

FILM REVIEW ESSAY

ARTHUR PENN'S *NIGHT MOVES*:  
A FILM THAT INTERPRETS US

EMANUEL BERMAN, ISRAEL

*Night Moves*: 1975

Director: Arthur Penn

Scriptwriter: Alan Sharp

Video distributor: Warner Home Video

'So it's really just a series of concentric circles. The outer reality just goes out and out in those circles; the inner reality, and the inner detective story, is there to be examined—if he would examine it.' Arthur Penn (in Gallagher, 1975, p. 88).

Having been interested in the detective's search as a metaphor for the psychoanalyst's quest, I found myself drawn to *Night Moves* ever since I first saw it. I offer the following interpretive viewing with the assumption that it represents neither an objective deciphering of the film's 'true' meaning, nor solely a projection of my inner world, but rather a new significance that has emerged in the transitional space opened up by my intense personal and transference encounter with *Night Moves* (Berman, 1997, 1998).

While my earlier thinking focused on the way I could interpret the film, I recently became more cognisant of interpretation as one of the themes in the film itself (as often in drama; Simon, 1985), and of the film *in toto* as an attempted interpretation ('The mystery is inward, and perhaps the solution is inward'; Penn, in Gallagher, 1975, p. 87). Contemporary art has absorbed (sometimes ambiva-

lently) psychoanalytic interpretation, both as a topic and as a tool.

*Ellen*: 'Who is winning?'

*Harry*: 'Nobody. One side is losing slower than the other.'

The film's plot interweaves and juxtaposes two equally important stories: detective Harry Mosby's attempt to decipher the disappearance, and later the death, of an adolescent girl, Delly Grastner; and his struggle to save his disintegrating marriage to Ellen. At the background of both stories stands a common emotional theme: failed parenthood, and its sequela—the helpless yearning, despair and rage of the abandoned child.

Harry (Gene Hackman) was abandoned by his parents as a child, and brought up by relatives. We hear this story in the context of a renewed abandonment: his wife's infidelity. Harry discovers the affair in which Ellen (Susan Clark) is involved, but is unable and unwilling to speak to her. Instead he violently invades the house of Marty, Ellen's disabled lover. Marty (Harris Yulin) defends himself by interpreting: 'I am beginning to get you in focus, Mosby. Ellen talks a lot about you, how you were left by your parents when you were very young ... It's a clue, isn't that what you do, look for clues? Didn't you track down your parents? I am sure you were trailing Ellen when you saw us'.



Marty and Ellen have come to think of Harry's childhood trauma as the source of his restlessness and action-proneness, of his occupational choice, of his inability to communicate and to invest in family life (Harry's childlessness at 40 is striking, though never brought up). Harry is infuriated by Marty's interpretation, but does not dispute it. It eventually appears to enable him to seek renewed closeness with Ellen. In their first intimate conversation, at a later stage, he finally tells her the truth: he managed with great efforts to find his father, but upon seeing him on a park bench, 'just a little guy reading the funny pages out of a paper, mumbling the words through his lips', he watched for a while and went away, without ever talking to him.

We hear nothing at all about Harry's mother, and wonder: was she dead, or was tracing her more than he could even attempt? Still, a yearning for a motherly bosom appears predominant in the film's visual imagery. The first time we see Harry meeting Ellen he slips his hands into her blouse (but later, right after discovering her affair, he rejects her offer of cocoa); their first open conversation is accompanied by his gently caressing her bare breasts with his toes; another protagonist, Paula (Jennifer Warren), seduces him by telling him of the first time a boy touched her breasts, and by putting his hand on them.

Harry is unexcited, however, when Arlene (Janet Ward), while hiring him to trace her missing daughter, boasts about her own 'lovely tits'. The film makes a sharp distinction between desirable good breasts that can be easily lost (Ellen: Paula, who also betrays Harry), and destructive bad breasts (Arlene's silicone-boasted breasts); the place of Harry's mother in this split remains enigmatic. When Harry finds Delly (Melanie Griffith), she too initially appears as a dangerous temptress (her full name is Delilah), and her seductiveness towards him is also expressed by baring her breasts; but with her he appears embarrassed, and turns his head away.

Harry's growing affection towards Delly, most evident after her nightmare, is tender,

parental and non-incestuous. When he holds her to calm her down, she talks about feeling 'before you were born, your mother's heart beating on your back'. His identification with her is striking. 'Did you ever run away from home?' she asks, and he jokes: 'Me and my parents, we had a different arrangement'. He appears to know that these 'arrangements' are inherently similar: Delly was practically abandoned by her father, and his money appears to be the main reason why her mother wants her back home. Arlene has always been more involved with her lovers than with her daughter, and Delly's escape from home is accompanied by repeated efforts to seduce her mother's former lovers, including Delly's stepfather Tom (John Crawford). Indeed, Harry manages to locate her in Tom's house in the Florida Keys thanks to a dynamic, oedipal interpretation: 'Maybe she is trying to even up the score'.

*Ellen:* 'It has taken us a long time to get this far, I don't want to pour it all away. Please'.

We could ironically speak of 'the two analyses of Delly G'. The first 'analysis' takes place while Harry is being betrayed by his wife. His mute expression when first seeing Ellen with Marty is a vivid depiction of painful primal scene affects. This personal preoccupation is part of Harry's 'counter-transference' in analysing Delly's case, and contributes to his focus on interpreting oedipal dynamics. This first analysis is seemingly successful: Harry is able to help Delly renounce her incestuous affair with her former stepfather, and return home. But homecoming deteriorates into a violent row, and Harry appears shaken by the sarcastic confrontation of Delly's boyfriend Quentin (James Woods): 'Are you satisfied? You got another happy family together'.

When learning later of Delly's violent death, Harry must reconsider his understanding. The second part of the film is a 'second analysis', in search of the fuller truth, external and internal. Harry is reunited with Ellen, and starts grappling with questions he evaded

before: 'the identity of his wife, his relation to her, his relation to his father, his identity, who he is and what he is' (Penn, in Gallagher, 1975, p. 87). He is now able to see that his oedipal-sexual focus (a partially correct but insufficient interpretation) may have blinded him to Delly's plight as a rejected child; and in returning Delly to her mother he may have actually colluded in her exploitation by her mother (repeating Delly's past injuries rather than curing them as he wished), and endangered her life.

Harry's rage towards destructive parenting mounts. 'Delly had no chance with you as a mother, she was on a downhill flight right from the start', he screams at Arlene in their last furious encounter. Arlene bitterly answers: 'Delly wasn't the only kid who ever had it rough'. We may be reminded of the gunshot suicide committed by Arlene's father (when she was 8); but this casual early bit of information remains in the background, and Arlene never gains our empathy.

Harry's guilt towards both Delly and Ellen preoccupies him in his second, more daring and more penetrating search. In going again to Florida, he abandons Ellen once more. But the two parting scenes are markedly different. In the first, each of them is in another car, and Harry angrily rushes to go, refusing to talk with Ellen who begs him to stay for one more day. In the second, Ellen accompanies him to the airport, he explains to her why it is crucial for him to go and figure out the truth, and promises to be back 'no later than Friday'. He tells her affectionately: 'I know you have been alone a lot, even when I was around. And I know when you get ... when we get like that we reach out for other people'. Offering Ellen an empathic interpretation, he also remorsefully hints at his affair with Paula; and in switching to 'we' he acknowledges his and Ellen's common anguish. Earlier on, when Ellen used the word 'we', Harry exploded with projective moralistic blaming. The change of outlook and of tone is striking, as after a successful working through of a painful experience.

Although Ellen is visibly sad and worried, she also probes him not to miss his plane, saying: 'if you don't go now, you can't come back'. While made jokingly, this comment seems to convey her awareness that solving his 'inner detective story' is for Harry a crucial step towards forming a more real relationship with her. This too is an empathic interpretation, recognising the different meaning of Harry's present departure in comparison to his driven disappearances so far. And while many scenes in this film are cut short, contributing to its unsettling effect, in this scene the camera lingers attentively on lonely Ellen after Harry boards his plane. We know she wants him back.

The final sequence in Florida is very intense. Harry discovers that Tom, Paula and Quentin were all part of a ring smuggling precious antiques from the Yucatan, and that Delly was probably murdered after she discovered their plots. At the end of a bloody trail, an aeroplane appears, Harry is shot and wounded, Paula is killed, and when the plane drowns Harry recognises the face of the dying pilot: his older friend and confidant, the charming stuntman Joey Ziegler (Edward Binns). Joey attempts to talk to Harry, but through the drowning plane's thick windowpane only his lips are seen moving, like those of Harry's father when he finally traced him years ago. The discovery that fatherly Joey was the ringleader, possibly had killed Delly, and attempted to kill Harry, brings us full circle to the initial betrayal by the father.

Wounded Harry manages to start the engine of his boat (called 'Point of View'), but cannot steer it, and the scene fades out with the boat going around in circles. For me, however, there is a shred of hope in this bleak ending: the fantasy that Harry can be discovered and brought to shore, allowed to recover at Ellen's bosom.

*Paula* (watching Harry's chess manoeuvre): 'It's a beauty!'

*Harry:* 'But he didn't see it. He played something else, and he lost. Must have regret-



ted it every day of his life. I know so would I. In fact, I do regret it, and I wasn't born yet'.

Paula: 'That's no excuse'.

Harry is in many ways an heir to Hammett's Sam Spade (Marty challenges Harry to hit him, 'the way Sam Spade would'), just as the precious antique is a variation on the phallic Maltese Falcon. Loyal to the Hammett-Chandler-Macdonald image of the detective, he is violent, sexual and troubled himself, and yet an uncompromising truth-seeker.

But the film markedly differs from genre traditions. While *The Maltese Falcon* 'is completely devoid of any explicit reference to inner feeling states or motives' (Bauer et al., 1978, p. 283), *Night Moves* is psychologically minded and often interpretive. While Spade and similar protagonists maintain a detached cynical view of self and others, Harry Mosby evolves out of that position, acquiring insightful and empathic capacities. And while women in most *noir* detective stories and films remain two-dimensional, and Spade's final victory signifies 'asserting his invulnerability to the seductive powers of [deceitful] Brigid' (Bauer et al., 1997, p. 294), Ellen represents a possibility of overcoming splits and projec-

tions, of integrating sexuality and companionship, vulnerability and strength.

These unique aspects of *Night Moves* make a purely oedipal understanding (the detective as an aroused, inquisitive oedipal child; see Bauer et al., 1978) insufficient. There are strong oedipal motives and primal scene allusions (including the film's name), but they are better understood in a broader context of object relations and self development. Being an unwelcome child ('regretting every day of his life what happened before he was born') underlies Harry's oedipal conflict; his incapacity to handle the triangular situation ('he didn't see it ... and he lost') stems from his despair about dyadic relations, preventing him from full relatedness to a woman, as well as from parenthood.

Reliving—through Delly's tragedy—his childhood abandonment, re-experiencing his rage, gaining insight into repetition-compulsion in his work and personal life, and rediscovering Ellen's devotion, enable Harry to grow. The film follows him through pain and disillusion, but allows him new vistas, and therefore some hope.

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## OBITUARY

LEO STONE (1903-1997)

Dr Leo Stone, who died this past summer at the age of 94, occupied a special place in the American psychoanalytic movement. The affection and respect he was accorded bordered on reverence. He served as president both of the New York Psychoanalytic Society and the Institute, was a recipient of the Sigourney Award, and delivered both the Brill and Freud Lectures, in addition to many other tokens of distinction. His contributions to the literature of psychoanalysis, small in number as they may have been, were most influential. His ideas, in fact, may be considered as a point of departure for many of the current technical innovations in psychoanalytic treatment, those that emphasise the contribution of the analyst's personality in the treatment process. Central to his approach to technique was the idea of the analyst as a healer.

Starting with his paper on 'The widening scope of indications for psychoanalysis' (1954b) and 'The psychoanalytic situation and transference' (1967), a paper which he designated 'Postscript to an earlier communication', and in practically all of his subsequent contributions, Stone emphasised the role of the analyst as a benign, nurturing, helpful force. Fundamental to Stone's view of the therapeutic relationship was the idea that it had its roots in the very early, protective, nurturing, sustaining dependency on the mother or other caretakers. This was the baseline, according to Stone, from which all other considerations of technique derived.

In an earlier contribution, both witty and scholarly, 'On the principal obscene word of the English language (an inquiry with hypothesis regarding its origin and persistence)'

(1954a), Stone traced the origin and the persistence of the word 'fuck' to its source in the word 'suck'. The same line of approach may be found in one of his later papers (Stone, 1986), on the origin of depressive illness. There he states the view that the commonly emphasised elements entering into the formation of depressive illness, e.g. pathological narcissism, aggression towards the primary object, ambivalent aggression and 'identification' with the disappointing object, are in varying degrees important in most, if not all, cases of pure depressive illness. He goes on to say, 'While each of these factors is a dynamic entity in its own right, they operate synergistically in the complex of depressive illness. This synergistic relation may derive in part from the common origin of these dynamic elements in the same or repeated disturbances of neonatal experience' (p. 359).

Anyone who knew Dr Stone could not help but be struck that he was a helper and a nurturer. With utmost dedication and devotion, he cared for his first wife, Dina, through many years of excruciatingly painful illness. It was this kind of dedication that he brought to the concern for his patients, students and colleagues. Even in his last years, when illness and injury made a long-term patient of him, he demonstrated the same quality to all, and especially to his second wife, Marta, as he had previously shown to those who had depended on him.

A combination of urbanity, wit and deep compassion were part of his fundamental, somewhat hidden identity. He was fundamentally a poet. Characteristically private and modest, he put his own poetry into a drawer