

Jeanne Prinsloo

Beyond Propp and Oedipus: Towards expanding narrative theory

Abstract

*Aspects of theory surrounding both narrative and reception of film is examined and interrogated. The structural analysis offered by Propp, among other theorists, and insights of psychoanalysis are considered to rework the Oedipal scenario. This paper draws on ideas around transgression and refers to aspects of Oedipus's life which are largely ignored as the focus of psychic scenario. The narratives of two films, *On the Wire* and *Mississippi Masala* are examined in relation to contradictions surrounding their reception.*

1. By way of review(s)

■ Extracts of reviews: *Mississippi Masala*

- **Mississippi Masala gets them hot and bothered**

<In Nairobi> There was a single Indian man sitting three seats from me. Through the legs of the couple standing up and applauding between us, I looked over at him. He was sitting clenched, wincing. As the film ended I noticed that he got up and left before the final credit sequence.

For the first time I understood why the Indians are called 'the Jews of Africa'.

A friend of mine who saw *Mississippi Masala* in the US, said that the 'Africa is for Africans' line received similar roars of approval from the largely American audience over there. She noted, however, that when 'the scene is repeated at the end of the film, the audience was dead-quiet'. Clearly, in her New York audience (unlike in my Nairobi one), the film had made its point about racism that exists, in filmmaker Mira Nair's words, 'between black and brown' – perhaps because it touched the nerve of racism black people have experienced in the US (Gevisser, 1992: 28, in *Weekly Mail*).

- **Opening night bombs threaten *Masala* release in Trinidad**

Mississippi Masala won an award at this year's Venice Film Festival for its description of a relationship between an East Indian girl and an Afro-American youth. The film has touched a raw nerve in Trinidad, which has a large Hindu population.

Last week, an unnamed group sent a letter to a Hindu leader Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha saying that it would plant an explosive device at the Monarch cinema in Tuna Puna, where the film is scheduled to open at the end of the month (Steen, 1990:33, in *Hollywood Reporter*).

■ Extracts of reviews: *On the Wire*

• Reviews

Such a film could have become hopelessly melodramatic or pretentious, but Proctor's handling of a difficult subject persuades otherwise. Both script and direction are sure, and the two central performances, particularly that of Aletta Bezuidenhout as the wife, are convincing. So is the atmosphere of the stifling community in which both are fatally enmeshed (Anon., 1990:35, in *Variety*).

• Bleak and harrowing tale set in South Africa

Bleak, harrowing, long-winded are words that come to mind for this South African film – rape, murder with a miserable laagered existence behind high wire fences conjuring them up ...

Not that he does much to improve matters – in fact he turns on his wife Aletta and some brutal sex making takes place, much to the horror of the local dominee and most of the farming community of repressed women and chauvinistic men.

By the way, Wouter eventually puts us out of our misery and we're shown a little light at the end of a murky tunnel – but it's a long tunnel (Sally Scot, 1991:2, in *Daily News, Tonight section*).

The selected extracts of reviews present different spectatorial responses to the same films. The reviews of *Mississippi Masala* recount strong, hostile responses by Hindu groups and black spectators in Kenya and US for different reasons. Sally Scott's review of *On the Wire* similarly is dismissive of this film in sharp contrast to the review presented in *Variety*. The films do not fulfil the expectations and presuppositions about narrative entertained by those who reject these films. Rejection of the film also does not coincide with the intentions of the producers of these films. To consider film spectatorship in some of its complexities, I intend to interrogate notions of narrative and mainstream film reception by examining narrative structures, structures that fit very easily into common explanations of patriarchal and Oedipal scenarios. By expanding approaches to narrative, one attempts a prism of alternative narrative structures to consider these films in their refusal to offer closure in the anticipated manner. I do not intend a critique of these films, but am using them to illustrate the need to expand a repertoire for narrative analysis of film.

Feminist film theory and the psychoanalytic film theory on which it has depended have offered very important insights for critical film practice. Largely based on Lacanian articulations of a Freudian position, the narrative structure of mainstream cinema has been deemed to operate in a particular way. The continual reworking of the male Oedipal scenario has been understood to underlie most mainstream texts. Two recent films directed by women and essentially with female protagonists, namely *Mississippi Masala* directed by Mira Nair in the USA in 1991 and *On the Wire* directed by South African Elaine Proctor in 1991, are among those that do not set such a scenario in motion. Apart from both having female protagonists, the type of characters portrayed are uncommon protagonists in mainstream cinema, on one hand an Afrikaner *plaasmeisie* who tries to fit into the mores of her narrow community; on the other a protagonist who is Indian by parentage and is part of an exile culture, born in Africa, grown up in the UK and USA (and never in India), she describes herself as a "masala", "a bunch of mixed spices". Both protagonists deal with problems of alienation or 'otherness' in contexts seldom explored by mainstream cinema.

It is my intention to consider the debates about narrative, feminist film theory and practice by referring to these films. While I do not assume that these filmmakers' singular intention was to produce feminist film treatises, the films appear to have shared characteristics in

that both are atypical of mainstream cinematic texts in their inscription and discourses and in that they were made in a critical spirit. They offer useful texts to consider issues raised by feminist film theory and, consequently, any critical film theory and practice.

Firstly I shall look at those aspects of film theory surrounding the study of narrative in mainstream film in order to examine its relevance for these films. This will indicate how these films work by the transgression of implicit cinematic codes. By examining the connections and insights offered by psychoanalytic film and narrative theory, suggested expansions pertaining to psychoanalytic scenarios will attempt to advocate a renewed look at narrative forms that offer alternative spectatorial positions. Analysis of the nature of the narrative offered by these films will illustrate aspects of these theoretical proposals.

2. Theories around narrative and film

A narrative is a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time. A narrative begins with one situation; a series of changes occur according to a pattern of causes and effects, finally a situation arises which brings about the end of the narrative ... Usually the agents of cause and effect are characters (Bordwell & Thompson, 1985:83).

Bordwell's description offers a position from which we can begin to examine film narrative and which enables narrative to be seen structurally with what constitutes the beginning, the middle section and the ending. Also, crucial to such an understanding of narrative is the notion of cause and effect within this structured action, and of characters as the movers of the action, the force that directs and motivates this chain of events.

This understanding of the linear narrative has been developed diversely by structuralist theorists. Todorov describes the narrative process as beginning at a point of equilibrium which is a point of order, of plenitude, of fulfilment. Early in the narrative, this state is disrupted by some event, crisis or power, thereby creating a disequilibrium. The course of the narrative then is caught up in the attempt to correct the disequilibrium or to deal with the disruption and its effects. The conclusion of the narrative is marked by the restoration of a state of equilibrium marking its closure and which is never quite the same as the original state, but similar to it.

3. Propp: Structural similarity in narrative

Proppian functions similarly offer a linear story. Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* was first published in 1928, although translated into English only in 1958. His initial aim was a fairly modest one. He chose to analyse the Russian folktale in an attempt to establish a reliable system for their classification. Consequently, Propp ignored the content of the hundred folktales he analyzed and concentrated solely on the latent form. For Propp a 'function' describes a single action, (not a literal event) with a specified role in the narrative development. While it becomes obvious that Propp placed more emphasis on action than on character, he does also categorize characters in terms of their sphere of 'function' within the narrative. Disregarding their personal qualities, the hero becomes identifiable by the sphere of action he inhabits, namely the hero goes on a quest. This sphere of action forms the second of the basic structural components. Propp established seven character functions in all, consisting of the villain, donor or provider, helper, princess, dispatcher, hero or victim and false hero.

Propp concluded that "functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are told" (1958:30-39). Propp found that he was able to distill these narrative events to thirty-one. He noted that certain kinds of functions always occurred at the same stage of the story, for example the interdiction always near the beginning (compare Todorov's disruption), whereas the villain would only be punished towards the conclusion. Furthermore certain functions always occurred in twos and threes. Thus he concluded that, while allowing for interlinking incidents and omission of functions, or repetitions of functions, that "the sequence of events is always identical". Finally, he concluded that despite their multiformity, "all fairy tales are of one type in regard to structure" (1958:30-9).

Propp confined his analysis to the Russian folk tale but he did suggest that it was possible that these narrative forms, ostensibly stylized and primitive, might have the same armature as the modern realist texts. Modern Anglo/American film theorists, such as Wollen (1976) with his examination of Hitchcock's *North by North-West*, tested this hypothesis and proclaimed an accurate fit. Subsequently, film theorists have frequently addressed and debated the relevance of a Proppian form of analysis for film. Such significance relates to the correspondence between the folk tale and film, sharing popular forms and similarity of ideological function. The implications of this type of narrative will be drawn out when looking at notions suggested by Lacan, Barthes and other theorists describing narrative.

4. Psychoanalysis and the audience

Psychoanalytic film understandings are premised on certain non-visual dimensions of the cinematic experience, including the phatic dimension. This dimension involves making contact with and holding the spectator and relates to the conscious and unconscious pleasures of viewing. The psychoanalytic approach attempts to understand the subtle, usually barely conscious pleasures experienced by spectators when viewing a film. Posited on the theory of the unconscious processes at work in constituting the subject, certain key concepts underlying this approach relate to the formation of the Unconscious, with particular emphasis on the mirror phase and the Oedipal scenario (the *Imaginary* and *Symbolic stage* in Lacanian terms).¹

The Unconscious operates according to a rhetoric of its own, a rhetoric experienced in dream imagery and linked to film theory. It was Metz in *History/Discourse: A Note on Two Voyeurisms* (1976), who perceived of cinematic address being within a register of *histoire*, rather than *discours*, and giving the impression of a transparent, impersonal narrative style.²

¹ The Imaginary according to Lacan (1977) is marked by the child's realization of its separateness from the mother. As in a mirror image the child acquires an image of his/her completeness. This is also the beginning of the acquisition of language: You, not I. Entry into the Symbolic is premised on the child's awareness of the mother's lack of the phallus and the boy child's desire for the mother becomes fused with a fear of castration. Repressing love for the mother, the boy child aligns himself with the father. After a latency period, he is able to obtain a substitute object of love. For the girl child the Oedipal scenario is more complicated. She recognizes the father as having the phallus that she lacks. This desire for the father is prohibited on the part of the parents. However, for her the threat of castration does not exist and she returns to identification with her original love object, enabling an ambivalence or bisexuality in identification.

² It presents itself as a story, *histoire*, told from nowhere. No signs of the enunciation, *discours*, or the source of production is revealed.

Metz argues that conventional use of cinematic language within film narrative makes *discours* difficult. Obscuring devices of construction produces a particular relation between spectator and text. Psychoanalytic film theorists (including Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" written in 1973 and Metz in his classic study of film spectatorship, "The Imaginary Signifier" first published in 1975) have argued that the rhetoric of cinematic language is analogous to the rhetoric of dreams or the Unconscious, and that the cinematic narratives set in play a form of subjectivity that relates to the subject's own formation as a gendered being. Because of the phallogocentric nature inherent in patriarchal cultures, this metaphorical psychoanalytic model provides us with an understanding of gendered behaviour. It has to be emphasized that the Woman is designated as an absence or lack, since she does not possess the phallus and, consequently, as the 'Other'. This approach further posits that during the acquisition of language and the constitution of the subject, certain repressions occur and form the Unconscious. The Freudian notions of the id, the ego and the superego come into play here. The superego (the introjection of the idealized parental figures) act as censor, repressing any unconscious ideas that will threaten the ego-ideal, the Unconscious being the price exacted for language and human culture.

During the viewing of the film, identification with any and all of these three levels of subjectivity is possible. That this is not experienced as fragmented or threatening is accounted for by the notion of suture. The filmic narration, operating as *histoire*, as Metz described, leaves the position of the narrator open. During the viewing process, the spectator becomes caught up in the film's enunciation and becomes the subject-in-the-text. This implies a dynamic process in which the spectator is continually repositioned. The idea of suture incorporates the spectator's attempts to create a whole image and to sew up the gaps. According to Lacanian theorists, there is a constant interplay in our psychic life between the imaginary and the symbolic. Suture is the attempt of the subject, or more precisely, of the ego, to sew up the gaps between the id and the superego and to impose unity on the operating, conflicting forces of the Unconscious. These would otherwise jeopardize a stable or coherent identity.³

Cinematic narrative is then argued to construct the subjectivity of the spectator in the same way in which the subject is produced. Specularity is caught up within the Lacanian categories of the mirror stage and the Oedipal scenario which then finds its continual replaying in different guises within narrative cinema.

The psychic drives held to account for the continued spectatorship of films, particularly scopophilia which relates to the pleasure of looking, are constantly played on by cinema. Looking involves a condition in which the spectator is situated and determines the position taken up in the identificatory processes.

³ The notion of suture is a complex one. Debatably, a filmic example of when suture can be seen to be at work is present in the shot/reverse shot sequence common to narrative cinema. Here the viewer is positioned in alternating viewpoints: firstly as the privileged observer of character (X), and then in the reversed position as the observed character (Y).

5. Towards a synthesis: Proppian Oedipus

Psychoanalytic film theory has examined cinematic texts and found the Oedipal scenario to be a dominant cultural theme. Similarly, the Proppian model has been found to be appropriate to examine mainstream film texts.

The contention offered here is that the thirty-one narrative functions also incorporate the Oedipal trajectory. In order to employ the Proppian functions in terms of the tale of Oedipus, one can look at the organization of these functions in terms of the groupings: preparation, complication, transference, struggle, return, recognition. The Oedipal scenarios hinge on the boy child becoming aware of himself as separate from his mother (*preparation*) and his need to prove himself as not a child (*complication*) and, in order to reach maturity, to separate from his mother (*transference*), and through struggle, to be able to *return* and gain *recognition* for his achievements, which are rewarded by marriage to the woman who is not his mother, but who makes good the lack of the mother. Consider the following Proppian functions:

9 This lack or misfortune is made known; the hero is given a request or a command and he goes or is sent on a mission/quest.

OR

11 The hero leaves home.

AND

31 The hero is married and crowned.

These narrative functions describe what Lacan identifies as the *Imaginary* and the *Symbolic* scenarios. The hero has to separate himself from the mother, see himself as separate from her. The functions described as the *Transference and Struggle* deal with the testing and development of maturity that enables the hero to establish himself as the mature adult who again possesses the phallus and the woman whom he desires. This trajectory forms the core of the narrative as perceived by Propp and it is unsurprising that the psychoanalytic understandings fit the mainstream narratives so well.

Psychoanalysis informs the study of narrative in two ways: The notion of the return of the repressed is basic to Freud's thinking. Narrative acts as a containment of the id, but allows it to be exercised, to return before its control, before the closure of the narrative. At the beginning of the narrative, there is a state of plenitude. The threat occurs, the disruption of order is created by the power of an evil force, understood to be retained psychically by the id. This force is able to threaten, to become fearful and powerful, and the spectatorial desire is for this to be contained; by the conclusion of narratives of the type under discussion the closure gestures towards this containment, frequently with reference to moral or higher powers (superego), of a return to 'normality' and a return of the id to its repressed. It is important to recall that Freud saw this replaying of Oedipal scenarios not simply as neurotic but maintained that the Oedipal scenario was never completely perfected, especially in the case of women who have to separate from the mother, the primal love object, yet also identify with her and strive to be like her.

Furthermore, the concept of the repetition compulsion (beyond the *Pleasure Principle*), suggests a bid for mastery. Texts are understood characteristically as economies of repetition and variation, involving similarity and difference, symmetry and asymmetry, which aim to establish mastery over the lack.

What is perhaps even more interesting is the fact that this trajectory is replayed with such alacrity and frequency in our cultural texts. The social and psychic need to rehearse, to re-enact, this scenario is considered to result from its unsuccessful operation for the spectators whose lives are engaged by the Oedipal crisis. Inherent in the psychoanalytic understanding is the challenge to the father and the overthrowing of a situation where the child is powerless, through struggle and testing in order to take on this mature role. Also the notion of the id is crucial to explaining the phatic aspect of the film's narrative.

The Proppian description of narrative functions fits numerous texts. These are particular types of texts and serve similar cultural functions. By considering the conservative function of the folk-tale in teaching societal norms, expectations and social morality, Propp offers an explanation of the role that these narratives serve culturally. The replaying of the Oedipal myth also coagulates around patriarchal law, about the acquisition of property and power and exchange of women. But it is not suggested that all narratives fit this model. It is precisely when the fit between film narrative and these models is uncomfortable or non-existent, that the narrative becomes interesting as a critical practice. Consideration of certain notions offered by Barthes surrounding narrative enable these ideas to be extended.

Barthes' ideas in *S/Z* (1975) are dissimilar to the formalist analysis of Propp. His interest in narrative leads him to examine the codes, which he suggests are inherent in the narrative, that entice the reader through its trajectory. Of the five codes of signification he described, two particularly relate to narrative development, namely the proairetic or action codes and the hermeneutic or enigma codes. Like the analysis offered by Propp they function linearly.

The *hermeneutic codes* relate to the mystery and suspense invoked and refer to the amount of knowledge that is available to the spectator, and the gradual allowing of greater knowledge until the disclosure by the conclusion. The enigmas can be delayed, complicated and have minor resolutions on their passage to the final disclosure. One can use the hermeneutic/enigma codes to chart the linear progression of the narrative. In contrast, I would consider those aspects focused upon by the Proppian narrative as the action codes; they deal with the successful completion of the mission or quest. The proairetic or action codes seem to me to offer a more appropriate tool of analysis for certain narratives. Propp's narrative functions focus on particular actions and thus correspond to these action codes (and dare I say it), and those that characterize the male genres of action films like Westerns, adventure, war and those of the Kung-fu/Rambo variety. Not all theorists have been satisfied with the Proppian model. Davies (1978) points to problems using this form of narrative analysis when she examined *The Big Sleep*, a forties film noir film with a narrative that focused on the private dick's investigation.

Propp and *proairetic codes* are useful when dealing precisely with the replaying of the male Oedipal scenario, yet are less appropriate when the codes being activated are hermeneutic. When the enigma codes are the dominant ones, Proppian analysis and accordingly notions around the male Oedipal scenario cease their easy fit.

What becomes interesting for me in attempting to consider this in terms of feminist film theory, is that numerous mainstream narratives circulate this particular discourse which repeats and naturalizes discourse around patriarchal laws, but they fail to provide an effective armature to hang the narrative on as soon as the narrative does not replay this dominant discourse. Then it is about as useful as a rusty colander for carrying water.

This Oedipal scenario is replayed constantly in the media, from the news to film to folk tales. What is apparent is that this need to rehearse finally relates to the lack of success of closure, to the excess that is uncontained and that escapes control. Essentially, this re-enactment suggests that we have a patriarchal discourse that needs replaying; it also suggests that there are other powerful discourses operating.

I would like to consider the notion that has been suggested that if we are to use psychic metaphors and explanations, there could be other aspects of the psychic scenario beyond this Oedipal one that are also fascinating, as fascinating as the Oedipal trajectory which is never successfully negotiated.

It is precisely those narratives that exclude the Proppian, Oedipal and proairetic oriented plot where interesting ideas can be examined. In those mentioned, the masculine bias is overriding: the narrative centres around a male protagonist. The proairetic code is activated around a man, the hermeneutic code frequently revolves around the woman, her mystery, and frequently the discontent that she activates. Woman plays an ambiguous role. Initially she is both the problem and the disruption: in film the woman acts as the principle signifier of male anxieties; she fails to fit into the male world, she destabilizes the male identity and presents the threat of castration. Control of the woman can be achieved in a number of ways: punishment can include being raped or disfigured (minor characters in *Klute*, *The Big Heat*), she can be murdered (*Fatal Attraction*, *Lady from Shanghai*) or she can be subdued (*Klute*) and position herself as subordinate to the man and provide the solution for the male protagonist, as the woman who makes good the lack. This woman also then accepts the role as partner/mother.

6. Gendered spectatorship

Being the mainstay of mainstream cinema, the re-enacting of the male scenarios has offered debates around the role of spectatorship for women. Principally, the notion of gendered spectatorship has been debated widely since Mulvey's seminal article (1973) posited that spectatorship was confined for women. Mulvey emphasized the visual side of narrative pleasure. Firstly, scopophilia and voyeurism are looks associated with looking at other people. Visual pleasure is acquired in these instances by an identification with the camera. Secondly, narcissism and exhibitionism are facilitated by the cinema with its anthropomorphic thrust. The cinematic image allows the type of identification and recognition/misrecognition of oneself identified by Lacan in the mirror phase.

This, Mulvey argued, has direct consequences for the spectator in terms of gender. The sexual politics of narrative visualization generally present woman as the image and man as the bearer of the look. There is the further active/passive division of labour which controls

the narrative structure premised on the active male and the passive female. The gaze is directed towards the woman both by the male spectators in the film and the spectators. The resulting presentation of woman as the object of the gaze is considered by the male not pleasurable, but as threatening, re-invoking the castration anxiety initially provoked in the Oedipal scenario. A means of coping with this is explained by Freud by the process of fetishism, in which the lack is disavowed and placed onto something else. This manifests itself in the instances of sheer spectacle in which parts of the women or their clothes are fetishized and which in fact works against narrative flow. In this way and because of the way in which dominant narrative cinema is conducted in terms of the negotiations of the unconscious scenarios, Mulvey posited a unitary viewing position as a male.

Subsequently, Mulvey (1989:37) posited a slightly amended position of spectatorship which offered the transvestite position for women by means of which female spectators could identify with the passive feminine role and the active masculine role which had been repressed, and acquire pleasure by these instances. In addition the woman is able to identify with the desire for the woman which originates, as for the man, with the desire for the mother, the original love object. She is also able to identify narcissistically with the fetishized female object of the gaze. The woman is here inscribed in her relationship to men and patriarchal structures as the 'Other'. The implications of this are that the specificity of masculinity is culturally universalized. By adopting a marginal position to the address, an ideological distance from such an address is enabled which many feminist theorists consider conducive to forming a critical perspective. The position of spectatorship, it is also suggested, does not coincide with actual male or female spectators. However, Doane (in Penley 1988:221) points out that men as social subjects are far more likely to take on the comfortable position designated as male. Women must resort to bisexuality as masculinity is necessary for access to cultural discourse.

For any feminist consideration, notions of spectatorship and pleasure for woman spectators are crucial, but the insight of positioned spectatorship extends even further. The position of 'Other' as a cultural signifier can also be used to understand signification of other social groupings beyond gender, more specifically relating to colour, to age, to sexual preference.

Feminism has drawn attention to the way that women have been presented in a negative relation to creativity and artistic practices. But this polarisation around access to culture is not particular to sex oppression. The mind/body opposition is characteristic of other oppositions of dominance (black/white, colonised/conqueror, peasant/noble, bourgeois/worker) and in each case the oppressed are linked to nature (the body) and the dominant to culture (and the mind). Whatever actual cultural deprivation and economic exploitation may give the myth a historical foundation, it is there to exploit 'the human acts' (Mulvey, 1989a:167).

Just about two decades after the publication of Mulvey's seminal document, we still need to debate and (perhaps with hindsight) look at film that is feminist, that is oppositional, for the implications of these ideas relate to other forms of oppression.

7. Order and disorder

Mulvey's later writings began to explore the Oedipal scenario anew, an attempt that opens up interesting spaces and understandings very different from the polemic offered by "Visual

Pleasures" (1989b). These ideas open up interesting spaces for feminist and oppositional film practices.

The discourse contained in the narrative of the male hero and his successful quest frequently retells only a single stage of Oedipus's life story. The Oedipus myth tells of Oedipus as the victim child, the royal child, wanderer, hero-king, of his defilement, his catharsis and finally how he becomes sanctified and possessing of symbolic authority. Oedipus does enact the adventures of the hero in the narrative functions described by Propp: he kills the king, he is interrogated and tested (by the riddle of the Sphinx) and succeeds in the test, he finally receives the queen (Jocasta) in marriage. This narrative plots the linear story described by the proiaretic codes and it is one that is initiated by stasis, followed by disruption and returns to a closure. Yet it is when we allow ourselves to recall more of the myth of Oedipus, that concentration on this phase begins to feel so arbitrary, so unsatisfactory, so unconvincing. Closure at this point is inconclusive. Concentration on one part of his life begs the question: And what then? Perhaps this is where it all begins for oppositional practice, for Oedipus too!

The Sophoclean tragedy begins the next phase of Oedipus's life. A plague produces the disruption that characterizes the opening of the narrative; for the plague to end, the murderer of Laius has to be cast out of Thebes. With the retardations that characterize the hermeneutic, the remainder of this play deals with gradual coming to knowledge, establishing who perpetrated the crime. The knowledge that Oedipus is both murderer and incestuous husband to his mother provides the solution to the initial enigma. Consequently, Oedipus blinds himself and departs from the city. This second narrative begins precisely where the Proppian model end. It centres around a search for knowledge and seeks to reveal those things that happened before the opening of the narrative.

Unlike the emphasis on action in the Proppian model, emphasis shifts to thought, to dealing with cognitive puzzles, to finding answers to questions. This quest for knowledge is that which detective narratives follow far more than a Proppian structure. Hermeneutic codes drive this narrative. Mulvey suggests that this searching for knowledge which reveals such horror and self-knowledge, also offers a metaphorical journey into the Unconscious, which then paves the way for redemption. Unlike the first Oedipal story of patriarchal law, no attempt to pose closure exists. The solution of this problem, the lack of knowledge replete, does not mark the closure of Oedipus's story.

The Sophoclean *Oedipus at Colonus* deals with the end of Oedipus's life. Responding to questioning by the chorus, Oedipus retells his life story and recounts how he comes to terms with his fate, his death and with issues of inheritance. This does not replay patriarchal law, particularly as his sons are cursed. At the end he is ready for death purged by suffering.

Within Oedipus's life story we have three narratives, but beyond these are yet other narratives, the pre-Oedipal ones which account for why his father, Laius, wanted to destroy him, or the one that offers his mother's history to account for Oedipus's life trajectory and its complications. Post-Oedipal narratives retell the fratricidal war of the sons he curses. The narratives do not exist separately and exclusively. Yet the Oedipal scenario we replay is the one contained in the action codes of the Proppian model. Freud chose to understand

the law of desire by naming the Oedipal scenario. The discourse contained in that speaks the concerns of a particular person, of a particular discipline, of a moment in European history. The power of the discourse emanated from its inscription as 'natural'. It remains the core text for much of psychoanalysis, but to remind ourselves of the rest of the Oedipal myth is to remind ourselves of the other potential discourses and structures that can be picked up on as cultural metaphors in the same way. They offer important opportunities for restructuring our narratives.

According to Barthes, myth imposes stasis on history and conceals contradiction. To Levi-Strauss, myth functions to explain and maintain the status quo. Under Propp's scrutiny the folktale was also revealed to ensure the maintenance of order. These theorists describe narrative as functioning to ensure closure and to emphasize order.

8. Between the beginning and the end?

Leaving aside the other stages of Oedipus's life and returning to the Proppian model, here narrative offers a closure that is static, one that restores the initial stasis that binds the narratives described by Turner.

The story is bounded at both ends by an implicit or explicit assertion of synchronic order. The narrative itself, however, represents a complex mediation of this order, necessitated by the eruption of conflict and confusion ... of the original synchronic order" (Turner in Mulvey, 1989a:170).

So if one acknowledges the stasis of the beginning and the ending of the narrative, it is the middle section that is active that allows desire and disruption; this section allows the unspeakable to be spoken, it enables those issues that conflict with the codes of the law, those actions that are the domain of the repressed id, to be acted out, to escape control. The final section has to close in and to harness this disorder and return it to a controlled, stable position.

Yet, it is the middle section of the Proppian narrative that offers numerous possibilities. It is here that the potential for change exists in the same way that the carnival offers scope for subversion. Just as the carnival

celebrated a temporary liberation from the prevailing myth and the established order, it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges and norms of prohibitions (Bakhtin, 1968:47).

The carnival offers a liminal phase, where laws are converted. The closing of the carnival marks the return of the law, but inherent in this threshold are other potential closures. There is no guarantee that the return to repression will be successfully completed, in fact to the contrary. Just as the rites of carnival can offer those on the verge of political consciousness with such a liminal moment to act out their intentions and desires and activate greater historical events, similarly narratives can allow some of this liminal experience to offer a closure that is different, one that draws from those moments of rebellion of the middle section.

For narratives to exist as more than a safety valve for discontent, they need to pose different trajectories, ones that do not accept stasis, that might also pose political and historical contexts. By questioning the symbolic, by posing endings without closure these narratives have potential to be politically socially significant.

If narrative, with the help of avant-garde principles, can be conceived of ending that is not closure, and the state of liminality as politically significant, it can question the symbolic, and enable myth and symbols to be constantly revalued (Mulvey, 1989a:175).

By invoking those later scenarios experienced by Oedipus, we are able to emphasize hermeneutic scenarios, where coming to knowledge and understanding is the focus of the narrative. Oedipus had to deal with the horrors of self-knowledge. This narrative structure is not new and has been employed both as the models for investigative genres and in many politically intentioned film, from Soviet Realism and feminist film to Third Cinema.

Films also mirror what Oedipus did at Colonus. He told his story; filmmakers retell narratives. The retelling that Freud considered the compulsion to repeat is evident here too.

These understandings I believe are useful for an examination for the type of films that I referred to in the beginning. In both *Mississippi Masala* and *On the Wire* the openings offer moments of stasis, while the middle sections explore the areas of potential disruption and excess. In both cases the conclusions that are constructed are not 'naturalized' or conservative conclusions. What is exciting about them is that they begin to construct stories around transitional phases where social change is given the ideological force of order, which can be integrated into a new expectation of normality. What they do is symbolically represent moments of social change, moments of social change relating to oppression, the aftermath of colonialism and of reactionary power relations within these societies. They construct the 'abnormal' back into a sense of an order that is different from, but clearly subject to, the law.

9. The films

These films, neither boasting mainstream directors, both by women, offer pertinent texts to look at narratives that are provocative in their construction. The description offered below is deliberately schematic and among other aspects, it overlooks the context politically which is vital to its impact. Neither does the description attempt to trace the richness of detail and nuance.

9.1 *On the Wire*

The film focuses on the woman protagonist, Aletta. It opens when her husband, Wouter, is throwing a branch for his dog; he is in the veld, unconstrained, happy. He returns to his house which is surrounded by a wire fence. Our first glimpse of his wife is as he sees her: at his home and surrounded and encapsulated in her home through the grids of the wire fence. It is this thematic use of wire that the title suggests which recurs throughout the film: wire that divides and marks the separation. Beyond is the 'Other'. Here significantly, the woman Aletta is 'other' to her husband.

Subsequently they sit down for lunch which is preceded by the reading of a passage from the Bible, one that talks unequivocally of division, either corruption or goodness,

addressing the idea of a house being divided against itself. This division gradually manifests itself, between the couple, between the servant and employer. This is suggested only at this stage by the awkward framing. Then a harmony is restored when their black servant, Lizzie, who has been a mother figure to Wouter, serves them. Home from the Permanent Force for a week, Wouter is restless and feels compelled to return to his mates for the evening.

The film begins with this disruption, one between husband and wife, a union which has brought no children, one where there is a sense of alienation, of being outside the symbolic bliss that is meant to accompany the successful completion of the Oedipal scenario. In *On the Wire* the initial disruption relates to a breakdown in the marital relationship, with the suggestion later that the wife, Aletta, is unprepared to have children.

At another level there is an enormous sense of alienation for Aletta and her husband, Wouter, that relates to the social conditions of war, apartheid and the abuse of women.

In psychoanalytic terms, it could be assumed that she was reluctant to make good the lack of the phallus by having her own baby, by accepting Wouter as the person who could take the male role. The stasis positions nuptial bliss as normal and desirable. The disruption marks the start of a trajectory that can indeed allow the unspeakable to happen, for the violence and disruption to occur. Wouter and his army mates have raped a black woman. She was stopped for running along a wire fence. Forced first of all to sing (ironically a song that Lizzie sang to him as a child), she is then sadistically gang-raped and murdered. The black woman metaphorically becomes linked to Lizzie, the woman who reared him, a surrogate mother. Here we have the Oedipal horrors of incestuous relations with the 'mother'. He is the man. Women are other and, in his culture, so are blacks. Hence the enormous paradox of the mother being twice outside – the fear of castration doubled in Freudian terms.

Wouter's recall of these sadistic pleasures leads him to cajole his wife into allowing him to treat her gradually in a similar way. In the scene where he returns from his mates, he watches Aletta brushing her hair. Significantly, her Afrikaans song is about being on an island, reinforcing the theme of division. What would be considered sexually aberrant in the context of Aletta's experience occurs: a sexuality unfolds that defies the norms of conventional patriarchal law. From cajoling her to say "fuck", Wouter's actions push other boundaries that culminate in Wouter raping her, with her hands bound by wire.

From the fragments of a torn photograph, Lizzie learns of Wouter's treatment of black women and walks out on the couple. The community in which they live, consists of conservative Calvinists, intolerant, hostile and racist. The town is dominated by the white church with its phallic spire. Wouter's self-hate and lack of control spin the couple into direct confrontation with the community. They are rejected by them, divided from them. In a significant scene near the conclusion, it is a drunken and defensive Wouter who throws himself against the fences that surround the farm they are visiting. (It is partially a celebration to mark the completion of this fence.)

Still the end could have brought a closure that returns the couple to their positions within patriarchy. In a climactic scene after this incident, Wouter's attempts at further

humiliation of Aletta meet with her refusal to accede. Wouter, unable to contain his self-hate, shoots himself. This knowledge that he reaches, closely mirrors the Oedipal myth, except that Wouter does not purify himself as did Oedipus.

Aletta is released from this bond, and simultaneously rejects the patriarchal law of the church and the support of the group who banished her. In a final scene, Aletta has shed the flowing dresses that she has been wearing. Dressed in trousers and a long-sleeved shirt she burns the veld near the fence. The hypocritical *dominee* calls to invite her back to the fold. Aletta leaves him on the other side of the fence while she refuses the overtures and explains that she intends destroying the fences, the fences that characterize the patriarchal power, property and fear of others. The narrative has enabled a self-knowledge to take place for Aletta. It has also concluded without the conventional closure. While she is burning and singing, Lizzie returns and smiles when she sees Aletta busy with the burning. For Aletta, the rejection of the trappings of patriarchy are accompanied by the return of the mother figure, creating a form of feminine solidarity at the ending. But the mother figure is also the 'other' in South Africa by her blackness. The liminal positions opened up in the middle section have enabled a closure that does not meet conventional expectations of mainstream cinema.

This type of film will certainly meet with a degree of rejection. To reject the patriarchal law which most people assume 'natural' and with which the cultural norms have encouraged them to identify presents a dilemma for many spectators. Consider the critic's response.

9.2 *Mississippi Masala*

The opening of the film depicts the forced departure of an Indian family from Uganda during the reign of terror of Idi Amin. The father, Jay, has been a progressive lawyer, born in Uganda and "Ugandan". This intrusion to their life marks the disruption that initiates the narrative, one that relates to antagonism between black people and brown people. It is to this life and to the events that took place there that the film frequently refers by means of flashbacks. This period is almost presented as a state of grace, of utopia, from which they were banished. The double narrative structure spans two time periods.

There is a temporal leap of almost twenty years to Greenwood, Mississippi where the family live in an Indian motel owned by a relation. The Hindu customs and traditions prevail in this southern States hick town. It is here that Mina, dissatisfied with her own life in the Indian motel, quite literally bumps into a black carpet cleaner and the relationship between Mina and Demetrius begins. The start of the relationship poses the disequilibrium that begs resolution.

The problems experienced by the couple pertain to differing cultural expectations largely presented by her family. Ironies abound and it is Mina's action that drives the narrative on. This is in contrast to most mainstream films where men generally are responsible for the action codes. Mina is not simply structured as the 'problem' to be removed, the 'princess' to be saved, albeit by marriage. It is Mina who initiates the first phone contact with

Demetrius. She accepts Demetrius's invitation to stay with him at Biloxi beach. It is a sexual encounter that she consciously chooses but which would be unacceptable to her family, to the Hindu community in which she lives. It is at Biloxi beach where male members of her extended family protect their family honour by exposing her relationship.

The extended Indian family set about revenge on Demetrius. This divisive behaviour mirrors attitudes in Uganda. Frequently throughout the film, there are flashbacks to the family's last days, to the father Jay's memories of his 'brother', Okello. This sense of identity and belonging are constantly invoked. Demetrius's family question her Indian identity, she who is from Africa. She describes herself as "masala – a bunch of spices". (None of this description reflects the rich depiction of the family lives of both Mina and Demetrius. The conservative Indian community are irreverently but affectionately represented.)

By ruining his business, Mina's family succeed in driving Demetrius away. Simultaneously, Jay has decided to return to Uganda where he feels he belongs. It is Mina again who does not accept leaving Demetrius without a farewell and who then suggests that they make it together by leaving and starting afresh.

Accordingly on one level one has a simple romance where problems and misunderstandings in the relationship have to be overcome in order to achieve narrative closure. This particular plot follows the expectations of the Oedipal scenario: both Mina and Demetrius have to separate from the home, the symbolic mother; Demetrius indeed has to move away from his relationship of identification with his father and by this separation avoid its castrating effect. Unlike the Oedipal scenario, it is not the man who initiates and drives this action. Away from Greenwood he can develop into the man who has overcome his Oedipal complex accompanied by the possession of a mature woman.

For Mina the Oedipal scenario is more complicated, in the way that Freud suggested this is for girl children. She has a dual relationship where both parents are extremely important. She is attached to her mother and identifies with her. Yet she is separate from her and distanced by her strong bond with her father. Hers is a joint bonding: her father could offer her the phallus, yet by doing that she would be defying her mother with whom she identifies: her mother is also her mirror image. Interestingly enough, she has to leave both of them behind. Her father refuses to bid her farewell; her mother allows the separation. Mina moves into full adulthood and into a position where she leaves behind the Oedipal trajectory of her childhood.

This symbolic union is made all the more interesting if one takes into consideration the remaining Oedipal narratives: the space that is allowed for a coming to knowledge beyond. Mina and Demetrius have not returned to be contained by the law of the patriarch, to the confines of societal and especially racial pressures. They have moved to the position of the 'other' and will have to continue their lives beyond the known confines of their backgrounds.

Then there is her father's trajectory as well, where the angry father (Amin) rejects him, banishes him, makes him an outsider to what he considers his birthright. This process inflames him with a desire to return, to be an insider. It is at the end of the film that he is

able to return to Uganda and to decide not to remain, not in anger, not in despair, but in an acceptance of his status as able to be outside this now. He has been disempowered for twenty years: he has clung onto old dreams of his belonging, both in terms of his relationship with his 'brother', Okello, and to Uganda, to Africa; he has allowed Kinu to be the one who runs a liquor store and make the money to live off; he has accepted the charity of the extended family which is one which he is outside of. Finally purged of his anger and in acceptance, he chooses to leave Africa. He accepts that outsider status. For twenty years he has been closed. Prior to that he was able to take Uganda on its terms. By the end of the film, in the evocative scene where he watches the woman dancing and interacts with the child, he is able to let go. On discovering that his 'brother' had died years ago, he is able also to relinquish that anger, and to be open to a changed life. There is no cathartic closure, but a potential to actively engage in life once again.

Mississippi Masala does not have a single narrative and both of these end with an openness that rejects the patriarchal and social expectations of conservative narratives. The ending heralds social change and a rejection of narrow ideologies.

10. Conclusion

When I saw *On the Wire*, I objected to the review by Scott. Subsequently, I was intrigued at the manner in which the audience in Nairobi, described by Gevisser, replayed the initial disruption of *Mississippi Masala*. The rejection of this film in Trinidad focused my attention on another instance of the manner in which the experience of the film by the audience is linked to specific expectations and presuppositions. I can only speculate about the reasons for this (for here too there is no closure). Each of these examples are underpinned by the spectator's desire for a scenario that confirms their sense of what is appropriate, for the myth that 'naturalizes' their beliefs. By not meeting such expectations, the narratives are drawing on aspects of disruption characteristic of the middle section of narrative, the inherent transgressions and liminal positions that permeate the carnival. These films are examples of narrative structures that do not return the released trespassers to their patriarchal and traditional origins. This shift in resolution is sharp and refreshing. Perhaps the later parts of the Oedipal myths open ways to consider potential narrative forms and offer ways in which to reconceive aspects of spectatorship which can allow and speak for social change.

Bibliography

- Anon. 1990. *On the Wire* (British -16m). *Variety*: 35, Dec. 31.
- Bakhtin, M. 1968. *Rabelais and his World*. Cambridge, Mass. : MIT.
- Barthes, R. 1970. *S/Z*. Eng. Trans. London : Cape.
- Bordwell, D. & Thompson, K. 1985. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York : Knopf.
- Davies, G. Teaching about Narrative 1978-1979. *Screen Education*, 29:56-77. Winter.
- Doane, M.A. 1988. Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body. In: Penley, C. *Feminism and Film Theory*. London : RKP/BFI. p. 216-228.
- Gevisser, M. 1992. *Mississippi Masala* Gets Them Hot and Bothered. *Weekly Mail*: 28, June 26 – July 2.
- Lacan, J. 1977. *Ecrits*. London : Tavistock Press.
- Metz, C. 1981. History: Discourse: A Note on Two Voyeurisms. In: Caughie, J. *Theories of Authorship*. London : Routledge and Kegan Paul. p. 225-231.

- Metz, C. 1975. The Imaginary Signifier. *Screen*, 16(2):14-76. Summer.
- Mulvey, L. 1973. Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16(3):6-18, Autumn.
- Mulvey, L. 1989a. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London : Macmillan.
- Mulvey, L. 1989b. Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946). In: Mulvey, L. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London : Macmillan. p. 29-38.
- Propp, V. 1958. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Texas : University of Texas.
- Scott, S. 1991. Bleak and Harrowing Tale Set in South Africa. *Daily News*, Tonight Section: 2, May 1.
- Steen, R. 1990. Opening Night Bombs Threaten *Masala* Release in Trinidad. *Hollywood Reporter*, 313(43):33.
- Wollen, P. 1976. *North by North-West: A Morphological Analysis*. *Film Form*, 1(1):20-44. Spring.

University of Natal (Durban)

