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Leila Kincaid

Department of Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness

School of Consciousness and Transformation, California Institute of Integral Studies

Author Note

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Leila Kincaid

Email: LeilaKincaid@gmail.com   https://Leilakincaid.com

Abstract

Film, as a multivalent art form, uses archetypal themes and symbols that have the power to affect the consciousness of its viewers. The stories that play out on the screen through plot, setting, character, and the elements of storytelling through film carry rich and deep archetypal meaning for our culture and our psyches. This is how film can impact us on deep, subconscious levels and influence and change our consciousness, for good or ill. A look at two key films with the actor Julian Sands illustrates the way we, as viewers, experience a shift and even transformation in consciousness through the act of seeing and viewing the films.

Keywords: Archetypes, Consciousness, Epistemology, Feminism, Film, Male Gaze, Movies, Mythology, Psyche, Psychology, Philosophy, Story, Symbols

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 Our ordinary waking consciousness… is but one special type of consciousness,

whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens,

there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.

~William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences, 1909*

The great actor Julian Sands died this year. His remains were found in the mountains outside

of Los Angeles, California. He had been hiking, and after missing for several weeks and months,

he was finally declared dead. As an actor he played characters in films that captured something

important about the power of film. His persona, presence, and gravitas, projected through each of

his characters, somehow elicits a deeply serious and important message about being a human

being -something Jean Pierre Meurnier posits as an essential part of the subjective experience of

viewing a film (2019, p. 34). Two particular films -James Ivory's 1985 *Room with a View*, based

on the novel by E.M. Forster, and Mary Lambert's 1987 *Siesta*, featuring Miles Davis' score -

present Julian sands as characters that pierce the veil between film viewer, the film screen, and

the world of the film. In these two films, Sands portrays archetypal characters that represent a

romantic archetype, in *Room with a View*, and a guardian angel archetype, in *Siesta*. Through

both films, viewers are given the promise that love is the most important virtue, and that there is

a benevolent witness to and guardian in our lives, cheering us on in our adventures, even unto

death.

Film, Archetypes, and Consciousness

Because film plays with archetypal themes and our ides of archetypal representations in our culture and our psyches, it can impact us on deep, subconscious levels and influence and change our consciousness. When we, as viewers, sit before a film, we suspend disbelief and trust the filmmaker to take us on a journey. This journey is one we trust will make sense and follow certain structures of the storytelling mythos. Like Joseph Campbell's idea of the hero monomyth (1949), in which stories are structured according to certain common elements found across cultures that resonate with processes within our psyches, watching a film at once puts us on equal footing with the film's protagonist as a hero on a journey, partaking in some important ritual of meaning making, questing, battling enemies, and returning to the world with an elixir.

Transformational Power of Film on Consciousness

Understanding film as a way to access states of consciousness leads to a sense of their transformational power. Structures of consciousness portrayed in film can affect changes in our own consciousness. The meaning of films and the archetypes that are the foundation for certain characters, while often not intended by the filmmakers themselves, seeps into the consciousness of the viewer and alchemically transforms us. Film can change and influence our consciousness for good or bad. Film has the power to dictate our ideas about sexuality and gender. Laura Mulvey (1973) warns that we can fall into believing the world through the view of the filmmaker who is almost always male and casts the female characters under what John Berger (1977) called the male gaze. Camile Paglia (1990) says, "cinema is the culmination of the obsessive, mechanistic male drive-in western culture". In some ways, when we sit in front of a screen, it is as though we are hypnotized and brainwashed, and it behooves us as viewers to watch films as active, mindful participants, lest we succumb to unconscious forces beyond our waking control.

Film's power to influence structures of consciousness is realized across all strata of human experience, from the individual personal experience of being a self, to the interpersonal, social experience of being a person, to the ultimate experience of identification of the self in the world, and in the cosmos, trying to make meaning and sense of this great drama of being. Film influences our ideas of class, culture, and appearance: it can tell us what we think about appearance and beauty, often casting the real, waking life female as a less than perfect reification of the real ideal female on screen. In a strange way, the image of a female on screen can distort our image of the female offscreen. Even in the two films with Julian Sands that I discuss here, the females are objects of beauty and cast before us under the male gaze. Ellen Barkin is half dressed or naked and raped in *Siesta*. Helen Bonham Carter's character is titularly an object to be married off. The danger of the power of film is in just how it casts us, as humans, in our lives held up against the narrative of the characters in the films that objectify and alienate us from our true states. While film can uplift, it can also deform and destroy.

The Normalizing Power of Film

A deformative and destructive aspect of film is the tendency to normalize and glorify capitalism as an economic virtue. Good credit, financial solvency, and consumerism are hailed as virtues in most films that have a subtext (usually unbeknownst to the filmmakers) about the virtue of capitalism. The way film informs our acceptance and understanding of political economies is something we can well learn from. This is another example of why we must watch films mindfully. In the films with Julian Sands, capitalism and the hardships of money are barely touched upon, other than some mockery of people with less than, perpetuating a view that is usually force fed on us in film - that capitalism is synonymous with democracy, democracy with personal freedom, and therefore that capitalism somehow guarantees our personal freedom. This

myth, perpetuated by many (most) films, entraps us into mistaking socialism as evil and capitalism as good.

Film also informs our views of death, life, and the universe. The perpetuation of both the desensitization of the death of others through film violence and the lack of addressing and processing the fact of our mortality leads to a warped perception and consciousness of death that is perpetuated by film. The best horror films help us grapple with and confront our thanatophobia. Film can tell us what is real and not real. John Carpenter plays with this idea in his film, *In the Mouth of Madnes*s with Sam Neill ranting repeatedly in intercuts, "This is reality!" "This is not reality!"

Multidirectional Nature of Film Viewing: Creating Knowledges

There is an inevitable intersection between film and philosophy. Film can dictate our epistemology, shaping and warping what we know about the world. Film, as an apotheotic art form, combining several other art forms into itself and reifying them into a greater mythos, by which consciousness is transformed by the process of witnessing a drama play out in front of our eyes, creates catharsis and transforms consciousness. "Aristotle's *Poetics* speak as much to the consciousness shifting power of watching an ancient Greek drama unfold as watching a modern film," says Joseph H. Kupfer, in *Philosophy of film and motion pictures* (p. 343).

When we watch a movie, we are influenced by the film as much as our assumptions going into the film influence our experience and interpretation of the film. Berger points out in his documentary and book, *Ways of Seeing*, about human perception and viewing art, that we view a piece of art through lenses of perception that determine our ideas about beauty, truth, reality, morality, ethics, and so on. This idea of uncertainty about our ability to fully perceive something in itself captures the Heisenbergian idea that the observer affects the observed and we can never

really know the nature of the observed phenomenon outside of our own observation, and the tool of observation taints the subject of observation. In this case, when we watch a movie, our historically, sociologically, culturally conditioned views and ideas about the world influence and affect how we see and react to the film. And thus, at once, our experience of viewing a film is personal and collective. We see the film from our unique vantage point, while also being influenced by the filmmakers' view and the culture and society and historical context in which we view the film. In that sense, a film cannot stand on its own outside of a relationship with the viewers. When I watch Julian Sands standing in a tree in a field in Italy, yelling, "Beauty!" I feel at once transported there, enrapt in the awesome sense of a oneness with nature and the glory of creation. When I stand with him on the staircase pleading with a woman on her death journey to love, I sense the urgency of loving while I am alive, of embracing love as a pinnacle virtue in life.

   Edgar Morin (2005) writes about the "incessant dialectic between the real and the unreal" that happens when we watch films. "Motion pictures demand a divided consciousness," he says (p. 155). We watch the film, engaged, hypnotized, going on the journey with the chraacters, while at the same time aware we are not in the world of the movie, nor the characters of the movie. But, at some level, we must admit we are affected and transformed by this fake world and these fictional characters in very real ways. Meurnier describes this general experience of perception and identification as a film viewer in his theory of filmic identification. To the extent that I identify with the character I perceive in the films I watch, I cannot help but wonder how much the characters that Julian Sands played became a part of who I am.

Film and Types of Consciousness

Film not only shows us, but also catalyzes within us, different states and structures of consciousness. Allan Combs writes in *Consciousness Explained Better* about the various layers in the consciousness matrix he designed with Ken Wilber, based on Gebser's work (2009, p. 62). I believe they manifest in each of our waking lives on various levels and to various degrees. Film helps us experience and access these various states. Watching films may very well allow us to experience integral consciousness in that it can help us expand our own view of reality by exposing us to several other worldviews and experiences of reality and ways of being. Perhaps this is how viewing film can be like Gebser's notion of integral consciousness as "an integration of all the structures of consciousness" (Combs, 75). Watching films can even open us to the experience of a higher, illumined mind as described by Ken Wilber, in which we stare in awe at beauty and evocations of a luminous and implicate order to everything (Combs, 81). Scenes in films like the progression of cosmogenesis in Terence Malik's *Tree of Life* can catalyze a shift in consciousness in the observer to this illumined or even "overmind" that Combs describes (p83).

When we, as film viewers, watch Julian Sands, standing in a tree overlooking a valley full of flowers, yelling, "Beauty", we can grasp and experience this illumined state of consciousness that at once experiences the awe and exaltation in the presence of nature's beauty that his character represents. Sands in this role captures a sense of Combs' notion of illumined, integral, and nondual consciousness (pp. 61, 81, 84). When we tag along with Sands' character in Mary Lambert's *Siesta*, as a guardian angel on the main character's death journey, we get a glimpse into the witnessing of a life and the grappling with mortality we all inevitably face. I think this kind of witnessing as a film viewer also turns us into active participants in the philosophical and

even unconscious processing of our own mortality and the hope that there is some benevolent, witnessing guardian angel guiding us through our mortal experience. We also engage in some self-transforming act in which we psychologically and probably neurochemically experience the dopamine drip of the romantic worldview that Sands' character in Siesta represents. In the face of all possibilities, the best possible choice is to fall in love with it all. Sands' character says, "The only falling that is not failing is falling in love."

Film Viewing as Ritual Participation in Myth

When we watch a film, we participate in a ritual, as watching a film is surely a ritual in modern society. Ritual is the enactment of a myth, Campbell tells us. By participating in the ritual, we are participating in the myth. In this way we co-create and participate in meaning making as film viewers. Campbell describes the co-creative and participatory nature of myth, and we can interpret film as a kind of myth that we participate in:

> Since myth is a projection of the depth wisdom of the psyche, by participating in a ritual, participating in the myth, you are being, as it were, put in accord with that wisdom, which is the wisdom that is inherent within you anyhow. Your consciousness is being re-minded of the wisdom of your own life (Campbell, *Power of Myth*, 1988).

Sand's character, Emerson, is a romantic transcendentalist feminist. He leads us through an experience of a romantic feminist and liberatory consciousness. He wants Lucy, the protagonist, to be free, to think, feel, and do what she wants, and he hails the beauty and unity of nature and creation. When we watch him in *Room with a View*, we can experience how it looks and feels for a woman to be recognized as sovereign, in her power, respected as a free individual, who is thus emancipated from patriarchal oppression. By watching *Room with a View*, the audience participates in the myth of this romantic figure of George, portrayed by Sands, which puts us in

accord with the wisdom of romantic and liberatory consciousness. When we see him as the angel in *Siesta*, some part of our psyches senses that we, too, have a guardian angel witnessing and guiding our journeys through life and our grapplings with death. I think there is some ritual participatory moment in film viewing that engages deeper, myth making, and unity-oriented consciousness, that Combs speaks of, that is awakened when we watch films.

May the memory of Julian Sands stand glorified in the archetypal characters he played that create an indelible legacy upon our minds. The transformation available to us, through his characters, perhaps to something greater and better than we once were, is how I interpret Aristotle's hope for our participation as viewers in witnessing story.

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Appendix

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Julian Sands in *Room with a View*, 1985 (from Imdb.com).