

Review of *Critical Flicker Fusion* by William Fried (London: Karnac Press. Series on the Boundaries of Psychoanalysis, 2017)

Review Essay by Emilie Kutash, PsyD, PhD

Feature films created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are the living archives that both record and conserve, for current and future viewers, the psychic life of the postmodern mind. Riffaterre the French literary Critic has put forward the idea that there is an “intertextual unconscious” and *Critical Flicker Fusion* makes one realize that there is one in film as well. While modern classes in film often refer to “film as text”, the term “close reading” when it comes to film may be a misnomer since the analogy only holds in a limited way. Film presents as well as represents. Film is, after all, a visual medium and therefore should be treated with attention to the interrelatedness of one film to another or one frame to another. *Critical Flicker Fusion* is a study that allows the reader/viewer to appreciate film as its own genre. Unlike the novel or stage play, the extra, inter and intra-cinematic connectedness is vital to understanding its significance, despite its relationship to other media. Though film shares some of the features of a text, it is singular in that it produces visual polysemic meaning. At the same time it has a relationship with other films within the uniquely populated space that is modern cinema. Like dreams, a compressed image, such as is a *mise en scene*”, can produce and display human psychic life with a complexity that allows a multifaceted deconstruction and commentary. It demands to be expanded and decoded. Though film narratives are similar to what occurs in a psychoanalytic session, these as well provide a somewhat limited analogy to film interpretation. While the observer of the speech and behavior of analysis is a private affair between analyst and patient,

the protagonists in feature films are not confined to a couch and to a private treatment by a single interpreting observer. Films have become ubiquitous presences, their protagonists are cultural icons and they are a public genre accessible to a whole culture. Thus films of the twentieth century have become formative of our view of reality and therefore demand, a competent treatment of both their extra, inter and intra -cinematic significance. Hence, the need for an expert interpreter who can bring a wide inventory of strategies to their exegeses. William Fried, as this evocative book documents, is just that interpreter.

Perhaps William Fried's 'second sailing' as a sensitive and artful photographer has allowed him to prioritize the image and to apply psychoanalytic interpretation as a handmaiden to appreciation. Fried assumes the role of a philosopher/ psychoanalyst by organizing his critical apparatus around eternal themes such as 'Secrets,' 'Time and Death,' 'Love and Lust,' and 'Human Identity.' In doing so he performs a "close viewing" of film images, finding interrelated philosophical, and psychological themes that recur and interpenetrate particular films but also occur across disparate films. By treating sets of films under these rubrics, he achieves something that films, when taken individually, cannot. He identifies a "vision of the whole", an archive of human desire both tragic and erotic. Making artful use of such analytic concepts as projection/introjection, transference, and scopophilia, he imbues the larger philosophical categories with the ramifications of human desire. Though Fried deploys psychoanalytic parameters, he is not confined to this genre but reaches into an impressive inventory of interpretative tools that include his extensive knowledge of literature, poetry, and philosophy. Psychoanalysis, as a result, becomes less of a "master narrative" and more of a partner with other equally powerful worlds of ideas and images. His extensive knowledge and appreciation

of poetry and literature allows him to successfully handle his basically psychoanalytic approach without the flat-footed reductionism of much of Freudian cultural criticism. First and foremost he preserves the artistic integrity of the filmmakers “vision. “ Second he dexterously appreciates that the inevitable images that will accrue to the ultimate denouement of a film, gripping as they are, are at the same time reflective of psychic life.

Fried’s approach to psychoanalysis is flexible and wide ranging as well. It includes the findings of object relations theory, ego psychology and Bion’s mass and group psychology. Bion’s studies of group process, for example, with its “basic assumptions” regarding the primitive and persecutory regressions that are possible in the modality of group, are applied to the case of the film version of *Lord of the Flies*. In another example of his reach into other than classic Freudianism, he makes use of related resources from his professional field such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the Psychiatrists to describe ‘identity disorder’ in the discussion of films that fall under his rubric of ‘Human Identity’.

‘*Love and Lust*,’ is a particular prescient category of experience under which umbrella he groups four films (*An Affair of Love* (Fonteyne, 1999), *Talk to Her* (Almodovar, 2002), *Gods and Monsters* (Condon, 1998), and *Certified Copy* (Kiarostami, 2010). He treats each of these films as exemplars of the dramas of relationship, love and even death as they play out in bizarre and compelling scenarios. While these films operate at the extreme margins of possibility in dyadic relationships, they cast light on aspects that play universally in human love. In *Talk to Her*, for example, the comatose condition of one of the two partners (in two parallel relationships where the lover is in a unilateral relationship with a comatose love object,) renders the love

object a recipient of projected “transference” manifestations. Benigno, the protagonist in one of these scenarios, talks to and even makes love to his unresponsive love object, using projection and introjection as the sole means of relating. Is this not, perhaps, a paradigmatic exemplar of one aspect of relationships where control, transference and repetition of childhood attachments play out? The specter of death and human finitude in affairs of love is the subtext of the film, the *Affair of Love*, in which perverse alienated lust gives way to a humanized love. The protagonists, interrupted by a death outside a hotel room where they are consummating their perverse sexual liaison, seem to now become subject to the influence of romantic love. In *Gods and Monsters*, enacting the last days of James Whale, the creator of Frankenstein movies (monsters), the troubled protagonist carries on an uneasy friendship with homosexual undertones which culminates in death by desire. James Whale enacts his homoerotic longings by using them to bring about his death in his seduction of the enraged object of his lust, Clayton Boone. Transference is an even more overt mechanism in *Certified Copy*. The preservation of the ambiguity in the liaison of a French antiques dealer and a British writer of the book, *Certified Copy*, leaves unanswered the question of whether the couple just met or were married for 15 years. This is never clarified and the arguing and soul bearing in the dyadic relationship can be interpreted as either a real relationship or a transference: either way the enactment is informed by those they have lost. Just as in Benigno’s projection of features of his relationship with his infirm mother onto Alicia, his comatose love object, absence becomes presence when transference is at play. The organizing psychoanalytic constructs, transference, projection /introjection, then, come to life here as dramas of desire. As Yeats, one of the poets amply quoted by Fried, put it, “All perform their tragic play.” Here, film can be understood, with Fried’s assistance,

psychoanalytically, and conversely, the films themselves illumine these very concepts in a way that dry psychoanalytic texts do not.

Perhaps it is psychoanalytic theory which lies comatose, though loved by its practitioners, and it *is* only drama, like the sessions of analytic patients, which can “talk” to it and bring it to life. Thus the viewers of these films, as well as the readers of Fried’s book, are now enabled to understand their own ‘aha’ experience whereby they can realize that they have seen what they already know. In that sense the viewer emulates Freud who recognized in Sophocles drama Oedipus Tyrannus that it was a paradigm case and that drama can be the *sine qua non* to reveal the ‘unknown knowns’ of the human psyche. *Critical Flicker Fusion*, then, gives the reader and film viewer a concrete way to experience highly abstract concepts such as introjection and projection, time and death, love and lust, etc. The book allows them to connect these concepts with the dramas and images that confirm their heuristic capabilities. Fried pays homage to a genre that is perhaps better equipped than narrative fiction, to present the simultaneous conscious and unconscious nexus of desires as they play themselves out. This can only be compellingly given artistic expression in a genre that can simultaneously use all the permutations of the visual image, montage, *mise en scene*, sound music, camera angles movement, etc.

Fried’s discussion of Time and Death and Human Identity provide equally compelling treatments. Time and Death, for example make *Dr. Strangelove* (Kubrick, 1964), and his fellow ‘phallic narcissistic’ character types consummately comprehensible. *Up in the Air* (Reitman, 2009), and *Tunes of Glory* (Kennaway, 1956), as well, combine macho aspirations and the specter of time and death. The category, ‘Human Identity’ in such films as *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), and *Lord of the Flies*, (Hook, 1990), command equal analysis in the book, I must confine

the discussion here, however, to one particularly compelling application of Fried's approach. It is the fascinating category of 'Secrets' which includes the films *Notes from a Scandal* (Eyre, 2007), episodes from *The Sopranos* (Chase, 2000), and *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974). These films comprise allegories of 'scoptophilia' with its Freudian conceived wish to gain knowledge of the primal scene as a concrete "origin" of the universal desire for eavesdropping on secrets, voyeurism and spying. This discussion is another example of Fried's dexterous ability to consummate the marriage of psychoanalysis and art. Under the rubric "Secrets", the episodes of the Sopranos with Tony "singing" to his analyst Dr. Melfi is treated as an opportunity to examine her scoptophilic wish to satisfy her insatiable curiosity about evil. Displaying his wide range of associations, Fried deconstructs the name Sopranos and its connection with singing as in confessing and incriminating, Neapolitan popular song, Italian opera, and all of their association with the themes of love, betrayal, revenge remorse. The companion films classified under 'Secrets' including *Notes on a Scandal* further display the idea that "mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show," a line Fried borrows from Yeats. Circle upon circle of voyeurism are enacted by Barbara's knowing Sheba's secret affair while Sheba's secret is nested like a Russian doll within Barbara's trust. Fried, as he does frequently in this book with protagonists' names, brings etymological and literary, even biblical sources to unpack the name Sheba (Bathsheba in the bible, for example). . Barbara and Sheba's drama is nested in turn by the filmmaker's camera, the journal, and even by the viewer's privileged access. The mirror upon mirror construction can, therefore, be applied as well to the circle upon circle of voyeur listeners that not only comprise the protagonists, but also the filmmaker, the audience and

now even the film critic/analyzer and the psychoanalyst whose insights provide yet another mirroring lens

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The enacted narrative of a film exposes through its dramatic and multidimensional display, human psychic life. It calls for an observer and commentator who can take a panoptic view. Unlike the prototype of the “mad doctor” that Fried discusses in one of the appendices to the book, Fried himself emerges as a not so mad doctor. He is mad with the desire to philosophize and encapsulate the images that have arrested his attention and fascinated his inquiring mind. He does not, however, use his operative codes in the service of his own empowerment, as does the mad doctor, but in the service of a desire to understand and share. As he admits in his conclusion “I freely acknowledge that my enthusiasm for almost all these films tends to diminish any capacity or inclination I might have to see their weaknesses. “ In these afterthoughts, Fried emerges as much as a philosopher as he does a psychoanalyst. In one of these appendices, Time and Death, given the imprimatur of the ancient Greek categories of Chronos (discursive time) and Kairos (epiphanic time), for example, are examined as organizing themes. Eros and Thanatos, even in Freud’s work take on a cosmic and philosophical import. *Critical flicker Fusion*, the well-chosen title of Fried’s study, in fact, itself fuses a variety of meanings, those of psychoanalysis cohabit comfortably with literature, philosophy etc. The fusion of philosophy, poetry and psychoanalysis that Fried allows in this book, then, render them mutually enhancing while preserving what he describes as film’s magic and mystery, without prioritizing one over the other. The vast universe of film, where inter-cinematic interaction creates a unique aesthetic genre, calls for a multi-determined approach. By playing on all fronts, Fried thereby works

against the oft articulated complaint that Freud is used as master narrative in reductive interpretation of artworks. What is clear from Fried's important achievement here is that film illuminates psychoanalysis as much as psychoanalysis illuminates film.

In conclusion, Fried allows filmology to recapitulate the ontogeny of early development and the ontology of the greatest of philosophical and psychoanalytic thinkers. Scopophilia, this impulse to perceive and understand what is forbidden, is discussed in one of the appendices, as accounting for the discoveries of Western scientific inquiry. If this is so, our fascination with film makes us realize that artworks are a form of knowing and understanding as important as epistemological discourse. The expressive arts are truth yielding and in film, human lived experience artfully reconfigured, is the proof-text of abstract ideas now written large in artistic dramatic immediacy. Perhaps the Freudian idea that the child is curious about the primal scene, though, is not the root of intellectual curiosity. Maybe it is the reverse: the child is primarily after knowledge itself of which the primal scene is but one example. We are all after knowledge and so we hunger for interpretations, here beautifully supplied by Fried's study. Perhaps we are all scopophilic, as well, and so will continue, armed with the insights that *Critical Flicker Fusion* supplies, to eagerly pursue our viewing of film.