

Films from the Couch: Film Theory and Psychoanalysis

Pedro Sangro Colón

Facultad de Comunicación. Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca (Spain).

Correspondence: Pedro Sangro Colón. Facultad de Comunicación. Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca. Henry Collet, 90-98. 37007 Salamanca (Spain).

e-mail: sangro@upsa.es

Received 6 November 2007; accepted 29 November 2007

Summary

Different disciplines have contributed to weaving a theory of psychoanalysis in the cinema: ranging from the loans from anthropology and experimental psychology, to proposals belonging to the specific sphere of film theory, such as Filmology, Text Analysis or Feminist Theory in films. In all cases, the aim is to establish a relationship between the significance structure that governs the cinema and psychology, so as to confirm that the cinema's system of representation is modelled on our unconscious psychological apparatus, as was explained by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, among others. The arrival of psychoanalysis in film thought forges the idea that considers the cinema as an auxiliary psychological device capable of making us subjects and submerging us in the emotions in play in the conflicts proposed by any audiovisual story.

Keywords: Cinema, Psychoanalysis, Identification, Filmology, Significant.

Loans for a theory of psychoanalysis in the cinema

Psychoanalysis is a discipline started by Sigmund Freud (Figure 1) which studies the *unconscious* in all its manifestations. As a therapeutic method, it attempts to bring to the surface repressed mental material, thus giving the psychoanalyst the ability to reproduce conflicts from the patient's past in order to point out unconscious desires manifested through signs linked to processes of satisfaction belonging to childhood. We can point out a first relationship between this discipline and film theory in the use that certain analysts make of the filmography of the directors they study, subjecting the film makers' work to a kind of psychoanalysis session aimed at following the biographical tracks left by the authors in order to unmask the unconscious desires of their personality (supposedly latent in the stills). Such is the case, for example, in Donald Spoto's work: *Alfred Hitchcock. The Dark Side of Genius*¹. Without underestimating this type of analysis at all, it really involves contributions that are closer to exquisite critique than to the cinema's theory of psychoanalysis.

Broadly speaking, psychoanalysis also tackles the way in which we become subjects through the

study of the basic structures of desire that underlie all human activity. Giving attention to this second perspective (broader and more ambitious), we should not be surprised at the swift interest these objectives awake in film theory in the 1970s (coinciding with the popular boom caused by the re-readings that Jacques Lacan made of Sigmund Freud's work), especially if we recognise that, in its fictional representation mechanism, the cinema as a spectacle needs to have an individual socially and psychologically involved in it: the spectator. Hence, through the eyes of psychoanalysis, film theory will tend to consider the cinema, not as an object, but rather as a process, shifting the analysis of the meaning of the films towards the study of the phenomena responsible for producing the subjectivity that occurs during its viewing. The spectator thus becomes the main character in the new lines of research proposed.

The early contribution of Hugo Münsterberg's work, *The film: A Psychological Study*² (Figure 2), published in 1916, already foreshadowed the idea that the meaning of a film is the result of the mental activity that the spectator carries out during the showing of the film through being subjected to a whole variety of



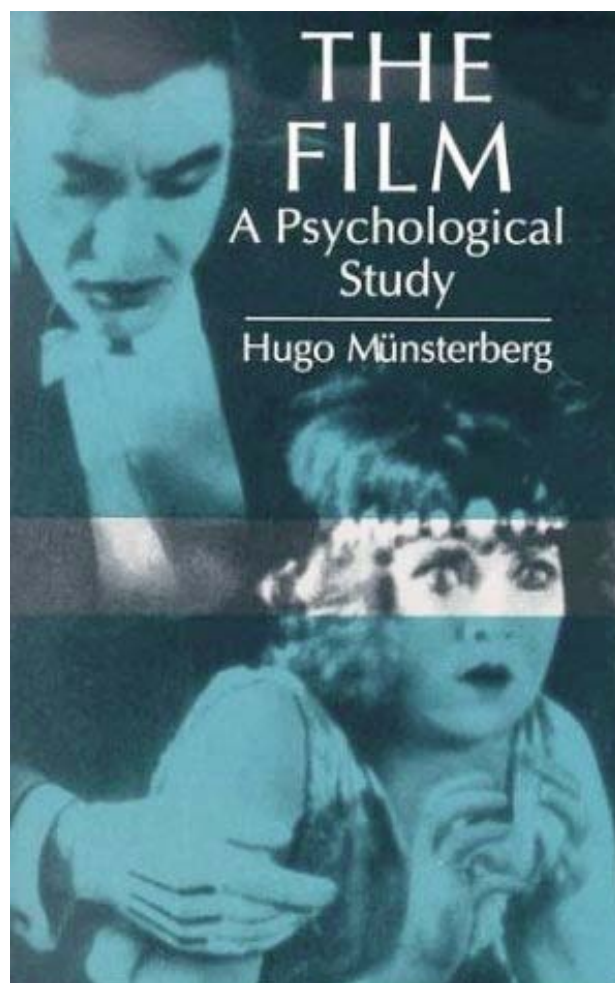
Figure 1: Sigmund Freud

reactions by the machinery that the cinema sets in motion (camera, projector and hall). Although primitive, this approach seems prophetic if we move forward three decades to focus on the subsequent findings of filmology, a discipline inaugurated by Gilbert Cohen-Séat³ in the mid 1940s, whose first and foremost objective would be the study of what many authors have come to call the *film situation*, a concept that the theoretician Francisco Casetti defines as “the set formed by the screen, the hall and the spectator, in which processes develop such as the recognition and deciphering of what is being seen, abandoning oneself to enjoyment of the story, identifying with the fringe characters, fantasy, personal re-invention, etc.”⁴.

Etienne Soriau, in the study *L'univers filmique*⁵, was to give filmology its own terminology and, at the same time, promote the creation of the Institute of Filmology, in which the cinema would, for the first time in its history, be considered an academic subject. In its circle, studies belonging to experimental psychology would be carried out (mainly based on the multiplication of tests), dealing, above all, with the study of the psychological and physiological conditions of the spectator while watching the films. The different proposals would soon find their echo in the founding of the journal related to the discipline (*Revue Internationale*

de Filmologie), in which a large number of essays devoted to this topic can be found. For example, Michotte wrote a pioneer study in this field: *La Participation émotionnelle du spectateur à l'action représentée à l'écran*⁶. This tackles the study of the strategies that allow the spectator to forget his/her own existence while watching the film, and take on the identity of the characters living in the realm of fiction. The main idea of the study defends that the relative immobility of the subject watching, the comfortableness of the seat, the darkness and isolation of the cinema, all help the spectators to lose awareness of their own bodies and focus all their attention on what is being shown on the screen. In the same line, Serge Lebovic in *Psychanalyse et cinéma*⁷ poses the closeness of the film medium to dreams. In his study he concludes that both coincide in their principally visual nature, as well as in the absence of a main cause that links the different sequences of images.

But, above all, the essay by Edgar Morin, *Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire* (1956)⁸ (Figure 3), is the best in-depth study of all the psychological processes

Figure 2: *The film: A Psychological Study*

and transfers that take place between the spectator and the film material in the *film situation*. Thus, in trying to establish a relationship with certain phenomena enunciated by Anthropology, his proposal incorporates this discipline to the sphere of studies on the cinema. Basically, Morin's approach starts from the idea that the meaning of films (which the author calls *the imaginary*) is the result of the symbiosis of the image on the screen and the imagination of the person contemplating it. All this leads, once again, to setting up a parallelism between the cinema and dreams in which, for the first time, the importance of the process of *identification* with one's fellow creatures (i.e., the coincidence of our needs, hopes, wishes, obsessions and fears with those of another person) is described as a manifestation inherent to every subjective psychological phenomenon and, therefore, also present in the reception of films. Just as it is explained in anthropology, when faced with the impotence of not being able to actually participate in the conflict shown in the fictional account, the spectator assumes a regressive situation that favours the coming to the surface of his/her feelings, thus activating an intense and deeply affective participation that triggers and intensifies the

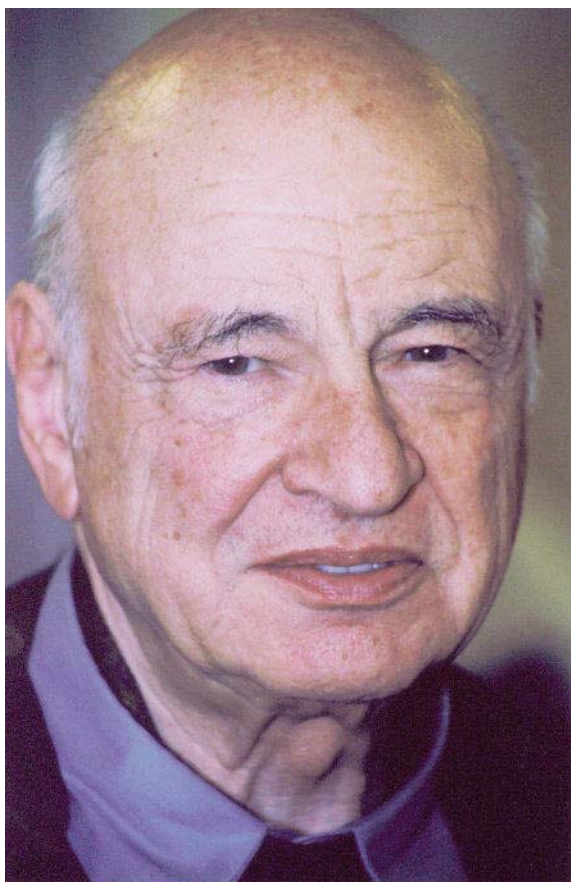


Figure 3: Edgar Morin

phenomenon of identification with the characters. This pioneer idea puts forward, as we shall see below, some of the foundations on which the future psychoanalytic study of the cinema is laid down.

Psychoanalysis and double identification with the cinema

Since 1975, when a famous text by Stephen Heath^{9a,9b} in the contentious journal *Screen* openly admitted that psychoanalysis is an essential tool for solving the problem of the psychological identity of the cinema spectator, contributions concerning this topic have not ceased. In general, most of the new approaches advocate that the cinema is modelled on our unconscious psychological system as was explained by Jacques Lacan¹⁰ (Figure 4), so that the situation the spectator confronts during the showing of the film reproduces the key moments prior to the forming of his/her *self*.

Turning again to Morin's ideas, and attempting to show precisely that the film significance structure works analogously to the psychological structure, Jean-Louis Baudry, in his study, *L'Effet cinéma*¹¹ was the first to open the way to reflection on the concept that he called *the base mechanism (dispositif)* –physically comparable to the film camera. His study would lead to the discovery and enunciation of a *double identification* experienced by the cinema spectator, very similar to that undergone by the individual during the process of the forming of his/her personality as in the Freudian model described by Lacan. Baudry (establishing parallelism with psychoanalytic theory) starts from the idea that the individual, in early childhood, goes through a stage in which objects and subjects have not been independently situated. Seeking and identification are inseparable during this stage, thus submerging the child in a confusion subject to the lack of differentiation between the *self* and the *other*. Subsequently, what is known as the *mirror stage* will make it possible to establish a differentiated relationship between subjects and objects, precisely through the gaze (as Lacan suggests, at this time the baby discovers him/herself in the mirror together with the *other* – the mother who has him/her in her arms-forming in the imagination the body unit). We are, for the first time, facing the *primary identification* of an individual with an image. Thus, by comparing this process with the one experienced by the spectator in front of the screen, Baudry explains that the cinema can be considered a *basic mechanism* capable of reproducing the mirror stage in which primary identification arises,

forcing spectators to constantly confirm their role of *subject*, that is, someone who, taking him/herself as a starting point, organizes the world and their own experience. Thus, privileged contemplative observation of fiction leads them to feel like the focal point of the representation, and we can therefore speak of an analogy between the situation of the individual (in front of the mirror) and that of the cinema spectator (in front of the screen). In both cases we are before a square, limited, confined surface, which allows the objects of the world to be isolated, making them into *total objects*; furthermore, similarities are established between the child's state of motor inability and the spectator's position required by the cinema mechanism; finally, in both situations sight acquires a major role.

Continuing with the process of constitution of our personality, Freud explained how the mirror stage was followed by the *Oedipus crisis*, characterised by a set of conflicts deriving from the discovery of identity and, with it, the limitations that this finding entailed for the satisfaction of full desire. Although this feeling of frustration will never be totally overcome –the psychoanalyst explained– throughout life the conflicts deriving from the constitution of the personality will be solved thanks to the secondary identifications afforded by the cultural learning leading to the maturity of the individual.

In the cinema, it is precisely the showing of the conflict underlying the story that allows the spectator to become attached to it and recognize it as part of his/her own. Hence, the representation of the opposition between desire and the law peculiar to classic audiovisual drama constitutes a cultural experience with a strong power of identification, thanks to its possibility of putting the *other* into the scene as the representation of a fellow creature. Thus, the secondary identifications that come from the screen invite the cinema spectator to participate in the hopes, desires, anguish, vices and defects of the characters. The sentimental attachment of the spectators to them by recognizing their conflict as their own allows them to put themselves in the place of the characters and, for a moment, *be them* (regardless of the moral qualities that define the fictional universe they live in). Discourse strategies such as the manipulation of the planning (size, movement, angle, duration and sharpness of each shot), handling of focus (i.e., from the visual, cognitive and ideological point of view that each placing of the camera establishes), or the use of the diegetic gazes of the characters, are some of the



Figure 4: Jacques Lacan

mechanisms within reach of the film makers that govern the processes of identification of the spectators in film. Taking refuge in this reasoning, Baudry's thesis posits that the necessary condition for being able to speak of *secondary identification* with the film (in short, identification with the fictional character appearing on the screen) is the existence of a *primary identification* that would correspond to what the camera sees.

Films as a significant device

From the above argument a key idea is derived: the major contribution of psychoanalytic theory to the cinema is that of its consideration as an auxiliary psychological device capable of making us subjects. Thus, psychoanalysis approaches the cinema medium as a significant device, rather than anything else. Hence, from the 1970s on, there was a shifting of interest from the study of the situation in the film to that of the significant underlying elements in particular films, now considered as texts for analysis that make possible the secondary identification of the spectators.

Paradigmatic in this field is the work by Raymond Bellour *L'Analyse du film*¹², or the study by Thierry Kuntzel *Le travail du film*¹³, in which, through analysing several of Alfred Hitchcock or Fritz Lang's films, the authors observe that classic films bring into

action a significant structure subject to different procedures of discourse action (which the authors call *figures*) on which the different possibilities of significance are negotiated. The first one, proposed by Bellour, is the *rhyme*, which occurs when in different films there is a group of settings with identical characteristics in both the formal plane and that of the content. The second figure studied is *substitution*, which is apparent in a figure that makes it possible to facilitate data to the spectator with a view to condensing and changing the information given previously. When we find many settings that break the balance and the correspondences -changing the established order- and introduce new data, we are looking at the figure of the *rupture*. Bellour analyses these figures by comparing the planning used by Alfred Hitchcock in two specific sequences in two of his most emblematic films: the attack on the character Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) in *The Birds* (1963), and when the crop-duster plane goes for Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) in the classic *North by Northwest*, (1959) (Figure 5).

Kuntzel adds another two significant figures: *condensation* and *displacement*, pointing them out as responsible for the structuring of discourse in any film. For his analysis, the author focuses on how the threatening elements are constructed in Fritz Lang's expressionist classic *M (the vampire of Dusseldorf)/M—Eine Stadt einen Morder* (1931) (Figure 6), through the significance exuded by the different appearances of the murderer's shadow. The figure of displacement was analysed in a later study¹⁴, using the film *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932) by Ernest Schoedsack and Irving Pichel, in which the diverse conflicts systematically introduced in its opening are dispersed and disguised throughout the whole of the narration.

What is most important in Bellour and Kuntzel's proposals is that they clearly stress that the underlying structure really lays the foundations of the very existence of the story. Hence, the presence of something that does not fit and the recognition that things seem to be fitting together again, are the two strategies on which the significant structure beneath the production of any story rests. If we now recall that the underlying structure that supports the narration of classic films is comparable to that which supports the process of secondary identification (through which, as we have explained, the individual can come through the oedipal crisis that Lacan spoke of more or less unscathed) we reach the conclusion that the underlying structure in classic narrative films refers us to Oedipus.



Figure 5: *North by Northwest* (USA poster)

The imaginary spectator: desire and genre

Without departing from the research line commented on, we find other studies that have analysed in much greater detail the functioning of some simple structures in film discourse with a view to showing the significant work through which the place the spectator occupies in film diegesis is manufactured. This is the case of Jean-Pierre Oudart's work *La suture*¹⁵ in which the author tries to explain how *field-counterfield* works in films, showing how it incorporates the spectator to the film diegesis. To do so, Oudart takes as a basis that each scene represented on the screen is prolonged (beyond the ideal fourth wall that should enclose it) into a hypothetical space which never lets itself be seen and from which the scene is contemplated. This invisible field coincides with the place the spectator occupies –the *absent one* (*l'absent*)– and what appears on screen (the in-field space) can thus be considered as the *signifier of this absent one*. What the author is making evident is that the *alternation game* (by means of which the signifying chain poses an absence, changes it into a presence and takes advantage of it to close up and knit together) makes it

Figure 6: *M* (German poster)

possible to construct a spectator who, on the one hand, is considered as *absent* in the film, but, at the same time, is also called upon as the element that guarantees the fluidity and fullness of the film (in the same way, as Lacan pointed out, that our unconscious is capable of performing significant activities thanks to the interplay of differences and absences that composes its structure).

Christian Metz's work *Cinema and Psychoanalysis*¹⁶ also inquires into the institution of the seventh art as signifier, as well as the role that the spectator plays in the process of discourse construction. Returning to many of the previous findings relating to the analogy between the oneiric experience and the cinema, Metz develops and explains the concept of cinematic identification, pointing out three specific phenomena that will make it possible to consider the cinema as an *imaginary signifier* in which the spectator is reflected during the viewing of any film. First, with respect to the mirror identification referred to by Baudry (which compared the screen to a mirror), Metz establishes a key difference: the impossibility of the film to reflect the spectator's body. This would explain why the spectator necessarily identifies with the characters (secondary identification) and, at the same time,

with him/herself. Thus, the spectators perceive themselves as something *imaginary*, as a *transcendental subject* on which the whole representation rests (which is expressed, as we have seen, in primary identifications with the eye of the camera). Metz establishes, secondly, the concept of *voyeurism*, understood as a desire to see, characterised by not wanting to touch the object desired, but rather wanting it to carry on being something different and distant. The cinema makes it possible to broaden this separation between desire and object by using the image as material (the image, which is merely an effigy, a shadow, a certification of absence from reality) and by making use of its power to play with its presence and absence through the fluidity of the planning and montage. Finally, the author speaks of the coming to the surface, throughout the process, of a kind of *fetishism*, that is, an admiration for the cinematographic technique itself, exhibited on the plane of the signifier (e.g., the detection of sublime tracking shots in a film, the remote delight in extraordinary settings in a sequence, etc.).

All the resources mentioned have a bearing on the imaginary construction of the cinema spectator, whose psychological coordinates are going to be studied, following the line of the works of Baudry or Metz, by new and varied proposals of legitimate theoretical aspiration. Among all the hodgepodge of emergent reflexive and analytic approaches, we highlight, to conclude, the line of study known as *Feminist Film Theory*, whose files, seen from the distance of the present day, still prevail somewhat in a world obsessed with gender difference when dealing with ways of audiovisual representation. Coinciding with the development of the feminist movement in the 1970s, feminist theory in the cinema would fill the section for psychoanalytic contributions especially with regard to matters referring to the imaginary representation that the cinema, as a signifier, makes of women. Compilations of its ideas can be found in texts such as Constance Penley's *Feminism and Film Theory*¹⁷, or Anette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*¹⁸, which both focus on the study of the textual ways of procedure in the cinema, in order to denounce the discourse model that makes it possible to reveal the unconscious mechanism of gender difference in our culture.

But, undoubtedly, the most representative text of the discipline is Laura Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures*¹⁹, in which the author, taking as a basis her analysis of films such as King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946) (Figure 7), studies the functioning of the

pleasure felt by the spectator during the showing of the film and reaches the conclusion that this can have two possible effects: *scopophilia* (linked to the presence of an object as a source of excitement or desire) and *narcissism* (linked to the presence of an object as source of identification). What the author reveals in both cases is that the mechanism that enables pleasure to be obtained is sight.

From the feminist point of view, the interest of Mulvey's work lies in her emphasis on demonstrating that in classic films (which are taken as the model of institutional representation), it is the man whose gaze continually roves the screen, whereas the woman is looked at by the others, hence the spectator always chooses the hero as an element of identification and the heroine as an element of enjoyment. Therefore, the denouncement by feminist psychoanalysis stresses the fact that the cinema spectator must necessarily go through the male character (through his gaze) in order to take possession of what he desires (generally the female character). All this implies, according to her theory, that generally the cinema can be considered as a spectacle made for men. Mulvey's banner proposal

combatively posits a change through the breaking of the traditional diegetic model of representation in order to achieve a filmic *displeasure* capable of inverting the habits that hide the desire to perpetuate a strict hierarchical structuring of sexes on the screen.

Epilogue: films and their teaching

So far we have made a brief review of cinema theory that blends, without a solution of continuity, with some of Lacan's psychoanalysis precepts. Before concluding, we would like to point out that, apart from the texts, studies and research mentioned, there are many examples of films that, in one way or another, have attempted to materialise these very reflections through the same representation developed in their fictional narration, becoming plausible cinematographic examples of the process of manufacturing the spectator, true examples of the cinema's work as signifier.

Of all the possible films we could mention, we have opted for highlighting, symbolically, only one title, perhaps in the fear of drawing up a list of irremediably inconclusive exemplifying aspirations. We will now mention Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* (1954) (Figure 8), not because of the many analyses that have been made of it, but because of its condition of epistemological cinema story, its strength as a representation capable of explaining the discourse mechanisms that form the spectator's place on the screen and its stimulating staging moulded by the filmic signifier. From the most militant criticism, to the wisest theory, all have coincided in seeing in this film by Hitchcock a brilliant parallelism established between the spectator's situation in the cinema hall and the fictional context of the main character, a photographer confined to a wheelchair, L.B. Jeffries (James Stewart). The phenomena analysed in this study, such as the cinematographic situation, the identification of the spectator generated from his/her privileged position as the main focus of the representation, his/her immersion in the oedipal conflict underlying the deep structure of the story, incorporation as the absent one from the outer field, or the hegemony of the male gaze in the planning that guides desire in classic films, all meet in the inner courtyard of the buildings contemplated by the main character, a true *voyeur* like the cinema spectator.

References

- 1.- Spoto D. *The Dark Side of genius: The life of Alfred Hitchcock*. New York: Little, Brown and Co; 1983.
- 2.- Münsterberg H. *The film: A Psychological Study: The Silent*



Figure 7: *Duel in the Sun* (USA poster)



Figure 8: *Rear Window* (USA poster)

Photoplay in 1916. Nueva York: Dover; 1970

3.- Cohen-Séat G. Essai sur les principes d'une philosophie du cinéma. Notions Fondamentales et vocabulaire de Filmologie. Paris: Nouvelle Édition (PUF); 1958

4.- Casetti F. Teorie del cinema. 1945-1990, Milano: Bompiani; 1993.

5.- Soriau E. L'univers filmique. Paris: Flammarion; 1953.

6.- Michotte A. La Participation émotionnelle du spectateur à l'action représentée à l'écran: Essai d'une théorie. Revue Internationale de Filmologie; 1953; 4(13): 87-96.

7.- Lebovici, S. Psychanalyse et cinéma. Revue Internationale de Filmologie. 1949; 2(5): 49-56.

8.- Morin E. Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire. Paris: Minuit; 1956.

9a.- Heath S. Film and system: Terms of analysis. I. Screen. 1975; 16(1): 7-77

9.b- Heath S. Film and system: Terms of analysis. II. Screen. 1975; 16(2): 91-113.

10.- Lacan, J. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.; 1988.

11.- Baudry, J.L. L'Effet cinéma. Paris: Albatros; 1978.

12.- Bellour, R. L'Analyse du film. Paris: Albatros; 1979.

13.- Kuntzel, T. Le travail du film. Communications. 1972; 19: 25-39.

14.- Kuntzel, T. Le travail du film 2. Communications. 1975; 23: 136-189.

15.- Oudart, J.P. La suture. Cahiers du Cinéma. 1969; 211: 36-39.

16.- Metz, Ch. The Imaginary Signifier Psychoanalysis and the Cinema, Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 1982.

17.- Penley C, editor. Feminism and Film Theory. New York: Routledge; 1988.

18.- Kuhn, A. Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul; 1982.

19.- Mulvey, L. Visual and Others Pleasures. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 1989.