

A journey into the unconscious

A Lacanian study on “The back to the future”

Anoush Masoudi

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Introduction:

Louis Bunuel has written in his autobiography book that he and Salvador Dali tried to make a movie without any logical coherence. They had just one rule: No idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted, he explains the *Un chien Andalou* was a film to be not controlled or analyzed by psychoanalysis.¹

After more than 60 years it seems that this film has been analyzed by lots of film critics from different views and aspects.

Although surrealist films such as *Un chien Andalou* or *Viva La Muerte* by Fernando Arrabal were under the influence of Sigmund Freud's theories, they actually used mechanism of dream as a structure of their images but at the same time these films can easily be analyzed by Freud theories too.

The first signs of psychoanalytic theories are visible in surrealists theories, manifests, films and shows, especially in theories of Anthonin Artaud, French writer, theater director and actor.

Artaud in his important books like *Theater and his double* and *Theater of cruelty* tries to find a way to prevent his work from being stolen away by the Other.

What Artaud wanted was a language that would not only express, but also be "the very flesh and blood of his thought".² Artaud wanted to create a theater or film, which the unconscious of author talks with unconscious of audiences through non-verbal language but violent images, different sounds, exaggerated gestures, body forms and signs. He believes that theater or film need to create its own language, which is completely different from verbal language, what as Jaques Drida and Jerzy Grotowsky say is impossible.

¹ Luis Bunuel :My last breath , USA, 1985 , P:105-106

² Linda Williams: Figures of desire : A theory and analysis of surrealist films, USA , 1992, P:20

Artaud writes about the Film language:

“We are not trying to find an equivalent of the written language in the visual language which is simply a bad interpretation of it, we are trying to bring the very essence of the language and transport the action into a level where every interpretation would become useless and where this action would act almost intuitively on the brain”³

Freud theories about language of dreams as an unusual images had a big influence on film language theories especially in relation with surreal films but his influence, as here we can see, was on the film directors more than film theoreticians. Whereas the reinterpretation of Lacan on Freud’s ideas so fast been accepted and developed by theoreticians and film critics especially in late 1960.

Till end of 1940 just two film theories were playing important roles in Cinema, the Andre Basin ideas on representation of reality, which in cahiers du cinema were published and Sergei Eisenstein Texts and books about dialectic of montage and montages of shock. Eisenstein poses montage as most important element of a film, while for Basin is Image most important element and it is because of their Ideology about representation of reality. For Eisenstein as a Marxist film director not representation of reality, but change it is important.

In 1960 the new film theories raised up and first of all the semiotic of film changed many limits and theories about films.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, Umberto Eco, Christian Metz and Jean Louis Comolli opened new windows in Film Theories and most of them focus on theory of Film Language and system of codes in Films. Meanwhile inspired other theoretician in other fields on Cinema theories, such as Gilles Deleuze with his book Cinema 1 and Cinema 2, Ferdinand De Saussure with his ideas about language and the structure of language and the psychoanalytic theory utilized in recent cinema semiotics has often been inflected by the work of Jacques Lacan.

One of the first persons who adopted Lacan’s theories on his works was Louis Althusser. Althusser as a Structuralist Marxist figured out that the structure of Lacan’s psychoanalysis is in correspondence with his ideas about Structure and the apparatus of the society. The term

³ Antonin Artaud: Collected Works , third Vol , USA, 1993, P:200

refers to the way in which '[m]en are no longer agents actively shaping history, either as individuals or classes, but rather are supports of the process within the structure'⁴.

Also Lacan's idea about language, different orders, Castration, Phallus, Oedipal complex, the system of codes and signs, the big Other and desire of the Other play important role in contemporary film semiotic. Which we can easily see these Terms in works of Althusser, Christian Metz, Umberto Eco, Robert Mc Cabe, Jean Louis Comolli, Allain Miller and Slavoj Zizek.

For example to Metz psychoanalytic film theory is the idea of an imaginary signifier central, he shows in his books that films give us the impression of reality but it's just the illusion of reality⁵, which Pasolini is completely against it. Pier Paolo Pasolini argued against Metz's proposition that there was nothing in the cinema to correspond to phonemes, which would align it to language's dual articulation. Pasolini names the smaller units of cinema 'cinemes', which represent reality, or objects from reality. Through a process of selection and combination cinemes were formed into shots, analogous to language's morphemes. Umberto Eco criticized Pasolini's naivety in supposing that the cinema could articulate an unmediated reality. Rather, Eco argues that reality is represented in the cinema through a system of cultural codes, which are intimately connected to ideology, which is in relation with Lacan's symbolic order⁶.

The third part of Lacan's influence on Film theories begins with Slavoj Zizek.

While before Zizek mostly been used Lacan ideas in "Theory of Films" or "Film – Semiotic", Zizek shows us that we can use Lacan's Theories for analyze of a single film too, it means Lacan's theories have a function as a key idea for understanding the behind and hidden parts of the films. For instance Zizek analyzes with Lacan's theories David Lynch's Lost highway⁷.

Also Zizek begins to understand and read the main stream films with help of Lacan's ideas. He shows that we can begins to read a film as a sign system and behinds of the signs find the real meaning of this film, for instance in Matrix or The Birds.

⁴ Robert Lapsley, Michael Westlake : Film Theory: An introduction, 1988, England, P:6

⁵ Williams, 1992, P:...

⁶ Lapsley and Westlake 1988, P: 45

⁷ Slavoj Zizek : The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway, USA, 2000

The American mainstream movies as commodified productions of capitalism represent falsity and reality together. We can by analysis of the codes and signs and the relations between characters find the hidden desires of not only the characters, but also the directors and the audiences.

Back to the future (Directed by Robert Zemeckis) is one of the most successful American mainstream films in 1985.

Film released on July 3, 1985 grossing over \$389 million worldwide, becoming the highest-grossing film of 1985⁸ and because of its success were made the *Back to the Future 2* and *3* by producers, which makes this film not only a successful movie , but also a key movie in 1980 and 1990.

I try to read this film as an text to analyze the signs and relations between characters through Jaques Lacan's theories. I want to show that the film in not a simple picture about a young teenager, who is embarrassed because of his parents, but also it is a journey into his unconscious to accept his castration.

• ⁸ "[Back To The Future \(2014 re-issue\)](#)". [Box Office Mojo](#). Retrieved October 17, 2014.

Oedipal Triangle and inverted world

The plot of “Back to the future” is so simple : A young teenager boy accidentally is sent to past in a time traveling machine which his friend, Dr. Emmet Brown has invented and must find a way to make his teenage dad and mom marry each other, so he can save his own existence.

The film itself is not as simple as it seems. After the opening scene we see Marty (Michael J. Fox) as a cool and charming teenager, who skates in the streets on his way to high school. Camera follows him in the streets, what shows us that he is the main figure of the film. He acts so self-confident, cool and relaxed. The first supporting role belongs to a beautiful and pretty young girl, Lorraine (Lea Thomson) who is in love with Marty. They talk and flirt, then want to kiss each other but exactly when their lips are so close, they get interrupted by Lorraine’s dad. This scene should be understood as a key. This scene begins like a dream, Marty is so lucky and he passes the streets so fast, his lover is so pretty and a sweet kiss can finish this scene but suddenly dreams fall into reality, “Father” comes and everything ends at this moment. Father (here Lorraine’s Father) steals Marty’s girl and his desire will stay unsatisfied. Father/son conflict is the most important issue of the film.

The second sequence introduces us to Marty’s family and the most significant character, his Father Georg (Christin Glover). His father is a loser and his mom is a depressed alcoholic, his sister is alone and his uncle is in jail. But between his family members his dad is deeply in trouble. George is bullied by his supervisor, Biff Tannen (Thomas .F Wilson) and their relation is exactly a slave- master model. Biff always insults him, kicks him and embarrasses him in front of his family. His mom drinks alcohol and just telling boring stories about her first date with Georg. Obviously they have bad sexual relation too. Georg is embodied as a completely poor loser who can’t do his job, can’t drive car well (while Marty skates so good) and is too stupid as a father. In Marty eyes his dad just fools around, therefore he finds that his dad is his obstacle to success. Because of his dad, he is embarrassed and will not to catch his girlfriend’s love easily. In opposite stays Biff , who is strong (bodily and socially) , rich, successful and respected in society. This question opens: can we see Biff as a big Other or symbolic father?

I will try to answer this question in next chapters. Now I prefer to focus on the structure of Marty's family.

Georg is so poor and miserable, Marty's mother just lives with his memories and alcohol but Marty is a cool, successful guy, who in trouble due to his family. In my view this image is too exaggerated and unreal. Is this image "Real" or more or less a virtual image, which exists just in Marty's mind?

"Lacan lays great importance on the role of Father in psychic structure. He attributes the importance of the OEDIPUS COMPLEX to the fact that it combines in the figure of the father two almost conflicting functions: the protective function and the prohibitive function. He also points to the contemporary social decline in the paternal imago (clearly visible in the images of absent fathers and humiliated fathers) as the cause of current psychopathological peculiarities".⁹

In Lacanian terms there are three different father relating to orders: Symbolic father, Imaginary father and real father. The imaginary father is an imago, the composite of all the imaginary constructs that the subject builds up in fantasy around the figure of the father.

This imaginary construction often bears little relationship to the father as he is in reality. The imaginary father can be construed as an ideal father, or the opposite, as 'the father who has fucked the kid up'.¹⁰

Now it's clearly visible that in the first part of the film we are facing with an imaginary father, who has destroyed Marty's life. Georg is not the Real father or even symbolic father because Marty lives in imaginary order. He still couldn't enter to symbolic order, which I believe will happens throughout his journey, what is not in the future or past but also in his unconscious. But why Marty doesn't want to face with his real father or the function of his symbolic father or as Lacan names "the name of father"? To answer this question at first I must explain Marty's oedipal complex and his fear of castration. Because in the first part of film he has not accepted his castration and tries to escape from it, although he must accept it, otherwise he will go toward his death.

⁹ Dylan Evans: An introductory dictionary of Lacanian psychoanalysis, USA , 1996 , p64

¹⁰ Evans, 1996,P:64

Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud's Oedipus complex only has been written in 1951, before this time Lacan had the same idea like Freud but in 1951 Lacan developed Freud's theory. "in Lacan's view, the subject always desires the mother, and the father is always the rival"¹¹

If we accept this idea that Georg is Marty's rival in his imaginary order, then we can easily understand, why he completely destroys his father's real image and creates an absolutely wrong picture of him. Because still Marty couldn't accept his castration and tries to be his mom's phallus although he knows that he has not this imaginary phallus. He faces with this absence exactly in the first part of the film, when he can't kiss his girlfriend because of the power of father, but being faced with this absence and accepting it are two different things.

In the Film we see, when all of the family's member are sitting around the table, Marty's mom wants to talk about the first date which she and Georg had but Georg is watching TV and doesn't care about Marty's mom, exactly at this moment she looks at Marty and talks about Marty instead of his dad. This scene more than anything is Marty's imaginary dream about his relationship with his mom in a triangle Lacanian Oedipus complex.

Marty creates an imaginary picture of his dad and wants to show us he has not the phallus too, because in this order Marty has understood that his mom is incomplete and needs to be satisfied but who will be possible to satisfy the mother here? A man, who has real phallus. Marty knows that in the Real his dad has the phallus and he is the big fucker as Lacan says but he doesn't want to accept it, not accept his inability to satisfy his mom, because of this he has anxiety, the anxiety of acceptance the absence of phallus.

'Anxiety, as we know, is always connected with a loss ... with a two-sided relation on the point of fading away to be superseded by something else, something which the patient cannot face without vertigo' (Lacan, 1956b:273). If Marty wants to solve his problem and win against his anxiety he at first must face with his castration, then he must accept his father's role not only as an imaginary father, but also as a symbolic and real father. For this reason he is searching in his mind to find a way to solve this problem.

I want to bring forward this argument that Dr. Brown is Marty's life's drive, who tries to make it easier for Marty to pass imaginary order and enter to symbolic and then Real order. Marty doesn't want to accept it in his conscious therefore he sees everything as an accident.

One of the most important signs of this journey in his unconscious is his dream. We see Marty is sleeping then he wakes up and his journey begins. In this moment Marty is called by Dr. Brown and wakes up then he goes to meet the doctor, but as an accident the terror groups attack

¹¹ Evans, 1996 : P130

Dr. Brown and kill him. Now Marty should himself alone goes toward of his unconscious and face with his anxiety to find a way to solve his problem. As Lacan says, imaginary order is a level, in which the person is so narcissist but now Marty should change his position and fight for his life. Then I see this scene as the entrance of the second part of the film and at the same time his entering to the Symbolic order.

Son, Mother and symbolic father

In the second part of film *Marty* travels to past, exactly thirty years ago, when his parents are just two teenagers. At the same city and same places he is facing with a big trouble. He has an accident with the same car that 30 years ago his dad had an accident with it. He saves his dad's life, who is a teenager at this time, so shy and inept. The driver is Marty's grandfather, father of his mom. He brings Marty to his home and there Marty meets his teenager mom. I place importance on this scene as a key scene to realizing Marty's Oedipus complex.

His mom at the first moment falls in love with Marty and Marty likes her too but he can't go further with this relationship. This scene shows us that Marty still wants to be an imaginary phallus for his mother, although now he is aware of absence of this imaginary phallus. Dylan Evans emphasize about this relation:

“In the first time of the Oedipus complex, then, the child realizes that both he and the mother are marked by a lack. The mother is marked by lack, since she is seen to be incomplete; otherwise, she would not desire. The subject is also marked by a lack, since he does not completely satisfy the mother's desire. The lacking element in both cases is the imaginary PHALLUS. The mother desires the phallus she lacks, and (in conformity with Hegel's theory of DESIRE) the subject seeks to become the object of her desire; he seeks to be the phallus for the mother and fill out her lack. At this point, the mother is omnipotent and her desire is the law. The child is now confronted with the realization that he cannot simply fool the mother's desire with the imaginary semblance of a phallus—he must present something in the real.”¹²

Opposite of Freud, Lacan's bring this argument that Oedipus complex is not a dual relationship, but also has a triangle structure: Mother, Child and Phallus, which just father has it. In this structure as well not only the child wants to be his mother's phallus, but also mother has a desire to be with his son, what we can easily see in “Back to the future” while Marty's mom comes to his son's room and want to kiss him , it's kinds of dream for both of them but this dream will be destroyed by the name of the father.

¹² Evans,1996,P:131

In this moment of film Marty begins to accept this lack and this refer to his dad as a guy who has/can have this phallus and he can satisfy his mom's desire, then he tries to find a way to unite them again. But how can Marty relocate his role with his dad? By passing the imaginary order and reaching to Symbolic order. In this part of film Georg (Marty's father) is not a real father, neither an imaginary father, he stays in some position between these two faces, but in this part Marty must face with his symbolic father, who is embodied in Biff. Then in this part of film Marty not only must try to accept that he can't be his mom's real phallus, but also he must try to recognize the function and role of Symbolic father, which is rooted in Law, language and cultural issues. For it in this part the conflict between Marty and Biff is bold.

Lacan explains that we are facing with three kinds of Father in three Order, about the imaginary Father I wrote in the first chapter but here I want to go further and see what the function of symbolic father is:

“The symbolic father is not a real being but a position, a function, and hence is synonymous with the term ‘paternal function’. This function is none other than that of imposing the LAW and regulating desire in the Oedipus complex, of intervening in the imaginary dual relationship between mother and child to introduce a necessary ‘symbolic distance’ between them (Seminar 4, 161).”

Biff is the brutal and strong face of the father, who in fact is Georg or the “Real Father” but Marty can't face it at this moment, because of his anxiety then he tries to see it as a symbol or form of Symbolic father.

As before I explained the symbolic father is more in relation with culture, while the Imaginary father and order could be understood more in relation with natural aspect. Biff is accepted by the society as a successful, attractive and strong guy and most of the girls love him, the other students and Georg (as an imaginary father) are afraid of him and follow his orders. He stays in the position of law and he has power to change anything or catch anybody that he wants. Then we can say that he occupies the position of symbolic father, although Lacan emphasizes that nobody can occupy this position completely, Biff can't neither but for Marty he is at the same time an idol and a rival. Marty treats exactly like Biff. He wants to be the most attractive boy in high school, he kicks the other guys, he has power to change the situations, all of these things show that he is trying to follow the values of symbolic father but because he stays in a complicated situation and has anxiety about his oedipal complex then he acts like a hysteric person. He tries to identify himself with his Big Other desire (here Biff or symbolic father) but at the same time he wants to destroy this big other too. Lacan explains that this passage from

the imaginary to symbolic by identifying is more logical than chronological. Then we can see in the film that Marty is trying to find a way to cure his anxiety and at the same time a way for his existence because if he can't pass this order to Real order he will pay a huge price with a Real treat. Lacan and Freud as well emphasize that if the person can't cross this orders he must pay the price as psycho with his blood, what means, that he either becomes insane or suicide would be his last way, therefore Marty knows it's the time of accepting his symbolic castration rather than that he will stick in his imaginary orders as child and never can satisfy his desires. Now I want to focus on the Castration complex and the roles of father, Mother and child in this complex and then compare it with the situation of Marty's family.

Castration is defined by Lacan as a symbolic lack of an imaginary object; castration does not bear on the penis as a real organ, but on the imaginary PHALLUS (Seminar 4, 219) Lacan divides the Oedipus complex into three 'times' (Lacan, 1957–8: seminar of 22 January 1958). In the first time, the child perceives that the mother desires something beyond the child himself—namely, the imaginary phallus—and then tries to be the phallus for the mother.¹³

That's the first part of the film and it continuous till mid of second part, exactly at that moment, when Marty doesn't admit to kiss his mom, at this time he passes this level, which he wants to be the phallus for the mother. Now he must faces with second part of his castration. In the second time, "the imaginary father intervenes to deprive the mother of her object by promulgating the incest taboo; properly speaking, this is not castration but privation. Castration is only realized in the third and final time, which represents the 'dissolution' of the Oedipus complex. It is then that the real father intervenes by showing that he really poses the phallus, in such a way that the child is forced to abandon his attempts to be the phallus."¹⁴

Now Marty wants to understand the exactly position of his father, because of that he begins to helps Georg to can grab her mom's attention. Marty understands that if he can't make it, his existence will be in danger. In the Film, this issue has shown as a symbol. Marty in film knows that if his dad and his mom don't marry each other he never will be born then his existence is in danger therefore he tries harder to unite them. Here but there is a big problem: the symbolic father, Biff.

"The symbolic is also the realm of radical alterity which Lacan refers to as the OTHER.

The UNCONSCIOUS is the discourse of this Other, and thus belongs wholly to the symbolic order. The symbolic is the realm of the Law, which regulates desire in the Oedipus complex. It

¹³ Evans, 1996,P:22

¹⁴ Evans, 1996, P:23

is the realm of culture as opposed to the imaginary order of nature. Whereas the imaginary is characterized by dual relations, the symbolic is characterized by triadic structures, because the intersubjective relationship is always 'mediated' by a third term, the big Other.¹⁵

The law or the power embodied by Biff is clear here as a big Other. Biff has everything that is a dream for Marty, but because of the feeling of lack and inability Marty at the same time wants to satisfy his Big Other's desire and revenge on him. Because of this he begins to be ready to face with his real father, the successful and strong Georg, who is a big fucker and has the Real phallus.

Castration and The Real Father

¹⁵ Evans, 1996, P:204

The third 'time' of the Oedipus complex is marked by the intervention of the real father. By showing that he has the phallus, and neither exchanges it nor gives it (Seminar 3, 319), the real father castrates the child, in the sense of making it impossible for the child to persist in trying to be the phallus for the mother; it is no use competing with the real father, because he always wins (Seminar 4, 208–9, 227).

At the last part of the film, we see Marty wakes up from a deep sleep, which I see it as a sign to realizing that what we saw was not a real movie or science fiction film but also a psychological film. He wakes up from his dream and now at this moment we as audience and Marty will see his Real father. Georg is a strong man, who is successful in his career. He is rich and a self-confident author. Here we are facing with the Real Father, who most notably is a big fucker, because at this scene he comes with his wife (Marty's mom) and seems that they have really good sexual relation.

Lacan believes that "the real father as the one who 'effectively occupies' the mother, the Great Fuckler On the basis of these comments, it seems possible to argue that the real father is the biological father of the subject."¹⁶

Georg occupies Marty's mother and they are deeply in love without any problem, at this time we figure out that everything what we have seen before were just the imaginary images of Marty's desire but now he has accepted his symbolic castration.

This castration saves the child from the preceding anxiety; without it, the child requires a phobic object as a symbolic substitute for the absent real father¹⁷. However Marty has a Real father, who is a great fucker then now Marty can as a normal person goes and kisses his girlfriend. Actually the last scene is one of the most significant scenes of the film: Georg and Mary's Mother are staying behinds of an open door and are gazing his son, who can feels this look. Then they smile at their son and with a happy gesture, while are hugging each other leave the scene, because now they are sure that their son has accepted his castration and is accepted in a normal society.

For me film finishes here, when Marty sees his girlfriend and kisses her. it's the last part of a psychological drama about a young teenager who had anxiety of acceptance his castration but he could passes his Oedipus complex and relocate his Real father with his Symbolic father. Biff is not Georg's supervise anymore but also his servant. The end of the Symbolic order and entrance of Real order. The film continuous when Doctor Brown appears again to bring them

¹⁶ Evans, 1996, P:63

¹⁷ Evans, 1996, P:64

to future, I can see this scene as symbol of life drive which drives Marty to pleasure and sexual pleasure in his life because this time he is not alone and his girlfriend is here too.

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Movie Info:

Back to the Future:

Directed by Robert Zemeckis

Produced by	Bob Gale Neil Canton
Written by	Robert Zemeckis Bob Gale
Starring	Michael J. Fox Christopher Lloyd Lea Thompson Crispin Glover
Music by	Alan Silvestri
Cinematography	Dean Cundey
Edited by	Arthur Schmidt Harry Keramidas
Production company	Amblin Entertainment
Distributed by	Universal Pictures
Release dates	July 3, 1985
Running time	116 minutes
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	\$19 million
Box office	\$389.1 million

