There are a lot of clues presented to us throughout the movie, some more subtle, other rather direct; the first reading key of the movie events is given to us right at the start, in the verses sung by the choir:

> … in the silence of our souls,
> Oh Lord we contemplate Thy peace,
> Free from all the world's desires
> *Free of fear and all anxiety*.[2]

If we correlate the almost permanent lack of energy that Conrad displays in the first part of the movie, and this formula of "being free of *all anxiety*" (which can be read as wish, but instead – and surprisingly at a first glance – it rather reflects Conrad's *actual* situation), we can remember the description of the term of *inhibition* given by Freud in his work *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*:

> As regards inhibitions then, we may say in conclusion that they are restrictions of the functions of the ego which have either been imposed as a measure of precaution or brought about as a result of an impoverishment of energy […][3]

And, more specifically, we can recall Freud's references to the type of inhibition known as "generalized inhibition":

> When the ego is faced with a particularly difficult mental task, as occurs in mourning or when there is some tremendous suppression of affect or when a continual flood of sexual fantasies is being kept down, it loses so much of the energy at its disposal that it has to cut down the expenditure of it at many points at once. It is in the position of a speculator whose money has become tied up in various enterprises.[4]

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[2] *Pachelbel Canon in D major* – choral version (emphasis added).

[3] Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, trans. A. Strachey, (The International Psycho-Analitical Library, No. 28, 1949), 18.

[4] Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, 17-18.

Why "free of anxiety" then? In order to differentiate the three concepts that give the title of his work, Freud specifies that (1) inhibition differs from the symptom in that the first represents a "restriction of the functions of the ego", a "lowering of function", while the second happens when "a function has undergone some unusual change or when a new phenomenon has arisen out of it"; and (2) inhibitions "obviously represent a relinquishment of a function whose exercise would produce anxiety", in another words, an inhibited person is free of anxiety in the sense that anxiety is avoided at all costs. While the choir verses would imply that heavenly peace, free of desire, of fear and anxiety, is what is sought-after, on the contrary, an analysis strives to put the subject on the way of (re)finding his or her desire, through a path that goes from *inhibition* (where the subject can be described as "at the level of trauma"), through *symptoms* (which, while pathological, present the advantage of having interpretative potential), to finally wake up *anxiety*, the "only affect that does not deceive"[5], which gives the analyzand the chance of becoming a "subject of desire". Therefore, a path *not* "free of the world's desires", and we will see Conrad following it; a path that takes him from his out-of-the-world situation back into his world, where his family, his friends and his desires live, helped by the Freudian analysis depicted in the movie.

To come back to this starting scene, we can therefore say that we find Conrad in an apparent state of helplessness, which hides an extraordinary censorship imposed by the ego (the *generalized inhibition* that spends all his energy), in order not to face the traumatic event to which he was exposed, at the same time cutting him off emotionally from the world.

The railway crossing

In this scene, Conrad is driven to school in the morning in one of his friends' car, together with two other schoolmates (they are all also swimming team buddies, and Buck, the elder brother who died in the boat accident, was also a member of the team). He is trying to read a book given as homework reading, while the others chat about various school events. At one point, one

[5] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis – Book XI*, Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Karnac, 2004), 41.

of them complains about a professor, and the other retorts: "that guy wants a *goddam personal analysis* of it all". The phrase delivers a second clue – as in Poe's Dupin detective stories, we are presented with key movie elements before they happen. We could even suppose that Conrad registers the words without actually listening and that his future decision to finally call a psychiatrist is made possible by this "mirroring of what comes from outside", that is so much present in his current behavior; or, to quote Jacques Lacan: "The message, our message, in all cases comes from the Other, by which I understand «from the place of the Other»."[6]

In the same text, Lacan talks about the Freudian Unconscious, describing it as being made of thoughts, thoughts that are barred from consciousness. He continues with an illustration of what he calls a *barrier* (of meaning) that one has to jump over, or pass through – the unconscious "is a thinking with words, with thoughts that escape your vigilance, your state of watchfulness" – and he ends up by describing the heavy traffic in the morning (when he was going to that very conference), with the neon signs indicating the change of time, finally concluding: "The best image to sum up the unconscious is Baltimore in the early morning".

Back to the movie: the car driving the boys to school stops at a railway level crossing, waiting for a train to pass; the train arrives, and Conrad looks *over the barrier*, through the fast-moving carriages. Suddenly another scene – the *other* scene – appears before his eyes: for a brief moment, he sees a cemetery, the one where Buck is buried. The train departs and the vision disappears. A short glimpse of the beyond, escaping the censorship of the ego, made possible by what? And why at that place and time? The hints are there, in words like the *passing* of the train and the railway *crossing* – specifying a place and coming close (both of them) to the theme of death. Also, the *morning*, specifying the time, when maybe Conrad is still a little asleep and dreamy, so the censor's *barrier* is not sufficiently protecting the gate. A scene that describes the unconscious at work, and one that tries to give a hint – for Conrad – that the traumatic event is related to Buck's death.

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[6] Jacques Lacan, "Of Structure as the Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever", in *The languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. R. Macksey and E. Donato, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970).

Analysis with Dr. Berger

In one of the days that follow, Conrad calls Dr. Berger, and finally meets him. In the initial interview session, Conrad is jumpy, cannot sit, and keeps saying that everything is alright. Of course, he is then immediately asked "So why are you here?" and thus the initial transferential "bait" is now being set: he wants to be "more in control" (so "people won't worry about me"), and Dr. Berger, while, in his words, "not big on control", agrees to help. From now on, they will meet twice a week, since "control's a tough nut" …

At the start of an analysis, the patient puts himself in the hands of the analyst, so to speak: the patient believes that the analyst *knows* what to do about the case, how to solve the problem, and is able to give answers. The role of the analyst is paramount here, and he can effectively decide the direction of the cure – and one way to go is the one centered on the strong ego of the analyst, taken as a (successful) model that should be followed by the (weak, fragile) ego of the patient, who learns from the analyst how to solve his own problems (even if they are not the analyst's) and follows the analyst's suggestions. After all, in this case, Dr. Berger could tell Conrad directly: your brother died in a boat accident, you were with him, obviously you are affected by his death. Should he expect this to help? This is what Freud has to say about the limits of the suggestion-based method:

> The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past.[7]

The opposite approach (explicitly indicated by Lacan) uses this "subject supposed to know" that the analyst is only as an initial transferential lure or bait, so to speak, but the direction of the cure is completely different:

[7] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 12.

the analyst gives control to the analyzand, since they are two different persons; the accent here is put on the singularity of the subject, of the trauma, of the desire, of the different relation to language each one has. The analyst helps the analysand find words for himself, words that will help him bring the trauma in the present as a memory instead of repeating it, words that, in the end, will make him a master unlike any other, a singular master of his own destiny, able to tackle problems and be creative according to his own means.

Thus, the transference means something other than copying recipes from the analyst to the patient; rather, both use their unique relation to language in a way that dislocates the analyzand more and more to the singular position where the unconscious dwells – and with an end that, instead of reinforcing the authority of the knowledgeable person (the analyst), rather prepares the patient to get rid of the analyst-"crutch" and stand alone on his own feet. Here the analyst follows the suggestion of the analyzand's discourse, and not the other way around:

> What is striking, in this institution of the analytic discourse, which is the mainspring of the transference, is not, as some have thought they have heard me say, that the analyst is the one who is given the function of the subject supposed to know. If speech is so freely given to the psychoanalysand – this is precisely how he receives this freedom – it's because we recognize that he may speak as a master, that is, as a birdbrain, but that this will not give results that are as good as in the case of a real master, since it's supposed to lead to knowledge. This is knowledge of which he who is prepared, in advance, to be the product of the psychoanalysand's cogitation, that is, the psychoanalyst, makes himself the underwriter, the hostage – insofar as, as this product, he is in the end destined to become a loss, to be eliminated from the process.[8]

At the next visit, Conrad comments about the session-measuring clock on the table, finds out that Dr. Berger does actually believe in dreams (in the first session he brushed away the topic when it came up), and also realizes that he is fidgety and restless. Therefore, he asks for a tranquilizer or some

[8] Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis - Book XVII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 38.

medicine to calm him down, only to find out that the purpose of the meetings is not necessarily "to feel better" afterwards. With each visit, Conrad's look starts to change, he starts to realize what he wants, or does not want, how others see him, he becomes more himself, and people around him start to sense these changes, but not yet putting their finger on them and making silly comments instead, such as "your hair started to grow".

Slowly, he begins to approach the feelings he had after his brother died, or rather how he could not *feel* anything; in one session, Berger moves his chair very close to Conrad's, and starts "pushing him" verbally (*Figure 2*). Conrad acts like a bottled Coke, wants to get angry, but he is unable to let it out. Finally, he says "It takes too much energy to get mad", to which Berger retorts: "And how much energy to hold it back?" And, thus, the idea of "better feel lousy, that not feel at all" reaches Conrad's mind.

Figure 2. Dr. Berger draws closer

An important theme brought up in the next sessions is the relation with his mother: during the movie, we see that she is rather cold to him and that she has strange reactions when he is around. Remembering the scenes,

Conrad starts to observe these details himself, realizes that something is off, and comes up with an explanation – he now believes that his mother will never forgive him for "trying to off himself". But, at one point during the "talking cure", he finally makes a Freudian slip: "If you think *I*'m gonna forgive… that *she*'s gonna forgive me…" And, after the moment of sideration passes, he continues: "I think I just figured something out. […] Who it is who can't forgive who." And with it one secret is out: it is *he* who is unable to forgive his mother, because she does not love him, or does not love him enough.

Dr. Berger now knows that there is something important about the theme of forgiveness, but since he doesn't know what, he has to make Conrad somehow arrive at it; therefore, Berger asks Conrad if he also cannot forgive himself, and Conrad starts panicking "What did I do? What did I do?", a perfect time for the analyst to make a scansion and stop the session: "Time's up, we'll talk about it on Thursday". Ironically, this statement that shows, in our opinion, an analyst able to use time in a Lacanian manner (variable length session, putting the logical time to work, *i.e.* the time of the unconscious) was seen by the author of the already mentioned article from *The New York Times* as further proof that Dr. Berger uses his clock, since he ends the session when the 50 minutes are up, even if "young Conrad is close to a breakthrough". Or, we already know from the previous scenes in the movie (Conrad's comments about the clock) that only the analyst could see the session time – we do not actually know if the 50 minutes were up, or how long the session was. In any case, that remark touches upon a delicate issue (fixed vs. variable session length), but also shows a misunderstanding about how the unconscious works: can a breakthrough be forced, so to speak, or do you have to let the unconscious do its work, in *its* time, which is precisely what a scansion provides?...

The moment of understanding for Conrad will be precipitated by a series of events that will push him closer to his trauma. He has a first date with Jeannine Pratt (Elizabeth McGovern), a girl who sings in front of him in the choir. They had already talked a few times, while he walked her home from school, and she was the one who remarked that he has a strong, very distinctive voice. Between all interactions Conrad had with anyone in the

movie, we can see that the one with Jeannine feels the most natural, unforced – that isn't to say free of emotions, on the contrary – but showing an invested Conrad that stumbles, makes jokes and can even laugh; the only moments in a day when he actually feels good. Coming back to the first date previously mentioned, the evening starts well, she asks about the scars on his wrist, and he opens up and starts talking about how he felt when he tried to kill himself:

> I don't know. It was like… falling into a hole. It was like falling into a hole and it keeps getting bigger and bigger, and you can't get out. Then, all of a sudden, it's inside, and you're the hole, and you're trapped and it's all over.[9]

Here, one should note the sudden change of the phrase time between the past and the present. While talking, Conrad is transported there and the agglomeration of verbs suggests the urgency, the speed of the change, the vortex that draws Conrad in.

Figure 3. The boat accident: Buck (left) holding Conrad's hand

[9] A description that has a striking resemblance to Lacan's topological description of the object *a*, associated with the subject's trauma and desire (*Seminar X. Anxiety*, starting with the end of Lesson 7).

Right at this moment, when Conrad is opening up, a group of boys (with some of his swim team mates) comes into the restaurant singing loudly. They start harassing the staff, and finally they come over to their table and approach Jeannine. She doesn't know how to react and, confused, she starts laughing – and of course she stops listening to Conrad. He feels betrayed, his attitude towards her gets cold and the evening ends in silence while he drives her home barely answering her.

On top of this setback comes another one. During an evening in the following days (it is almost Christmas), he calls a girl to which he got close while they were both in hospital, somebody else answers and he finds out that she killed herself. Panicked, he storms to the bathroom and we hear a metal clank hitting the sink (it sounds like a razor and most surely it is one, but it is filmed very quickly, probably deliberately). Conrad starts the tap water, and puts his hands in. The camera shows the water in the sink spiraling down, we remember the hole, and… Conrad remembers the accident, his brother Buck and him trying to control the boat they are on during a heavy storm, rain pouring over: the sail breaks, and Buck falls into the water. *Now*, Conrad rushes out of the house, searching for a public phone, while we see the rest of the accident scene playing in his mind: he is holding Buck's hand, while grabbing the overturned boat, but slowly Buck gets tired, their hands slide away from the grip, and the brother falls under (*Figure 3*). Conrad stays in the boat, shouting and staring at the water, waiting for Buck to resurface…

Conrad is now calling Dr. Berger, and they meet at the office. In a "final" breakthrough, he finds out first that *he cannot forgive himself for Buck's death*; in a reversal similar to the previous one, he now can see that ***he*** *cannot forgive Buck for his carelessness during the storm*, and this is what he had to hide from himself, to repress the whole time – because how can one allow himself to be mad at a loved person who died? He therefore had to take the blame on himself (survivor's guilt), without a chance to allow himself to recognize it – what a terrible burden to carry for a young boy. *Conrad was stronger, he stayed in the boat – not dying – and this was (not) his fault*.

Once the understanding is out, Conrad is scared, since all the feelings that kept bottling up overcome him, but we can see how the danger is gone and the bomb is defused. Berger reassures him, and declares that he is his

friend. The scene ends with both hugging each other. The movie will also end, further on, with Conrad hugging his father, after the mother leaves the house…

Final remarks

Even if Freud's name is not mentioned at all in the film, and Dr. Berger (who is a Jew) is called a *psychiatrist* and not a *psychoanalyst*, the movie and the analysis have all the relevant ingredients: the unconscious (the other scene), a traumatic neurosis, the talking cure as opposed to the pill or generic tests or therapeutic recipes – the "control" being just like a bait to fire up the transferential relation, and *not* based on suggestion (although Berger, like Freud, does offer interpretations when the time seems right) – free associations, Freudian slips, and an analyst that believes in dreams, the *royal path* to the unconscious.

The movie itself is permeated by a Freudian atmosphere, starting with the depiction of the relations in Conrad's family: the father is loved (Oedipal resolution), the mother not so much (and she is presented as being the "weakest" in the family in the end). Here we can remember Lacan's analysis of Freud's Oedipus complex in his *Seminar XVII*, where he reproaches Freud that he listened to women – as hysterics – a bit too much[10], and at the same time – as feminine subjects (beyond hysteria) – a bit too less[11], as Freudian analyses often end with "penis envy" and a reinforced respect for the father and the authoritarian male figures. This is exactly how the movie ends, because not only is the analysis Freudian, but the film itself is seen through Freudian lenses: the mother is presented in the worst light, she has to leave, the father, on the contrary, is constructed as sensible, caring and understanding – he even visits Dr. Berger and understands what happened to his wife. Conrad is hugging Dr. Berger and, in the end, his father – they both get his love and respect… which is maybe one of the reasons why Donald Sutherland didn't

[10] Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis – Book XVII*, Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 38, 101.

[11] Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 129-130.

get his Oscar nomination: perhaps in the imagination of the spectators and critics, he already got too much *in* the movie, the love and respect of his son, as the Freudian combined parent, both friendly and authoritative.

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