A Psychoanalysis of the Film Mr. Nobody

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Abstract: Mental activity is an iceberg, with the conscious being the above-water part and the unconscious the underwater part. So it is with human motivation and personality. In the field of psychoanalysis, Freud is an inescapable presence, and his proposal of the life and death instinct and the tripartite structure of the personality of the ego, the self and the superego is an important theory for our understanding of human thought and consciousness. This paper examines the film Mr. Nobody from a psychoanalytic perspective, interpreting the film’s pigeon superstition, multiple lives, this and that paradox, and other imagery, revealing that “trust in pure reason is a superstition that reinforces the connection between action and outcome”.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Mr Nobody, Pigeon superstition, This and that paradox, The collective unconscious, The Dionysus Spirit.

1. Introduction

1.1 About Psychoanalyse

In Buddhism there is not only a causal logic to the existence of things, but also a corresponding law. In The General Works of Hinayana Sutra it is written, “This being is therefore the other, this birth is therefore the other birth, this absence is therefore the other absence, and this extinction is therefore the other extinction.” There is no cause and effect, only correspondence to co-existence. Heraclitus famously had the paradox of also this and also that, which is a Western impression of Eastern cultures, just as Freud, for example, when talking about the unconscious, said that it had some resemblance to Chinese, because there is a lot of uncertainty in Chinese. On his tombstone in Austria is a far-reaching phrase: “The voice of reason is faint”.

1.2 About the Film

The film Mr. Nobody tells the story of a future in 2092 where Mars has been turned into a holiday destination for humans. Nemo, at the advanced age of 118, is the last natural man who will die. Old and dying, he keeps recalling his chaotic childhood, youth and middle age in one hypnosis and interview after another. At each bifurcation point in his life, different lives deriving from different decisions unfold, and each of these different versions of life ends in a different tragedy. There are many symbols in the film that can be interpreted in a psychoanalytic way.

2. The Superstition of Pigeon

2.1 Relevant Experimental Details

At the beginning of the film is a passage about the pigeon experiment, derived from a study by the psychologist Snakin. The theory that runs through the whole film is, in brief, that if a certain behaviour is accompanied by a certain result in a certain situation, such as being appreciated, then subsequently you are likely to repeat the behaviour in similar situations.

The experiment was designed by psychologist Skinner with eight pigeons in a special box in a state of hunger. The food dispenser in the box automatically dropped a portion of food every 15 seconds and something interesting happened: one of the pigeons developed a conditioned reflex to turn in a counterclockwise circle, another repeatedly banged its head against a corner above the box, a third pigeon repeatedly raised and lowered its head, and two others showed a pendulum-like movement: they stretched their heads forward, made a large swing from left to right, then slowly turning back again, with their bodies moving in the same way ...... The odd behaviour, which did not occur before, appears as if the behaviour led to the food.

Like humans, pigeons build a cause-and-effect relationship based on a chronological sequence. They believe that a certain action they take before the food falls is the direct cause of the food falling, so they repeat those actions in order to get more food, and it takes more than 10,000 reverse actions to make such behaviour disappear[1].

Pigeons have become superstitious, and although humans claim to be the spirits of all things, our way of perceiving the world is not much more sophisticated than that of pigeons. Success, for example, is the result of a combination of very few factors that we can recognize and countless others that are far beyond our perception. Because of this overconfidence, we always believe that we are successful because we did something right, that there must be a clear causal relationship between our personal achievements and something. But such perceptions are analyzed by subjective cognitive frameworks, consciously or unconsciously, through causal perspectives, perfection perspectives, trade-off preferences, value preferences and so on. It is not known what the world is really like. When we interpret the real world in terms of our subjective perceptions, we are actually deviating from the nature of the world.

2.2 Interpretation of the Concept in the Film

In the film, whenever Nemo has to make a decision, he flips a coin to make it, and believes that two different decisions can be good or bad, such is the superstition of his pigeon. He reinforces the role of the “ego” and “superego” and the connection between the choices he makes and the outcome, while ignoring the “ego”. We see that the film also spends a lot of time on unforeseen “butterfly effects”, such as a car accident caused by an egg shell dropped during processing. This is a counter argument to the superstition of the pigeon: there are many small and unforeseen things that have a huge impact on the outcome, and what you think will make the difference is nothing. Just as we see Nemo’s different lives at...
each fork in the road, the choices are different, but they all end in death.

2.3 The Analogy Between Human and the Pigeon

Thus the “ego” is the most distant from reason in the personality, but in a sense it is the most important. Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* states that the pleasure principle is innate, designed to eliminate the unpleasant sensations of tension and repression, and is the only principle of the ego that reigns in the life of the mind[2]. In the film, at the age of 118, Nemo finally follows his ego as he approaches death, saying to the journalist interviewing him: I am not afraid of dying, I am only afraid of not living enough, life is a playground, otherwise it is meaningless.

3. The Collective Unconscious

3.1 The Allusion of the Collective Unconscious in the Film

The film describes the birth of a human being in this way: When it is your turn to be born, the Angel of Oblivion puts his finger upright on your lips, whereupon you forget everything and become a new being. But the angel of forgetfulness forgets Nemo, and he is born with the memories of his previous life. In *On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry*, Jung introduced the concept of the collective unconscious, which refers to the deepest accumulation of the human psyche including the residues of ancestral life. The collective unconscious is rarely perceptible in our consciousness because the unconscious content is resisted by consciousness and has no chance of winning in seizing the territory of thought. But as the iceberg theory describes, our consciousness is only a small part of the picture, and it is the unconscious beneath the iceberg that makes up the bulk of it. The accumulated life experiences of our ancestors are stored in our unconscious and only emerge in due course. This is exactly what is echoed in the film. There is another reference to the collective unconscious in the middle and later part of the film, a famous experiment with young geese: the young stretch out their necks and squawk loudly, but when we change the model to a falcon, simulating flying geese, and the young are put on a playground, otherwise it is meaningless.

A similar interpretation can be found in *Mr. Nobody*. Through a staggered time and space, with multi-dimensional life choices, we see the protagonist Nino’s personal will expanded by the means of filming towards a curved surface. He is given multiple opportunities to choose, to experience different lives triggered by different choices. Each choice is in fact a manifestation of his personal will. In existing human society we are of course unable to satisfy all the needs of the will, but in art it is possible to fulfill such a conceit. *Mr. Nobody* is set up in such a way that there is the possibility of multiple choices at the same time. Thus we experience life not as a repetitive performance of music, but as an interactive game, with the right to choose although in a linear view of time, choices cannot be reversed, just as smoke cannot be returned to a cigarette, mixed ketchup and mashed potatoes cannot be separated again, and the principle of entropy dictates that the world evolves in a certain order.

This set-up seems to give us back some degree of subjectivity, but in fact it is just a choice within a finite combination. It is what Nietzsche called the roll of the dice by God. On the one hand, the game of dice rolling is full of variation and uncertainty, while on the other hand, the number of combinations of dice is a certain number. The result of the roll of the dice is therefore just the difference between the repeated actions of countless rolls of the dice. In the film, Nemo says that by not choosing, one has all the options. It is as if to say that without rolling the dice, we have all the possibilities of combinations.

The director boldly imagines a scenario in which multiple wills and multiple temporalities overlap, and he concludes that, even if we try all our individual wills, we may still end up not finding the so-called optimal solution. It is a possible answer that as long as we exist as human beings, we will continue to suffer from the torment and pain of will.

4. This and That Paradox

After listening to Nemo’s confused and multiple recollections, he asked, confused: everything you say is contradictory, which is the right one among so many life experiences? Nemo told him with absolute certainty that every experience was...
true, that every path was the right one, that everything could be something else and have the same importance.

Western civilization has benefited from the rationalist tradition from ancient Greece onwards, giving rise to great rational thought and a scientific civilization, but in doing so they have inadvertently fallen into an “either/or” mode of thinking. As a result, a series of anti-rationalist struggles began to flourish. Heraclitus’ this and that parodox reflects the definition of contradiction, which is the main ideological approach of psychoanalysis[4].

People know how to distinguish between a “tadpole” (A: without arms and legs and a tail) and a “frog” (B: with arms and legs and no tail), and Heraclitus and some philosophers of language, after keen observation and rational thought, have pointed out that the development of the tadpole to the frog is a continuum. When we know and use language to represent things in the world, we always have to cut it off from thinking as both. But Heraclitus found that there was now “both A and B” between A and B. He called this the paradox of the “unity of opposites”.

Nemo’s response demonstrates the film’s unique understanding of this and that. At the end of the film, the world in which the old Nemo lives is destroyed before his eyes - each life is just an unconscious imagination of Nemo when he was nine years old. So every experience is again non-existent, every path has not really been travelled. This is the other sense of both this and that - neither this nor that. The unconscious moves much faster in reality than the conscious, and a moment of incision in the realm of consciousness is already a century old in the unconscious. The film once again demonstrates the powerful driving force of the unconscious and proves to us that reason and consciousness are really only a very insignificant part of it.

5. The Dionysus Spirit

5.1 Relief From a Life of Indulgence

“I’m not afraid of dying, I’m just afraid of not living enough, life is a playground, otherwise it’s meaningless.” We might read this quote from another perspective. Whereas in the discourse of modernity Nietzsche sees the spirit of the god of the day as corresponding to the principle of individuation; the spirit of Dionysus corresponds to the principle of individuation. It is for this reason that he considered the spirit of Dionysus to be the highest truth, not only celebrating it as the essence of art and life, but also promoting it as the central idea of tragic aesthetics and the central force of resistance to the divisions of modernity.

In his book The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche, a famous German philosopher, aesthete and literary theorist, gives a vivid and comprehensive account of the Spirit of Dionysus, the spirit of the Apollonian spirit and the relationship between the two in their opposition and unity. Apollo, the Apollonian spirit, is a symbol of “light”, “silence” and “solemn and noble power”, representing “reason and order”, and by extension a modest sense of beauty bound within social civilization, while Dionysus, the god of wine, is a symbol of “madness”, “confusion” and “indulgence”, representing sensuality and, by extension, sensuality. Dionysus, the god of wine, is a symbol of “madness”, “ecstasy” and “indulgence”, representing sensuality and, by extension, the unbridled, barbaric beauty that breaks with social morality. The Spirit of Dionysus is the opposite of the spirit of the Apollonian spirit, which gives birth to tragedy.

The great power of rational reflection and its principle of subjectivity became the core and base language of modernity, and a new social structure characterized by differentiation and specialization emerged. In other words, the modern world is shaped by the establishment and historicisation of the modern principle of reason. The self-affirmation of modernity lies in the fact that Enlightenment reason has given independence to the spirit, so that all the obscure and customary states of nature in the traditional world are re-examined by the light of reason, and the legitimacy of this examination is determined by the unique temporal consciousness of the new world.

5.2 An Attempt to Break up Linear Time

According to Calinescu, the concept of modernity can only be conceived within the framework of a specific temporal consciousness, that of a linear irreversible, unstoppable historical time. Modernity as a concept would be meaningless in a society that does not need a historical concept of temporal continuity and organizes its temporal categories according to myths and modes of reenactment.

The disordered timeline of Mr. Nobody is an attempt to break with the linearity of humanly constructed time. In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche presents the spirit of Dionysus as a weapon in the critique of modernity. In a society where reason reigns supreme, the Dionysus spirit, with Dionysus as the central force to break the principle of individuation, is, in Nietzsche’s view, the only way to solve the crisis of modernity[5]. All things are one, and the root of human suffering lies in the solitude of individuation, as Fromm explains in the art of love, and it is only through the unity of man and man or man and thing that man’s innate loneliness can be dissolved.

The energy of Dionysus is linked to the energy of a restless life, in which mankind, imbued with the Dionysian spirit, confronts nature and his own finitude and, in the midst of this encounter, comes to a state of ecstasy in which only in the fullness of inner tension can he achieve liberation and a return to wholeness: in ancient Greece, at the time of the grape harvest, people lit bonfires on the night of the harvest and drank and reveled, “the earth has finally come to terms with her waves”. “The earth finally shakes hands with its prodigal son”. This is a return to the life of the whole. „... Breaking the illusion and bringing our individuality back to this original whole should produce a great joy, which is the Dionysian spirit. Nietzsche’s idea of the Dionysian spirit clearly contains a total negation, criticism and deconstruction of the modern structure of reason, implying a distant, social condition in which rational consciousness has not yet gained independence, implying a return to a primitive, undifferentiated social state.

The scenario described by Mr. Nobody seems to contradict the dream world in which the Apollonian spirit has always been thought to be located. All acts of the spirit of alcohol occur
within the unintentional dream world of the protagonist, and such a rendition allows us to glimpse another state of coexistence between the Apollonian spirit and the Dionysus spirit, namely that when we are confronted with the rational reality of the world, we inevitably bring in our subconscious self, our desires, our preconceptions, and in that moment form our evaluation of the work. What is possible therefore is that behind every day god stands a god of wine, of desire, of eroticism, of death, of memory. So even though thematically it could be entirely in the spirit of the god of the day, one’s aesthetic experience could be open-ended.

As Nietzsche wrote in Thus Spoke Zarathustra: “What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what is lovely in man is that he is a transition and a falling away[6].”

References