

THE EIGHTH EUROPEAN PSYCHOANALYTIC FILM FESTIVAL

Turning Points in Psychoanalysis

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Piccadilly (EA Dupont; UK 1929)

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Unlike Mike's and Daniel's presentations, mine is focused on a fiction and my turning point is one that changes the direction of the narrative, taking it away from the status quo into a new situation out of which the story will develop. I will show the relevant five-minute sequence but would like to begin with a few background points. Narrative structure, that is, in conventional stories rather than avant-garde or experimental ones, tends to be organised around an initial situation, a status quo which could happily continue were it not for an interference, a disruption that abruptly shifts events and characters into a new, unexpected, direction. However, more psychologically complex narratives might be triggered, as Peter Brookes has argued, by the eruption of desire which performs the function of an 'engine' sparking off and driving forward ensuing events characterised more by emotion and the erotic than adventure. In this sense, narrative structure is essentially axed around an initial turning point from which the drive of the story is derived. *Piccadilly* begins with an established and apparently stable situation. The suave and successful Valentine Wilmot

runs the Piccadilly Club, offering dancing, dinner and drinks as well as a special act performed by professional dancers 'Victor and Mabel' – Mabel is Valentine's devoted girlfriend. It is the implicit disruption of this status quo that my sequence depicts.

I am interested in the cinematic rendering of this narrative turning point. While its participants are not aware of its ultimate significance, the action is extended across time and space in such a way that its audience cannot but be aware that this is point at which the drama begins. And something else confirms this audience awareness: the turning point sequence also introduces the film's star, Anna May Wong. Cinematically and aesthetically there is a build up to the moment at which she first appears on screen.

Anna May Wong plays Sho-sho, a young Chinese woman from Limehouse who works in the scullery of the Piccadilly Club and who 'ultimately' will become the new star of the Piccadilly Club and emotionally (and professionally) involved with Valentine. Again, before showing the sequence: a couple of points about Anna May Wong and how her connotations and status manage to carry off this seemingly unlikely romance and easy rise to stardom. How is the turning point narratively possible?

I would suggest that the film can only be understood through the contemporary, 1920s, culture of the modern, and the specific resonance of the young modern woman and also through Anna May Wong's star persona. Wong had left Hollywood as the problem of 'miscegenation' rendered her unable to form part of the central romantic couple essential for Hollywood stardom. She was unable to break out of minor, supporting roles in a Hollywood ruled by the Hayes Code. She went to Berlin in 1928, and although 'exoticized', films were constructed specifically for her, her image was celebrated and her access to leading roles and stardom was

assured. Furthermore, her press build-ups and publicity throughout her European career all emphasized Anna May Wong's own personal, off-screen modernity, her stylishness, her sophistication and her engagement with contemporary culture; above all, that she was an American star, a Hollywood star. Wong's success in her Ufa films led to a contract with British International Pictures.

The film, and thus its very particular narrative turning point, also needs to be understood within the wider context of the British film industry's attempt around this time to construct a turning point of its own, to ward off Hollywood domination, to build a substantial industry that would attract international talent and international distribution. Andrew Higson has argued that the British film industry needed to move away from depicting traditional and thus 'stuffy' 'Englishness', in order to appeal to a transnational audience and to find a way of moving beyond its own stereotypes, its relegation of the lower-classes to crude caricature, and its characteristic inhibitions with regard to sex. As Higson says: 'The films this period produced might unsettle traditional national identities – with English reserve displaced by a "continental" approach to romance, desire and the representation of the body, for instance'.

It was into this context that Anna May Wong arrived, directed in *Piccadilly* by WA Dupont a supreme stylist of German cinema supported by some of the most skilled technicians of contemporary Europe. *Piccadilly* was a big budget production for BIP; Arnold Bennett was brought in to write a script, specifically to show case its star.

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Some comments: to begin with, the sequence constructs two binary oppositions. First: between the restaurant and the scullery, as the specifics of *place* mutate into the more abstract *space* of class hierarchy and the

high as opposed to the low. And secondly, between Mabel and Sho-sho: Mabel's stylistic fussiness, or rather her lack of a modern, streamlined silhouette contrasts with Sho-sho's instinctive, if downtrodden, version of flapper fashion. Mabel acquires these connotations, in keeping with the principles of structuralism, in relation to Sho-sho, as meaning emerges from the opposition of two terms. Valentine's journey, however, works to open up a space in between the binary opposites, and the presence of the kitchen (between the restaurant and scullery) suggests a metonymical figure: links in the chain of the spaces needed to produce entertainment as commodity, and the spaces themselves linked by stylised repetition. Valentine's journey, from high to low, echoes the opposition between London's East End and West End, socially between rich (bourgeois/aristocratic) and poor (working-class), ethnically between Piccadilly and Limehouse, that will mark his future relationship with Sho-sho.

But before Valentine embarks on his journey, the drunken diner (Charles Laughton) has already personified 'disruption' of a status quo: his behaviour and the mark on the plate condense into a single intrusion of the inappropriate into the polite or, perhaps, the id into the terrain of the super-ego. Thus while the disruption initiates the first step of a narrative turning point it also draws attention to its (perhaps anachronistically, perhaps due to this gathering) psychoanalytic implications, at least on a metaphorical level. Valentine's journey evokes the topography of the psyche, in which the conscious mind (the restaurant) shores up its defences against its own 'lower depths' (the scullery). But if the mark on the plate has functioned initially as a sign of the abject and of transgression, it mutates into a signifier of Sho-sho herself. The sequence moves from inappropriate behaviour in the restaurant to inappropriate behaviour in the scullery. The stain on the plate suggests a symptom, a sign that 'something is wrong'. In a kind of carnivalesque reversal, Sho-sho has transformed the site of degraded labour into a mirror of the heterotopic space 'in front'. And then

the oppression of the scullery workers intrudes as a return of the repressed in the site of high bourgeois entertainment.

The love story as a genre tends to address a female audience, to revolve around desire, leading to questions about the relative freedoms and constraints associated with women's sexual autonomy. Love stories touch certain social nerves and leave behind, even at their most clichéd, questions about the kinds of barriers and taboos that their fictional couples can or cannot transcend. Sentiment, the 'soppiness' of the love story, may thus also be intensely social – as feminist theorists of the melodrama have been pointing out for some time. Following the Women's Liberation Movement's slogan 'the personal is political', the analysis of love, sentiment, sexuality, emotion and so on, in film and literature, have been crucial in illuminating the 'poetics' of women's emotional discourses, translating 'feeling' into historical and social context, and underlining, if by a knight's move, Freud's insistence on the central place occupied by sexuality and its complications in human life.

To my mind, or rather in my imagination, there is something fascinating about these dreams of modernity and internationalism that characterised so much of cinema in the late 1920s. That is, the modernity of *Piccadilly*, of its Chinese-American female protagonist, its use of London and its topography, that emerge materially and symptomatically out of an economic and, perhaps, political substructure. Thinking about my chosen sequence, I found it impossible not to add a historical, ideological dimension, especially in the context of British Cinema. But two coincidental, and near simultaneous developments, turning points in the narrative of the wider world, took the cinema along a different path, away from the modern and towards the national:

Piccadilly was made in 1929, one of THE turning points in the history of cinema and, of course, highly significant in modern history. To sketch briefly:

1. Wall Street Crash on 24th October led to the great depression and (apologies for such a condensation of history) brought to an end the glittering decade of the 1920s, epitomised by the figure of the modern girl or flapper.
2. By early 1929, the Hollywood Studios' conversion to synchronised sound had been completed and brought to an end the easy international movement of stars as well, of course, as modes of narrative visualisation and figuration characteristic of non-synchronised cinema.

These two factors changed the context of film production and the cultural, economic context in which films were produced and exhibited.