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BeauKhoo Exceptions: A Reply to Olivia Khoo

Olivia Khoo
'Lounging with a Big Mac in One Hand and Freud by My Side'
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Olivia Khoo's review of Screen Memories [1] is evenhanded, sometimes to the point of exasperation -- it is a strange case when the author wishes that the reviewer had not reined in so many of her cavils. Her appraisal is also marred by several misprisions and errors which are all the more surprising, given her otherwise acute close reading of my book.

My occupation tends to render my methodology, and occasionally my person, open to exuberant armchair analysis -- more often than not exuberantly wide of the mark. In this vein, Olivia Khoo is assured that my title animadverts to Freud's 1899 essay, the thesis of which I then supposedly 'invert' in aid of suturing the essays together, culminating with my 'particular' concern over the appropriateness or inappropriateness of screening the Holocaust.

I regret to report that the Grand Syntagma/Master Critical Strategy espied by Khoo is chiefly of her devising, not of my own. The title was conceived in a flash as a pun. A psychoanalyst must aver that a pun's derivation is never simple, but my conscious associations after that intuitive burst hearkened more to Bertram Lewin's later work on the 'dream screen' [2] than to Freud's elucidations during his career.

The collection, originally submitted to Columbia University Press, was nearly a third longer, and was differently ordered. The final sequence of the essays is as much, if not more due to Louise Waller's judicious editing as my own contriving. Nor can I admit any intention, in the concluding review of Enemies: A Love Story, to probe the viability of Holocaust cinema, fictive or documentary. The problem is certainly worthy of study; I have addressed it in a recent review [3] of Yosefa Lofshitzky's commendable collection, Spielberg's Holocaust, [4] but not in Screen Memories.

In asserting that I believe 'viewers find Hollywood films (like Casablanca) so appealing precisely because they are formulaic', Khoo skims a reasonably nuanced argument. Her precis of my essay on The Maltese Falcon similarly omits comment upon a rather rigorous analysis of that film, as well as a deal of reflection on the hard-boiled genre it contains. Instead, she chiefly reprises opening remarks on the
overdetermined pleasures of detective fiction/film, which for the most part reprises work done by others.

While my reading of *Casablanca* and *The Maltese Falcon* does largely proceed 'within an Oedipal paradigm', Oedipality in cinema doesn't constitute a central theoretical focus, psychoanalytic or otherwise, of my discourse, as Khoo attempts to claim. The reader will actually find more pre-Oedipal than Oedipal interpretation in *Screen Memories* (inter alia).

Contra Khoo, I never profess, in or out of my book, to be an 'orthodox Freudian analyst'. On any number of scores, I would be denied admittance into the ever shrinking circle of high-church shrinks, if only -- as clearly stated -- by virtue of incorporating non-Freudian analytic concepts (notably Sullivanian) and non-analytic paradigms (notably Buddhism) into my work, as well as 'ordinary' Freudian parameters. Such differences may seem trivial to outsiders, but they translate into a very different way of treating patients than the echt-Freudian's stony abstinence. ('He must be alive . . .', said a comedian of such a gent, 'Who ever heard of a dead man with an answering service?'.)

**Pace** Khoo, 'Reel Significations' is hardly the only 'theory-dominated' chapter of *Screen Memories*. To the avowed exclusion of Lacanian dogma, I have less obtrusively and less didactically conflated a variety of other film theoretical perspectives/practises with psychoanalytic strategies throughout *Screen Memories*, particularly in the essays written since my first exposure to academic film study in the early 80s. Such, indeed, is the central thrust of my enterprise.

(By the by, Khoo seems unaware -- or her review doesn't register -- that a third of *Screen Memories* has been reprinted unchanged from my 1975 study, *The Movies On Your Mind*. [5] Republication of these lengthy excerpts was undertaken because of requests by many academics and clinicians to obtain this out-of-print material. The earlier essays are necessarily less 'theoretical'. They have been suitably updated in afternotes to reflect the impact of subsequent academic discourse.)

Unless Khoo has once again successfully plumbed the depths of my psyche to unpack an unconscious agenda I wasn't aware of, I own no overriding preoccupation with wrinkling out the negative impact of Hollywood 'sensationalist conventions' (in various genres) upon 'community' values. (Incidentally, Khoo never spells out what might be specifically American about the alleged community she thinks I am trying to alert or protect; it seems to be implicitly middleclass and middlebrow).

So far am I from whistle blowing on this score that I specifically commend -- and extend -- Michael Wood's seminal insights into the derisive attack upon conformist American heartland morality by 'trash' horror films. [6] The phrase 'American values', which Khoo mistakenly attributes to my use in one sense, is actually deployed in aid
of elaborating upon Wood's arguments -- i.e., 'cruel cinema has been waxing exuberantly nihilistic about sacrosanct American values for some time'. [7]

What Khoo may be processing is my concern, from a noncombative socialist/humanist perspective, [8] with the corrosive impact of multinational corporate capitalist practise upon sundry socio-cultural institutions; specifically upon contemporary cinematic style and content; and ultimately upon the very constitution of the psyche itself. This complex problem, I submit, is hardly native to the 'American community', nor did it originate in America. (Although I can well believe that Hollywood mainstream cinema has been one instrument amongst others which has helped, however 'unconsciously', to forge a worldwide hegemonic consensus on a panoply of dubious values and propositions grounded in the dehumanizing ethos of late-Twentieth century capitalism.)

As regards Khoo's comments upon my 'undisguised disapprobation' of Rambo and Psycho, she is unambivalently true about the former, and wrong about the latter. I do take Hitchcock to task over 'issues of filmic responsibility', as Khoo notes, but my essay indicates an immense regard for Hitchcock's art and psychological complexity, which in the case of Psycho is rendered ambivalent by his shameless manipulation of the audience's voyeurism and vulnerability while taking a high moral tone.

I was not the first to use the term 'weird' cinema with reference to the horror and science fiction genres. I did indeed coin the term 'cruel' cinema to characterize a horror subgenre which the Alien essay anatomizes at some length. Whether one agrees or not with said anatomy, it's hardly as 'imprecise' as Khoo avows.

Various errata: My opening essay is entitled 'Reel Significations: An Anatomy of Psychoanalytic Film Criticism', not 'An Anatomy of Psychoanalysis'. Verena Tarrant's father, in The Bostonians, novel and film, is 'Selah' -- not 'Stella'. Spielberg's Always is an adaptation of the 1943 movie, A Guy Named Joe. It was scripted by Dalton Trumbo from an original story by Chandler Sprague and David Boehm, not -- as Khoo states -- from a John Steinbeck novel.

Finally (recalling Churchill's mot to the effect that one doesn't help one's dignity much by standing upon it), I must take a jot of umbrage over Khoo's assertion that my work 'will not change the face of film theory or clinical practise'. I have never had any major cosmetic designs upon film theory (whose practitioners now seem as destined for the list of endangered species as psychoanalysts). However, The Movies On Your Mind was recognized in clinical circles as the first book-length 'treatment' of cinema by a workaday shrink. It afforded this liveliest of arts the same serious consideration analysts since Freud have brought to their exploration of fiction, poetry, and drama.

A small thing, but mine own.
New York, USA

Footnotes


7. *Screen Memories*, p. 166.

8. Voiced most notably in the essays on *Alien* ('Reimagining the Gargoyle'), and 'high concept' cinema ('On The McMovie: Less is Less at the Simplex').