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Psychoanalysis on Sunday: Lacan, Cinema, Comedy

Abstract

This article examines the place of film comedy in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis. It takes as its starting point Lacan's most extensive consideration of a single film, the comedy *Never on Sunday* (1960) directed by Jules Dassin. It places Lacan's reading of the film in relation to his other interventions on cinema, which are scattered through his seminars, and are more numerous and heterogeneous than generally assumed. It shows how the analysis contributes to Lacan's articulation of a theory of comedy in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, a seminar best known for its treatment of *Antigone* and tragic drama. The article then locates this theory of comedy and reading of *Never on Sunday* in relation to key concepts of *The Ethics* such as *jouissance* and the moral good(s). It finishes by proposing a general model of Lacanian reading as 'cut' rather than interpretation.

Lacan, Cinema

From Christian Metz to *Screen*, from Mulvey to Žižek, Lacanian psychoanalysis has shaped one powerful current of contemporary film theory. But unlike Gilles Deleuze, the source of a more recent and equally powerful current, Jacques Lacan did not prepare the path in advance. (Deleuze 1986 & 1989) Instead, the trajectory from Lacan's thought to cinema has been indirect, and his own explicit contributions to this field were minimal. As Stephen Heath observes after outlining a few of Lacan's scattered allusions to cinema: "all that does not amount to very much." (Heath 1999, 25-6)¹ Another scholar, counting optimistically, puts at twenty the number of references to specific films in Lacan's published writings and seminars. (Motta 2013)² In a predominantly abstract discourse, Lacan infrequently gave concrete examples from the clinic or everyday life, in marked contrast to Freud, to whom he was staging a return. Lacan's interventions on cinema are rarer still, and stand out even more as a result. Put together they do not amount to a theory of cinema, nor are they

notably attentive to cinematic form. They might be better described as a series of forays, brief skirmishes in the cultural field, a field that is wider and more heterogeneous, and contains more curiosities, than might be expected.

The vast majority of these references are spoken – found in Lacan’s transcribed seminars – and many of them are fleeting, made almost in passing, which may partly explain why they have attracted little notice.³ So, in a paper on criminology and psychoanalysis, Lacan notes that Chaplin’s *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947) seems “plausible” (*vraisemblable*) as a pathological case (Lacan 2007a, 119), and in his seminar on ethics he invokes the title of Georges Franju’s *La tête contre les murs* (1959) in relation to encounters with the “moral law.” (Lacan 1992, 70) In his seminar on the transference he remarks on the “erotics of the laundress” in Visconti’s *Rocco and his brothers* (1960), and in the same seminar, in a commentary on the ugliness or beauty of the analyst, he refers his audience to *Psycho* (1960) and *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), pointing out how important it is that Montgomery Clift should be a “beau garçon” to fulfill his narrative function in the transference framework. (Lacan 2001, 456 & 23)

Closer to the spirit of Žižek than *Screen* theory, these allusions are often droll or humorous. In his failed efforts to get his audience to learn German so that they can read Kant in the original, Lacan in his ninth seminar, *Identification*, compares himself to the characters in *Un chien andalou* (1929) who pull at the end of a rope a piano, on top of which lie two dead donkeys.⁴ In another invocation of Buñuel, he compares a photograph of Freud and his disciples to the travesty of the Last Supper “photographed” by the “little apparatus” at the end of *Viridiana*,

observing that Freud is more like Viridiana than Christ. (Lacan 1973, 178-9) The lesson of Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), Lacan explains in his tenth seminar, *Anxiety*, is to "show us very well how any old *irreplaceable German* can immediately find a perfectly valid substitute in the first Japanese man she comes across." (Lacan 2014, 335)⁵

In other places, films take on for Lacan an exemplary function, allowing him to lay out quick illustrations for his seminar audience. For example, in his sixth seminar he seizes on a scene in Jean Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (1939) when the Marquis, collector of mechanical music-boxes, unveils his crowning find to a gathered audience. The passion of the collector for his collection, as well as the shame he feels at making it public, captures for Lacan the ambiguity of the subject's relation to his object of desire. (Lacan 2013, 109) And the final scene of Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960), in which the revelers encounter on the beach in a net a monstrous sea creature, proves of use to him on two separate occasions. The first time, in his seventh seminar, he indicates that his audience knows the film and took great pleasure in it, and that they will be tempted, he does not say if correctly, to see in the creature a representative of the Lacanian "Thing". (Lacan 1992, 253) The second time, in his tenth seminar, he comments on the dead blind eyes of the sea creature, and the way that its gaze may not see us, but "regards" us nonetheless, in an analysis that anticipates the much-repeated anecdote of the sardine tin that Lacan relates in his seminar the following year. (Lacan 2014, 253-4)⁶ Other instances include Lacan's comparison of the "paradoxical space" of combat in *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950) to the space of sexual display, and some brief comments on the relation between

psychoanalyst and mathematician in the Robert Musil source-novel for *Young Törless* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1966), a film that he deems “joli,” but “un peu raté” (nice, but a bit of a failure).⁷

In the later years of his seminar, Lacan draws less frequently on cinema. In 1969 he claims to have walked in late to a screening of *If...* (Lindsay Anderson, 1968), and in 1976 he reports on a trip with his inner circle to a private showing of *In the Realm of the Senses* (Nagisa Oshima, 1976). His late entry to *If...* might explain why he mistakes the film’s public school setting for the “English University” displayed in its “most seductive forms”.⁸ Even though he finds the film “detestable,” it is a pretext for him to re-introduce his neologism, the *hommelle*, perfectly embodied, according to Lacan, by the headmaster’s wife, who simultaneously occupies the position of master and knowledge (S_1 and S_2 in Lacan’s algebra). In his excoriation of the University, as incongruously represented by an English public school, Lacan rehearses what in the following year’s seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, will become the University Discourse. Commenting directly on the events of May 1968, Lacan argues provocatively that students have no revolutionary potential and that they will continue to occupy what is a structurally “servile” position, unless they call into question their relation as subjects to knowledge. In his contemptuous dismissal of the University he also takes the opportunity to air a dispute with his hosts at that time, the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*. (Lacan 2006, 398-99)⁹ As for the erotic Japanese film, Lacan reflects on the fantasy of murdering the lover and removing his penis, and wonders why this is done after he is dead, and not before. (Lacan 2005, 126-27)

It is a question for Lacan's biographers why so many of the films he cites are from 1959 and 1960 (including *La Règle du jeu*, restored and rescreened in 1959), or why the filmic examples in his seminar are so concentrated between *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-60), and *Anxiety* (1962-63). Was the psychoanalyst simply going more to the movies in this period? Or was it that cinema in this moment demanded his attention? In spite of the reputation of psychoanalysis for ahistoricism, Lacan put great stock in his seminar in what he called the "actual," noting that he is "always pleased to latch onto some current affair in our dialogue" (*m'accrocher à quelque actualité*). (Lacan 2014, 29) From this perspective, Lacanian psychoanalytic work is not about unearthing universal structures, but about attentiveness to the contingencies of the signifier as manifested in the speech of subjects, each of whom is singular. Given Lacan's attentiveness to intellectual trends, his more frequent citations of cinema in the years 1959-1963 may mark the actuality of the French New Wave, whose inaugural films date from the same years – 1959 and 1960 – as the bulk of Lacan's film references. It could certainly be argued that the New Wave was addressing in filmic terms some of the same topics – desire, the subject, the absence of a sexual relation – that occupied Lacan in his teaching and clinic, and with the same passion for formal difficulty that Lacan displayed in his writing and seminar. That his only direct references to this French cinema were the witty remark about *Hiroshima mon amour* and a brief mention of Louis Malle's documentary *Calcutta* (1969), does not mean that it was not in his mind when he spoke of Fellini, Visconti and Kurosawa: Lacan was also typically oblique when he sparred by proxy with Derrida, Deleuze, and others who were "dans le vent" of Parisian fashion.¹⁰

None of this background quite accounts for Lacan's most sustained engagement with a single film. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* contains not only Franju and Fellini, and a meditation on the face of Harpo Marx, but also an extended reflection on Jules Dassin's *Never on Sunday* (1960), a light comedy set in the Greek port of Piraeus.¹¹ *Never on Sunday* competed for the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1960 with *L'avventura* and *La Dolce Vita*, and enjoys a cult status in Greece and in the Greek diaspora, even if it did not join the two Italian films in the canon of European art cinema. It remains in distribution thanks to its star (Melina Mercouri, winner of Best Actress at Cannes, and a major figure in Greek political and cultural life), its soundtrack and title song (by Manos Hadjidakis, winner of the Academy Award for Best Song) and to a lesser extent its black-listed and exiled American director. Vassiliki Tsitsopoulou has convincingly argued that the music and dance sequences are frequent and significant enough for the film to be a sort of variant on the Hollywood musical comedy. (Tsitsopoulou 2000, 83)

In the film Dassin himself plays Homer Thrace, a Hellenophile American who arrives in Piraeus seeking to discover the reason for the decline of Greece from its classical heights. Mercouri is Illya, an independent-minded prostitute in the port whom Homer takes to represent the decadence, but also the vitality of modern Greece. He aims to redeem her, and succeeds temporarily in doing so on his terms, but in the end admits defeat to Illya's hedonism. At the film's conclusion, Illya is rescued by love in the shape of the half-Italian Tonio, one of her regular clients. Dassin, who was also scriptwriter, claimed that he "was trying to criticize in comedy this awful tendency that Americans have to try to

remake the world in their image, in their thinking, in their imposition of what we call the American way of life. Often half-baked, often without any real understanding of what different countries are about.” (Gow 1970, 68) *Never on Sunday* was a significant box-office success, and with its idealised depiction of pleasure-loving Greeks “is credited with pushing the tourist boom in the early 1960s, and establishing Greece as a favourite holiday destination.” (Iordanova 2001, 58-9)¹²

Even though Lacan shared with Dassin an antipathy for the “American way of life,” *Never on Sunday* seems an unlikely candidate for Lacanian analysis, and it is something of a puzzle why he should pause on it for so long. The rest of this article is devoted to this puzzle. How does Lacan’s analysis of *Never on Sunday* fit within the larger concerns of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*? What bearing do Lacan’s lapidary remarks on comedy in the same session have on his reading of the film? How do the film’s debates on happiness relate to the question of *jouissance*, and does Lacan’s intervention tell us anything more generally about the psychoanalytic, and more specifically Lacanian, use of cinema and comedy?

Comedy, jouissance

Lacan’s discussion of *Never on Sunday* comes in the final session of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, held on 6 July 1960 at the Hôpital Sainte-Anne in Paris, where he held all his seminars up until the end of 1963. His remarks are dilatory enough to make them his most extensive on any film, but still short enough to be reproduced in their entirety here:

Some of you recently saw a film that didn't exactly excite me, but since then I have revised my impression, for there are some interesting details. It's Jules Dassin's film, *Never on Sunday*. The character who is presented to us as marvelously at one with the immediacy of his supposedly primitive feelings, in a small bar in Piraeus, starts to beat up (*se met à casser la gueule*) those sitting around because they haven't been speaking properly, that is to say in conformity with moral norms. On other occasions, in order to express his immense excitement and happiness (*satisfaction*), he picks up a glass and shatters it on the ground. And every time a glass is shattered, we see the cash register vibrate frenetically. I see that as a beautiful touch, a stroke of genius. That cash register defines very clearly the structure that concerns us.

The reason why there is human desire, that the field can exist, depends on the assumption that everything real that happens may be accounted for somewhere. Kant managed to reduce the essence of the moral field to something pure; nevertheless, there remains at its center the need for a space where accounts are kept. It is this that is signified by the horizon represented by his immortality of the soul. As if we hadn't been plagued enough (*assez emmerdés*) by desire on earth, part of eternity is to be given over to keeping accounts. In these fantasms one finds projected nothing but the structural relationship that I attempted to indicate on the graph with the line of the signifier. It is insofar as the subject is situated and is constituted with relation to the signifier that the break, splitting or ambivalence is produced in him at the point where the tension of desire is located.

The film I just referred to, in which I learned afterwards the director, Dassin, plays the role of the American, presents us with a nice and curious model of something that can be expressed as follows from a structural point of view. The character who plays the satirical role, the role that is offered for our derision (*proposé à la dérision*), namely, Dassin as the American, finds himself to be as the producer and creator of the film in a position that is more American than those whom he makes fun of (*livre à la dérision*), that is, the Americans.

Don't misunderstand me. He is there in order to undertake the reeducation of a good-hearted whore (*aimable fille publique*). And the irony of the screenwriter is to be found in the fact that in carrying out this pious mission he is in the pay of the one whom we might call the Grand Master of the brothel. The deeper meaning is signaled to us by the placing before our eyes of an enormous pair of black glasses – he is someone whose face is for good reason never shown. Naturally, when the whore learns that it is the character who is her sworn enemy who is paying the piper (*paie les frais de la fête*), she eviscerates the beautiful soul of the American in question, and he who has conceived such great hopes is made to look very foolish.

If there is a dimension of social criticism in this symbolism – that is to say that what one finds hidden behind the brothel are the forces of order, so to speak – it is somewhat naïve to make us hope at the end of the screenplay that all that is needed to solve the problem of the relations between virtue and desire is to close down the brothel. There runs constantly throughout the film that old *fin de siècle* ambiguity, which involves identifying classical antiquity with the sphere of liberated desire. It is not to have gone beyond

Pierre Louÿs to believe that it is somewhere outside her own situation that the good Athenian prostitute can focus all the light (*feu*) of the mirages she is at the center of. In a word, Dassin didn't have to confuse what flows from the sight of this attractive figure with a return to Aristotelian morality, which he fortunately doesn't spell out in detail.

Let's get back on track. This shows us that on the far edge of guilt, insofar as it occupies the field of desire, there are the bonds of a permanent bookkeeping, and this is so independently of any particular articulation given of it. (Lacan 1992, 318-19; Lacan 1986, 365-67)

Lacan is rarely quoted at length, and sometimes hardly at all, even by some Lacanians (Žižek is a case in point). This may be because once one starts citing, it is difficult to know where one should end. Or it may be that Lacan's short and repeated formulae ("desire is the desire of the other," "there is no sexual relation," "the unconscious is structured like a language," and so on) are preferred by those who cite, because in longer quotations, clarity, if anything, retreats further beyond the horizon. This is in some respects the case with Lacan's commentary on *Never on Sunday*. He changes tack more than once and does not appear to have a single thesis. He also makes factual errors about the film. In the opening paragraph Lacan conflates two scenes and two characters: one at the beginning in which Jorgo, a local from Piraeus, dances and smashes glasses, and one at the end where Homer does the same. Nor is it clear whether the character who is "marvelously at one with the immediacy of his supposedly primitive feelings" is Homer or Jorgo. Later on, Lacan recognizes the film's satire and critique of Americans, but does not seem to be aware that Dassin is actually

American, and not just playing one. At the same time, on what seems to have been a single viewing, Lacan is attentive to the specifically filmic effects of montage (the glasses and cash register) and *mise-en-scène* (the sunglasses of the villain). The key to his reading, what holds it together, is his interest in the tension in the film between “the sphere of liberated desire” and the question of “keeping accounts” in matters of morality. Put another way, the status of enjoyment, or *jouissance*, in relation to guilt.

It is not immediately evident what relation Lacan’s observations about *Never on Sunday* have to the rest of the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, nor for that matter what bearing they have on session in which he includes them. These observations come more or less in the middle of the session, preceded by a discussion of Kantian ethics and followed by some remarks on the “service of goods” and the way that state power insists on desire postponing its demands. Neither of these subjects is addressed directly in the commentary on Dassin’s film, although Lacan does hint, in a tangent within a tangent, that one of its scenes illustrates Kant’s position that in matters of morality there is always the need “for a space where accounts can be kept (*la comptabilisation*)”. This also explains Lacan’s characterization of Homer as a “beautiful soul”: Hegel’s term for someone who holds lofty ideals without needing to pay the price for those ideals, who is complicit, and yet who protests “Isn’t it awful, I’m going to have nothing to do with it.” The only framing Lacan provides before introducing the film is to note that “Some of you recently saw a film that didn’t exactly excite me” (*je n’ai pas été complètement enchanté*), and when he finishes he says, “Let’s get back on track” (*Revenons à notre voie*), confirming that this has been a detour. None of this is in

itself unusual in Lacan's discourse, which frequently changes directions unannounced, and is thick with detours.

Looking beyond the immediate context of Lacan's intervention on the film, there is at least one hint that might have prepared us for it. In an early part of the session, and before the section on Kant, Lacan takes some time to talk about comedy. He notes that during the year he "had recourse to tragedy" (*pris le support de la tragédie*) to make his audience understand the relation between action and desire in ethics, but that he could equally have drawn on "la dimension comique" to make his point. (Lacan 1992, 313; Lacan 1986, 361) In comedy as in tragedy, Lacan says, it is a question of the "fundamental failure" (*échec fondamental*) of action to catch up with desire. (Lacan 1992, 313; Lacan 1986, 362) Lacan's discourse proceeds in a looping and leaping fashion, so he does not go straight from his general thoughts on comedy to his discussion of a comic film, but working backwards we can see how he has laid the ground for that discussion, even if, when he gets to *Never on Sunday*, he does not mention that the film is a comedy, and does not refer back to what he has previously said about comedy.

Tragedy, as Lacan says, is central to *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: in it, he devotes three entire sessions to Sophocles' *Antigone*, making it the exemplary text for the year, just as he had done with *Hamlet* in the previous year's seminar, *Le désir et son interprétation*. In contrast, he rarely pauses in his writings and seminars to draw in detail the contours of what he frequently alludes to as "the comic dimension". His comments on comedy in the final session of the *Ethics* may be

only fragments, then, but in the absence of any comic equivalent of *Hamlet* or *Antigone* in his thinking, these fragments constitute one of his most important contributions to the theory of comedy, sitting alongside his reading of Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* in *Séminaire 5: Les formations de l'inconscient*, and his brief commentaries on Aristophanes, Molière and Genet in that same seminar. According to Lacan, Molière's *L'École des femmes* demonstrates that the most vital sources of comedy are in love, and that love is most "authentically" love when it is comic. (Lacan 1998, 137-9) Genet's *Le balcon*, meanwhile, he takes to be one of the 'chefs d'oeuvre' of comedy, even though at that point it was yet to be staged (Lacan 1998, 262). He uses the play as a platform to make a number of statements about the genre, not all of them consistent with each other, including that comedy generally turns on the "apparition of the phallus" (262); and that it is the "law of comedy" that characters "enjoy (*jouir de*) their functions" (as bishop, general, or judge in the case of *Le balcon*) (263).

To return to the key passages in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: if tragedy is the "triumph of being-for-death," the temptation, says Lacan, is to see comedy as the triumph of life. This is a fairly common perspective in comic theory, and one that Lacan modifies immediately. It is not the triumph of life in comedy, but the triumph of a "futile or derisory (*dérisoire*) play of vision". (Lacan 1992, 313; Lacan 1986, 362) "Dérisoire" is a favored word in Lacan's lexicon, combining as it does the sense of something paltry that is at the same time ridiculous. It captures neatly the meager satisfactions of phallic *jouissance*, and indeed, it is to the phallus that Lacan then turns, pointing out its presence on stage in Greek Old

Comedy, and noting that it is still there in later comedy, as a disguised or hidden signifier. What satisfies us in comedy, Lacan goes on, is not the triumph of life, but its flight or escape (*son échappée*), the way that it slips past all the barriers that oppose it, barriers that are “constituted by the agency of the signifier”. The phallus is the “signifier of this flight”. (Lacan 1992, 314) It is not so much that *life* triumphs, then, but that in comedy *it* survives: as Lacan says, “If the comic hero trips up and lands in the soup, the little fellow nevertheless survives.” (*Quand le héros comique trébuche, tombe dans la mélasse, eh bien, quand même, petit bonhomme vit encore.*) (Lacan 1992, 314; Lacan 1986, 362) Translator Dennis Porter substitutes soup for molasses, and prefers “trips up” for the “stumble” that Lacan himself gives as translation of *trébuche* in *Seminar 10*.¹³ What Porter retains is the insight that the comic hero who stumbles is not necessarily identical to the “petit bonhomme” who lives on, in the split that constitutes comic character. Lacan had already articulated this idea in *Seminar 5*, where he said that it is “the principle of comedy” to “center attention on an ‘it’ that believes entirely in its own metonymic object [...] and it is also a characteristic of comedy that the ‘it’ of the comic subject, whatever it may be, always emerges intact.” (Lacan 1998, 136, my translation)

In “Creative Writers and Daydreaming,” Freud claims that popular adventure tales usually come down to a fantasy of the “invulnerability” of the ego, with a hero who is “under the protection of a special Providence”:

If, at the end of one chapter of my story, I leave the hero unconscious and bleeding from severe wounds, I am sure to find him at the beginning of the

next being carefully nursed and on the way to recovery; and if the first volume closes with the ship he is in going down at sea, I am certain at the beginning of the second volume to read of his miraculous rescue. (Freud 1985, 137)

In contrast, in comedy, Lacan argues, the ego is regularly destroyed, but not life with it, because something else survives the ego's destruction, thrives even. That something else is a form of satisfaction that is highly paradoxical, since it extracts enjoyment from the pain of a stumble, or from the stickiness of molasses. And this is not just the feeling of superiority the audience is supposed to enjoy according to one significant strand of comic theory (Aristotle, Hobbes). The divide between enjoyment on the one hand and suffering on the other is not so easily parceled out in comedy. As Alenka Zupančič puts it,

The discrepancies between what I want and what I enjoy are the bread and butter of comedies. So is the fact that something in me can be satisfied even though "I" find no satisfaction there is something about satisfaction and enjoyment that has its own logic and relatively independent autonomous life, which can land the subject in rather awkward situations. (Zupančič 2008, 63)

For Zupančič, the typical comic character combines a miserable "I" and a happy "it". (Zupančič 2008 71) The stakes in this matter are very high for Lacan, since it is at this very point that he asks the question that is so often taken to be the most important one in his *Ethics*: "Avez-vous agi conformément au désir qui vous

habite?” (Lacan 1986, 362) Have you acted in conformity with the desire that inhabits you? The intractable question that follows from this is how can “I” conform with a desire, the fulfillment of which would bring the “I” no satisfaction? But then Lacan does not claim to be making recommendations for conduct in this final session, but offering some “propositions” that he will “formulate ... as paradoxes.” (Lacan 1992, 319)

Lacan enlists both tragedy and comedy in his argument with traditional ethics, whose major representatives in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* are Aristotle, Kant and the utilitarianism of Bentham. Far apart as they might be historically and philosophically, these ethical traditions, from Lacan’s perspective, all fail to take into account the whole field of perverse desire, a field which psychoanalytic experience cannot discount, since it presents itself so insistently in analysands’ actions and speech. Lacan, as we have already seen, agrees with the philosophers that how one is to act is the central question of ethics. However, he will not proceed on the same basis as Aristotle, for whom “a whole register of desire is literally situated...outside of the field of morality.” (Lacan 1992, 5) According to Aristotelian ethics, desire and the “good” should coincide with each other. It is simply a question of determining what the good is, and desire will rationally and reasonably follow. And why wouldn’t it? In this model the good action should be unambiguously pleasurable. But psychoanalysis tells another story. It discovers, as Véronique Voruz puts it,

that there exists a form of satisfaction which goes against the grain of the subject’s good, perceived in the classical sense of well-being, self-

preservation; that the appeal of “perversions” may be more potent than “normal genital” love; and that people are undeniably far more attached to such a satisfaction than to pleasure. (Voruz 2009, 261-2)

And as Marc de Kesel points out in his commentary on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, the patient may come to analysis demanding to “feel good,” but

psychoanalysis cannot give any positive advice concerning that good. It can only assist the patient in the search for his desire *as such*, that is, his desire insofar as it does not coincide with the good(s) moral values and norms promise. (de Kesel 2009, 55)

What Freud discovered in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and named repetition compulsion, and Lacan renamed *jouissance*, confounds Aristotle’s ethics with actions that refuse to line up with the “good” of the one who carries them out.

Tragedy also tells another story. Antigone’s “good,” when she acts in absolute, indeed, inflexible conformity with her desire, brings with it anguish, turmoil, and ultimately death. Lacan makes the point even more forcefully in relation to *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which, even at the end, Oedipus “has none of that profound peace of the gods, of that transfiguration associated with the penitent that traditional exegesis is pleased to observe in him.” (Lacan 1992, 285) As for Kant, Lacan notes his “innocence” in such matters, citing an example given by the later philosopher: a man who has the opportunity to “spend time with the lady whom he desires unlawfully,” but who knows full well that the punishment for doing so

is the scaffold. In such circumstances, Kant believes that “every man of good sense will say no,” as Lacan puts it. (Lacan 1992, 188-89) For Lacan, this example simply shows Kant’s naivety, since psychoanalytic experience provides many examples of subjects steadfastly pursuing desires in the face of the pain and suffering that accompany acting on them, and many who say yes to both ecstasy and the scaffold.

This pleasure in suffering, this *jouissance*, is what Zupančič detects at work in the comic protagonist as well. Certainly, presented in the right style, Kant’s example of the man embracing forbidden desire in the shadow of the executioner could be a straightforwardly comic scene. To take a more recent example, we could point to the “deranged penguin” of *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), anthropomorphized in director Werner Herzog’s lugubrious voice-over. Perched on a rock above a penguin colony, Herzog tries to detect some anguish, some pathos, in the flightless birds below. “Could they just go crazy because they have had enough of their colony?” Herzog asks a bemused arctic scientist, who admits that penguins can sometimes get “disoriented”. Herzog finds one such disoriented penguin, determinedly heading in the wrong direction, away from both feeding ground and colony, into an empty frozen wasteland. “Even if we caught him and brought him back to the colony” Herzog observes, “he would head immediately back towards the mountains”. The film leaves this doomed penguin “heading off into the interior of the vast continent with five thousand kilometers ahead of him ... heading towards certain death”. The scene can of course be read sentimentally: there is nothing more pathetic than the death of an innocent and ignorant animal. And yet, there is also in this waddling

Chaplinesque figure, who spurns the goods of feeding ground (nourishment) and colony (neighbours, the society of others) the resilient survival of the “petit bonhomme”.¹⁴ Lacan’s dispute with traditional ethics is that it fails entirely to take account of the destructive power of the death drive and the molasses of *jouissance*. The same accusation cannot be leveled at tragedy or comedy, since they place these things at their very heart.

Never on Sunday: three forms of enjoyment

Against this background, there are a number of reasons why *Never on Sunday* might have appealed to Lacan in the final session of his seminar on ethics. Not least of these is the way it overtly stages a contest between two further models of happiness, or enjoyment, both of them clearly distinct from comedy’s paradoxical *jouissance*. On one side is Homer who idealizes the philosophy and culture of ancient Greece, and on the other is Illya, who lives and works in the port, laughing, uninhibited and gay. Homer, an innocent abroad, is fascinated by Illya, and takes her as a symbol of the decay of classical values. A self-declared follower of Aristotle, Homer tells Illya “You live by the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies that came after the fall of Greece.” He commits to reforming her, convinced that “A whore can’t be happy” and vows to put in her head “Reason instead of fantasy, morality instead of immorality”. Homer believes, as *The Nicomachean Ethics* put it, that “moral virtues... are acquired by practice and habituation,” and so assumes that it is just a matter of inculcating those virtues in Illya through an appropriate regime. (Aristotle 2004, 31)

At first Illya scoffs at Homer's attempts, dismissing with especial venom all mention of Aristotle, because of the philosopher's attitude towards women. Eventually she accepts the offer to educate her, and in a double-quick Pygmalionism, Homer furnishes Illya in two weeks with geometry, geography, history and piano-playing. A picture by Picasso replaces one of Olympiakos football club on her wall, and a chess set appears on her coffee table. The success of Homer's project is evidenced in Illya's newfound shame. In the first scene of the film she strides with abandon into the port, stripping down to her underwear and leaping into the water, encouraging all the men working there to follow her, even the most dignified. After her moral education, the scene is repeated, but this time Illya undresses in a makeshift cabin, emerging in bathing cap and modest swimsuit to daintily dip her toe in the water. She also gives up her profession, suddenly enlightened about its immorality.

The Aristotelian's victory is short-lived though, as Illya discovers that he has funded her moral education through the corrupt landlord who extorts the port's other prostitutes with high rents. This character, referred to by Lacan as "the Grand Master of the Brothel," is known in the film only as "Noface," and indeed his face is never seen without over-sized dark glasses. Illya is the only prostitute in Piraeus independent of the landlord, whose henchmen she openly mocks, and Noface underwrites Homer's reformation project in order to get her off the streets and out of the way. This is why, as Lacan notes, Homer's "pious mission" is compromised from the start, dependent as it is on the very corruption he seeks to root out. Lacan spots and spells out Dassin's intended message, one which the director felt was largely missed by audiences: "the very falseness of [Homer's]

position”, the fact that “he’s tied up automatically with the character called Noface, who is the guy who exploits people.” (Gow 1970, 68) From this perspective *Never on Sunday* is part of the materialist’s suspicion of morality. The materialist insists instead on the contingency of virtue: it is not possible to be “good” without a specific set of economic and social conditions that allow for that goodness. One of the clearest articulations of this position can be found in Bertolt Brecht’s *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1943), in which the virtue of Shen Te is underwritten by the exploitative actions of her alter-ego Shui Ta.

For reasons already outlined, Lacan, like Illya, is skeptical about the Aristotelian model of enjoyment, in which pleasure can be made to coincide with moral virtue. But he is equally skeptical about the model the film puts in opposition to the Aristotelian. Lacan detects in *Never on Sunday* a primitivist strain that “involves identifying classical antiquity with the sphere of liberated desire.” He names poet Pierre Louÿs as shorthand for a *fin de siècle* Hellenism that idealises a supposedly non-repressed sexuality, free from the constraints of modern morality. That *Never on Sunday* continues to subscribe to this ideology can be seen in the encounter between Illya and an English sailor, whose erectile dysfunction is, as one critic puts it, “a surprise for its time,” and possible only because the film was produced outside the constraints of the Production Code. (Shelley 2011, 167) Not even English psychical impotence can withstand Greek sensuality, though, and Illya’s sheer vitality sweeps aside such petty obstacles as shame and prudishness. Dassin was known to have admired Nikos Kazantzakis, and there is more than a little of Zorba in Illya, who embodies, in Tsitsopoulou’s words, “the naïve, the unreflective, the instinctive, the physical.” (Tsitsopoulou

2000, 90) If it is true that *Never on Sunday* was instrumental in the tourism boom in Greece, no doubt the promise of liberated desire was central to this success, and to the lucrative subsequent packaging on an industrial scale of Southern Europe to northerners suffering from sun and *jouissance* deficits.

The key here would appear to lie in Lacan's allusive and ambiguous admiration for the "beautiful touch," the "stroke of genius" of the cash register ringing in the bar scenes in *Never on Sunday*. His point appears to be that there is no uncosted *jouissance*: with each smashed glass of libidinal expenditure, there is a price to pay, a running tab. While it is a little surprising to find Lacan in the position of the strict bookkeeper, the position becomes clearer if viewed in the light of the daily routine of the psychoanalytical clinic, with its usual run of neurotic symptoms. The neurotic, Lacan says, wants above all to avoid responsibility for articulating a demand, for facing up to his anxiety and desire. One neurotic strategy is therefore to push the responsibility for the demand onto the Other, to insist that the Other make demands of him: "The true object sought out by the neurotic is a demand that he wants to be asked of him," Lacan says in *Seminar 10*, "He wants to be begged (*Il veut que l'on supplie*)". "The only thing he doesn't want," adds Lacan, "is to pay the price." (Lacan 2014, 51)

Never on Sunday would have us believe that before Homer's arrival Illya's is an entirely non-neurotic sexuality. And yet, Illya sustains her hedonistic *joie de vivre* through an absolute obtuseness, a singular and pathological not wanting to know. Lacan does not mention it, but Illya shares with him a passion for classical tragedy, a fact that Homer seizes on as evidence that in her lies a kernel of the

“purity” of Greek antiquity. But Illya’s understanding of tragedy does not extend to accepting its pathos: against all counter indications, she asserts that *Medea* ends happily, and indeed that this is the case with all Greek tragedies. One of the recurring jokes in *Never on Sunday* is that in Illya’s retellings all tragedies end with the characters going together “to the seashore”. Lacan assumes that it is Homer, as American and Aristotelian, who is the film’s comic butt, the target of its derision, but Illya’s inextinguishable optimism, her “healthy” sexuality, is also exemplary of a certain comic *jouissance*, with the “I” going one way and the “it” another.

At the start of his teaching year that ends with *Never on Sunday*, Lacan expresses his skepticism about the eighteenth-century philosophy of libertinage, which aimed at the “naturalist” liberation of desire, but which nevertheless, Lacan insists, places obligations on its adherents, like any other ethical system. Foremost among these was the exhausting obligation to “enjoy,” but even this could not dispose of feelings of culpability at the failure to do so. And so it is with Illya, whose defining constraint, beyond a pathological injunction to be happy, is found in the title of the film. Illya may be a form of libertine, untroubled by religious or moral scruples, but her liberated desire is circumscribed precisely by a negation: she is untroubled by religious belief, instead insisting each week on holding a party for her favorite customers.

In this context, one final peculiarity of Mercouri’s character deserves mention. In her autobiography, Mercouri spells her character’s name “Illya,” which is the spelling I have adopted. The MGM Entertainment DVD version distributed in

2005 renders it “Illia,” while IMDB gives “Ilya,” as does Wikipedia. Tsitsopoulou tries “Ilia,” while Dina Iordanova in turn offers “Illyia”. It may be that the name is difficult to spell properly because it is not a Greek woman’s name, nor indeed a woman’s name. In fact, none of these five versions are recognized names at all, with the exception of “Ilya,” which is an Eastern European man’s name. The answer to this puzzle can be found in the final credits of the film, which was jointly produced by Melinafilm and Lopert Pictures Corporation. Melinafilm was formed especially for *Never on Sunday*, which struggled to find funding, and Lopert Pictures was mainly a distribution company, producing only one other film during its existence. By 1958 it was owned by United Artists, but still run by its founder, Ilya Lopert. When Dassin was pitching *Never on Sunday* to United Artist’s European head Charles Smadja, Smadja asked for the lead character’s name. Dassin, casting around, said Ilya, after Lopert, whose office was the next one down the hall. (Mercouri 1971, 117) Nothing more than a little filmmaking anecdote, perhaps, but the masculine name is of no little consequence: Illya is found almost exclusively in the company of men, in relations that are in equal measures fraternal and conjugal. Here, if anything, is the perverse incestuous core of this story of female Don Juanism, a perversity that dissolves abruptly at the end when Illya is “saved” by the love of Tonio rather than the education offered by Homer. As for Lopert Pictures, it specialized in distributing in the United States foreign art films whose sometimes risqué content was in danger of contravening the Production Code (Balio 1987, 226).

Cuts

Lacan's disparate commentary on individual films has remained largely unremarked upon. One reason for the lack of engagement with this small collection of brief interventions may be the fact that so many of Lacan's references to films come in his seminars. Some seminars have only been published recently, others are still to be released and translated in authorized versions, and remain available only in unauthorized versions, most easily accessible online. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* was published in French in 1986 and translated into English in 1992, so Lacan's thoughts on *Never on Sunday* are not recent news. But the relative obscurity of *Never on Sunday* and its apparent frivolity do not provide much encouragement to Lacanian critics more at home with *Antigone* than with musical comedy. Nor does what Lacan says about the film fit obviously into dominant strands of Lacanian film theory preoccupied with apparatus, gaze, and ideology. There is also the suspicion that for Lacan psychoanalysis is the primary interest here, and film distantly secondary.

The standard accusation leveled at psychoanalytic interpretations of aesthetic objects is that they find the same thing wherever they look: whatever the literary or filmic surface, the same psychoanalytic concepts or principles are discovered at work underneath. In the worst cases the charge is completely justified, in readings where, for example, different characters in a film are reduced to embodying the id, ego and superego of Freud's second topography, or when the Oedipus complex is relentlessly hunted down in film after film. On the face of it, the accusation might be leveled at Lacan in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, where

Never on Sunday seems little more than an opportunity to illustrate psychoanalytic concerns about desire and ethics.

But Lacan was not exactly in the business of interpretation: neither in the clinic nor in the cinema. Just as in the clinic he resisted providing an explanation for the analysand's symptom, so with films he does not try to close off their meaning once and for all. The film as discrete object is not his quarry. Instead, it is more the case that he plunders from one film, steps off from another. He does not try to comprehend the film in its entirety or unity, but extracts from it some detail, just as in analysis the analytic method is to break into the analysand's discourse to seize on some dissonant element. When he first introduces *Never on Sunday*, he makes clear that he does not think much of the film as a whole, but he returns to it because he finds in it "some interesting details" (*de bons détails*): to be exact, the montage of smashed glasses and cash register. In this sense, for Lacan it is not a question of culture, and film as part of it, as some sort of surface that yields up a psychoanalytic depth, but rather culture as a sort of continuous surface, a Moebius strip, from which relevant details can be plucked, without regard for the supposed specificity of genre or medium. Or more precisely, it is a strip in which one can make a cut at a given point. I wrote earlier that Lacan claims to have walked in late to the "detestable" *If...*, but this is not exactly what he says. He tells his audience they should come in at the right moment, like he did (*entrez au bon moment, comme j'ai fait*). He refers to the old practice in cinemas of continuous projection of films allowing spectators to enter at any point, and leave again "where they came in". He alludes as well to the way the analyst must learn when

to interrupt, to cut into the analysand's speech, and in the process informs us that the Lacanian approach to cinema is entirely a matter of timing.

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¹ In a footnote, Heath continues: “Perhaps the most consequent of Lacan’s references is his little fable [in *Seminar II*] of a camera filming in the absence of any human presence to illustrate the idea of a consciousness without ego.” (51).

² The count is optimistic because Motta includes films such as *Rififi* (Jules Dassin, 1955) where Lacan simply reproduces a phrase from the film, or notes that *Él* (Luis Buñuel, 1953) was a critical text for Lacan, but does not identify where he cites it. He also includes references to actors (James Dean, Brigitte Bardot, Harpo Marx) where no film is identified by Lacan. Motta has done a great service in identifying these disparate references, but his analysis is restricted to providing brief summaries of Lacan on each film, along with unrelated background material on the films, and he does not draw any significant psychoanalytic conclusions about Lacan’s remarks on cinema.

³ Paul Flaig notes that, “Despite the importance of Jacques Lacan’s thought for film theory, there is almost no scholarly engagement with the various discussions of film in his seminars.” (Flaig 2011, 99)

⁴ Transcriptions of Lacan’s unpublished seminars are available online at various sites. I have used Staferla, including for Seminar IX, *L’identification*, cited here from the session of 21 February 1962.

⁵ It is instructive to compare Lacan’s sardonic remarks with a Lacanian film theorist’s approach to the same film. Todd McGowan soberly explains that *Hiroshima mon amour* demonstrates the “impossibility of the object” and the “traumatic real of the other.” (McGowan 2007, 189)

⁶ Fellini appears again briefly in Seminar 17, in which Lacan quibbles on the spelling of *Satyricon* (1969). (Lacan 2007b, 81)

⁷ Lacan, *L’identification*, session of 27 June 1962; Jacques Lacan, Seminar XIII, *L’objet de la psychanalyse*, session of 8 June 1966.

⁸ In the British education system, a “public school” is in fact not a state-run institution, but a privately run one, more like an American prep school.

⁹ This seminar was Lacan’s last at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, whose authorities asked him to leave at the end of the year. The following year he moved to the Law Faculty at the Place du Panthéon.

¹⁰ There is another example of the actuality of Lacan's filmic references in *Anxiety*, the session of January 30, 1963 when Lacan alludes to *Cybèle, ou Les dimanches de Ville-d'Avray* (Serge Bourguignon, 1962), a film released in Paris in late November 1962, that went on to win the Oscar for Best Foreign Film. Apropos of a case of Margaret Little's that he is summarizing, in which the sexual undercurrents in a father-daughter relation are very mildly thematized, Lacan remarks that "We are hardly, in this story, in *dimanches de Ville-d'Avray*." (Lacan 2004, 170, my translation). The film in question stages a chaste romance between a 30-year-old man and a twelve-year-old girl, taking as its pretext the abandonment of the girl in an orphanage by her father, with the man, Pierre, acting as paternal substitute, taking Cybèle out on Sundays. The "purity" of their relationship was much and admiringly commented on at the time in what Ginette Vincendeau describes as a symptomatic denial of the strong erotic dimension of the film. (Vincendeau 2014) Based on his laconic comment on the film, Lacan was not fooled by all the critical protestations about purity and "tasteful" handling of the theme. Nor does he pause on the Pierre/*père* pun the film offers up, although it is worth noting that it is the second film with "Dimanche" in the title that attracted his attention, and he never hesitated, especially in later years, to play on words that contained the "dit" (say) of "dire" (saying), such as "dit-mension," which he turned into "dit-mansion," and of course "Dimanche" itself, which occasioned in *Encore* an extended pun on the English Channel (La Manche). (Lacan 1975, 96-7)

¹¹ For an extended meditation on Lacan's remarks on Harpo's face, see Flaig 2011.

¹² In her autobiography, Mercouri, future Greek Minister for Culture, confirms this view of the film's influence on tourism: "The film *Never on Sunday* was an international success. It gave me a name. It was nominated for five Oscars, but the deepest satisfaction was that it stimulated hundreds of thousands of people to visit Greece." (Mercouri 1971, 137) The film's title song continues to provide a soundtrack in many Greek holiday resorts, along with the music from *Zorba the Greek* (Michael Cacoyannis, 1964).

¹³ “My God, it might’ve taken me awhile to get to it, but what a beautiful language the English language is! Who here knows then that, already since the fifteenth century, slang has found this marvel of replacing on occasion *I understand you perfectly* by *I understumble you perfectly*? ... This *understumble*, untranslatable in French, incorporates *stumble* (*trébuche*) into *understand*. Understanding always amounts to struggling forward into misunderstanding.” (Lacan 2014, 79)

¹⁴ Thanks to Daniela Caselli for reminding me of this scene.