

Little Madnesses

Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena
and Cultural Experience

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On the seashore of endless worlds children meet.

The infinite sky is motionless overhead and the restless water is boisterous. On the seashore of endless worlds the children meet with shouts and dances.

They build their houses with sand, and they play with empty shells. With withered leaves they weave their boats and smilingly float them on the vast deep. Children have their play on the seashore of worlds.

They know not how to swim, they know not how to cast nets. Pearl-fishers dive for pearls, merchants sail in their ships, while children gather pebbles and scatter them again. They seek not for hidden treasures, they know not how to cast nets.

The sea surges up with laughter, and pale gleams the smile of the sea-beach. Death-dealing waves sing meaningless ballads to the children, even like a mother while rocking her baby's cradle. The sea plays with children, and pale gleams the smile of the sea-beach.

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. Tempest roams in the pathless sky, ships are wrecked in the trackless water, death is abroad and children play. On the seashore of endless worlds is the great meeting of children.

Rabindranath Tagore

On the Use of a Film: Cultural Experiences as Symbolic Resources

Tania Zittoun

The work of D.W. Winnicott on transitional phenomena has inspired a new area in the investigation of lifelong development. He indeed showed that children, adolescents and adults do learn and develop a sense of themselves and a capacity to act in the many situations of daily life, especially as they engage in various forms of 'playing'. In this chapter, I borrow two ideas from Winnicott, *cultural experience* and *the use of an object*, to examine how people can develop as they watch films.

Winnicott observed the emergence of the young child's capacity to live as an autonomous being, able to experience the world and learn from it. An important moment is the transition from an early state of non-integration of the infant, quasi-merged with the mother, to a progressive state of integration and autonomy. The idea of 'the use of an object' designates an early relationship between mother and infant in which the child has strong needs which are more or less satisfied by her. A 'good enough' mother can satisfy, perhaps with some bearable delay, the needs of the child; she can also 'survive' the strong aggression and fear projected by the child who might have experienced too long a separation from her. The 'resistance' of the mother allows the child to experience her as an 'object' that can be 'used': that is, as trustworthy yet other, separate from self (Winnicott 1968: 227). From there the infant experiences its *fantasies* (desires and aggression) as distinct and separate from the *object* (which survives in spite of these fantasies), and what is 'me' is felt as distinct from what is 'not-me' (Winnicott 1968: 239).

At the point when the child becomes able to experience itself as

In healthy development, children learn to experience their own continuity through time, even when the mother is not present. They will use fingers, sounds and objects to comfort themselves in the mother's absence, as she would give comfort if she were present. The things being used – transitional objects, such as thumbs or blankets – are partly 'real', offered by the world, and partly 'created' by the child's desires and hallucinatory capacities (Winnicott 1991: 2). Hence in the same movement the possibility of symbolising is created – 'this stands for that'. The blanket is a stand-in for the relationship with the mother, who will return. The child's relationship with the transitional object models the capacity to be alone, to survive with the memory of the other; it also models the experience of being creative – the capacity to turn a blanket or a thumb into a symbol.

The capacity to engage with transitional phenomena enables the individual to distinguish three areas of experience (Winnicott 1991: 104), or three 'lives' (Winnicott 1986a: 35). Firstly, the area of inner psychological reality – where dreams and hallucination occur; secondly, the area of external (or shared) reality, 'with interpersonal relationships even as the key even to making use of the non-human environment' (Winnicott 1959: 57); and thirdly, the area of transitional phenomena, which will become the area of *cultural experience*:

Cultural experience starts as play, and leads to the whole area of man's inheritance, including the arts, the myths of history, the slow march of philosophical thought and the mysteries of mathematics and of group management and of religion (Winnicott 1986a: 35).

Transitional phenomena will evolve as the child matures physically and cognitively and acquires more complex capacities and relationships with the world. Objects that initially had the function of enabling the child to deal with separation from the mother will lose their function: progressively decathected, they 'tend[s] to be relegated to the limbo of half-forgotten things at the bottom of the chest of drawers' (Winnicott 1959: 56). The 'potential use' of objects itself evolves into various forms of symbolic experience. Children develop the capacity to play with various objects; playing becomes more complex through socialisation as they master rules and can share activities (Winnicott undated: 61). Later, adolescents start to play with 'world affairs' (politics, love affairs, creation, science or wars) (Winnicott undated: 62–63).

In adult life, playing and transitional phenomena assume new

and wishes, even daily routine; secondly, the more specialised creativity of the scientist or the artist, which calls for mastery of the tradition alongside creativity, talent, technical capability, and contact with the inner world. This, thirdly, encompasses all 'cultural experience', the specific experience of listening to music, of watching a film or of reading a novel:

Put rather crudely: we go to a concert and I hear a late Beethoven string concert (you see I'm highbrow). This quartet is not just an external fact produced by Beethoven and played by the musicians; and it is not my dream, which as a matter of fact would not have been so good. The experience, coupled with my preparation of myself for it, enables me to create a glorious fact. I enjoy it because I say I created it, I hallucinated it, and it is real and would have been there even if I had been neither conceived of nor conceived (Winnicott 1959: 57–58).

The quality of cultural experiences such as listening to a string quartet or watching a film is obviously 'transitional' or 'potential': it occurs in the area between inner life and objective reality, demanding elements from each. The difference between cultural experience and children's play is that the former is highly social, and belongs to what Winnicott called a 'tradition' (Winnicott 1991: 99). Given that cultural experience is one of the ways through which adults can play, cultural experience in adult life becomes one of the areas in which people might develop a better knowledge and understanding of themselves, their relationships and the world in which they live. Winnicott thus opened the space to examine how people can actually develop through cultural experience, and in that sense, make use of the objects offered to them as what might be called 'symbolic resources'.

In sociocultural psychology, an area of developmental psychology, it has been demonstrated that the majority of complex psychological functions can develop only as people interact with others and with objects and meanings already present in their social and cultural environment. A core concept here is mediation: human capacities are expanded and developed through the use of specific 'tools' (Cole 1996). Some of these are material or technical – spectacles to improve eyesight, for example, or computers to think faster. Others are predominantly semiotic in nature: they are made out of signs of different modes, such as language, colours, images, sounds and movement, as in road signs, or in music or visual arts (Gillespie and Zittoun 2010). If some uses of 'tools' expand human power and mastery over things (planes to travel

semiotic nature, mainly expand people's minds. In *The Psychology of Art*, Lev S. Vygotsky, one of the authors regarded as founders of socio-cultural psychology, tried to account for the transformative effects of art for readers or viewers (Vygotsky 1971). In such a perspective, novels or art works are complex constructions of signs (words, shapes or colours) which, during the duration of painting-seeing, film-watching or book-reading, can somehow guide a person's psychological experience. Through this construction of signs, or semiotic guidance, people can thus feel emotions they have never felt before, or imagine alternative lives as they would not have done on their own. Such guidance is possible partly thanks to the fact that signs, or semiotic elements, can find a sort of translation from shared, socially visible forms to a mental plane. On this psychological plane, semiotic guidance becomes a way to regulate one's flow of consciousness.

Based on the same idea, scholars have looked at how semiotic processes enable people to take a psychological 'distance' from their here-and-now experience. When a person is experiencing an affective state – blushing cheeks, accelerated heartbeats, violent fantasies – she can detach from it, and from this distance can 'recognise' it thanks to similarities with past emotional experiences. Such distance becomes wider when she can use signs such as emotional words ('fear', 'anger') to name them. Such distance can vary according to the level of abstraction of these signs. Hence, it increases with the use of signs designating a class, or category (as in the types of encounter that are 'anger-provoking') or abstract values such as 'good' or 'bad'. Hence, semiotic means – internalised words, categories or values – become mediations of thinking, or of distancing from one's experience. Semiotic distancing enables one in turn to regulate one's thinking or emotions, and offers a form of guidance of thinking and action (Valsiner 2007).

My own work draws on both Winnicott and sociocultural psychology to account for the 'cultural experience' of fiction. I will consider film watching as taking place in a transitional space, in which semiotic guidance enables the transformation of a person's other zones of experience – her inner life and her relationship to the world. My proposition is thus that people can actually 'use' fictions as symbolic resources. Part of this research has involved gathering and interpreting the testimonies of cinema-goers, through their own writings or through interviews. Some of these are presented below.

To have a potential quality, cultural experiences need to be felt as distinct from real life. In our society, most cultural experience is marked by a material or social threshold. The beginning of storytelling ('once upon a time') or the ritualised entry into a cinema auditorium (the red velvet seats, the smell of popcorn, the darkness) creates a threshold between the world of the 'real' and the world of fiction, of cultural experience. Cultural experience, be it reading a novel, watching a film, listening to music and so on – demands a specific form of letting go, accepting what the film, the book or the music will offer. In that sense, it demands the trust and relaxation that is associated with potential space. During the experience, and as time passes, the individual will usually follow a semiotic stream – a flow of images and sounds, a series of words, a visual exploration of a painting (Benson 2001). It is during this semiotic guidance that the individual has to mobilise traces of past experiences – personal as well as cultural – to understand the story, the film, the fictional characters or the music. She will also draw on her expertise in that particular area of cinema, music or painting. In the course of the experience the individual has to allow herself to become emotionally engaged, and go through a series of bodily and affective states.

As the cultural experience unfolds in time, a co-constructed reality is built and progressively evolves: hence a given image in a film, for example, has value insofar as the viewer can relate it to some previous scene; but its aesthetic might also contribute to the general atmosphere of the experience. After the cultural experience, the individual will normally cross another threshold – go back into the daylight, say, or close the book; and her mind may struggle with the remnants of the experience as she leaves the cinema in a state of semi-blindness (Barthes 1975). At this point she can engage in various forms of *post hoc* elaboration: people talk about what they have seen, the meaning of song lyrics, about the plot of a novel; or they recall having been moved or upset by a story or a character in a film. This reflective examination can address two aspects: how the work is made, its technicalities as well as its anchorage in social reality or in a cultural tradition; and what 'it did' to them – what personal meaning it had for them, how it resonates with their own psychic reality (Tisseron 2000). Finally, afterwards – hours, days or even years later – an individual might think back about that film or novel, or recollection might be unexpectedly triggered by some event. Such recollection might bring him to see it or read it again, or invite him to reflect, through the memory of that

cases, I would argue, people are using the film, the book or the song as a *symbolic resource* (Zittoun 2006): just as the child once 'used' its mother to expand its control over the world, so young people and adults 'use' books, songs and films to reflect on what is happening in their lives, their relationships, and the world they live in.

There are several ways in which a researcher can learn about how people use films as symbolic resources. In what follows, I draw on autobiographical material – either people talking about their experience, such as in research interviews (Zittoun 2008; Zittoun and Grossen 2012); or people writing about them in a diary, an online blog, or an essay (Gilmour 2010; Zittoun, Cornish, Gillespie and Aveling 2008; Zittoun and Gillespie in press). A series of cues are indication that people are using a given film as symbolic resource: in their discourse, they mention films that 'changed their lives', or 'impressed' them, or were 'eye-openers'. They might also mention that a film 'helped them', or 'was useful'. They will often choose to see the film again, come back to it, or share it with others. Following these criteria, I borrow on the diverse data to show how people seem to use films as symbolic resources. My argument is that as transitional phenomena mediated by complex semiotic objects, fictions – including films – enable a distancing from immediate, here-and-now, experience. Thanks to such distancing, film watching or remembering become a form of playing with the real and the possible, what is and what could be. This in turn can transform a person's other zone of experience – her inner life and her relationship with socially shared reality.

The use of films can participate in distancing in various ways. Firstly, viewers often talk about how a film functioned for them as a revealing mirror, enabling them to capture and reflect upon embodied, affective states. For example, in an autobiographical essay called 'I grew up in the cinema', a young French man, Gauthier Jurgensen, reflects on *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, US, 1967), one of many films that played an important role in his youth, and on his feeling of similarity with the hero, Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman):

Like the young Benjamin, I just finished my studies. My parents congratulated me many times. And, like him, I stay for hours sitting in my room. I look in the empty space and I wonder what I have to do to move to the next stage. All my life I thought it would be simple: kindergarten, school, college, university; study, get specialized, and work. No, it is not like that. There is a floating moment during which, like Benjamin, one stares at the

of Dustin Hoffman, is the silence of death that is in the head of the young graduate. Everything is so noisy around us: job offers, ambitious projects, parental expectations, the desire to get some rest (Jurgensen 2008: 14).

Jurgensen makes a precise analysis of the feelings of a young man alienated from the world, prisoner of his internal silence, and needing to break free of his parents. In order to do so, he makes use of *The Graduate* and its multimodal construction (the image of Dustin Hoffman in a diving suit in the swimming pool; the film's theme music, 'The Sound of Silence') to reflect upon his own emotional and existential situation. The film seems to have captured and reflected this complex existential situation, as well as offering the viewer a term to name that state – that of a 'graduate'.

Distancing from immediate experience can go one step further: when a situation in a film enables a person to identify a *category* of actions or experiences. This is the case with Ismaël, a French-speaking young man aged 17, who was interviewed as part of a research project on the use of symbolic resources by secondary school students in Switzerland.¹ Ismaël mentions a film that he often watches, *Remember the Titans* (Boaz Yakin, US, 2000). The film shows how a mixed-race football team manages to overcome racism in the team itself and also in their opponents, with all the players eventually united in a common song chanted as the teams enter in the field. As with Gauthier Jurgensen, people will often start to use a film as a symbolic resource when they find something in the fictional world that resonates with them – characters, emotional situations, events and so on. The interviewer asked Ismaël about this experience:

Interviewer: How come you resonate with the movie – did you experience racism personally?

Ismaël: Actually, when I was younger, during a period I had a cousin who was a racist and he was always telling me that I was, well, that if one is not a racist one cannot be a good Swiss or so; so I told myself I could be a racist too, I sort of thought that it was a matter of style; but then after, seeing that movie, I reflected and I told myself that I didn't need to do that.

It seems that Ismaël initially identified spontaneously with the most racist characters of the film: like them, he would probably affirm his difference from young coloured people. But the evolution and resolu-

way to win as a team is to play united, and to achieve this encourages them to sing a unifying song, seems to have invited him to reflect upon his real-life position and his self-identification as a racist. Hence we might think that the film made him aware, through the fiction, of the possibility of overcoming race-based boundaries, and of the benefits of opening oneself up to different young people (the film emphasises the emotional and moral strength of the unified group singing its song while confronting the opposing team). From then on, Ismaël would often watch the film again in specific situations:

Interviewer: Could you say when you feel like seeing the movie again?

Ismaël: For example, mornings, when I am watching Euro News, and I see bomb attacks or so, in the evening I might feel watching a bit of it.

Interviewer: You see bits... (..) what are the bits which...

Ismaël: Impressed me most, it's when they enter on the football field because they decided to make a song together in order to show everyone that they could associate together with that song.

In this case, Ismaël seems to be using the film as a resource for dealing with racism and intergroup violence as these issues appear in the television news. The film reflects, to some extent, similar events; in addition, the film offers categories and moral principles to reflect upon such events; and finally, it offers a possible solution to such conflicts. Hence, the film becomes a means of developing more complex understandings of real-life events.

The use of symbolic resources can even assume a more general value. Interviewed as part of a research project on youth transition in the UK,² Randy is a young man in his early twenties who had often moved house during his childhood and who became a keen film fan, encouraged in this by his father. He eventually developed an informed passion for cinema, and learned to appreciate classic, complex films such as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, US, 1943). Reflecting on his long history of film-going, Randy suggests that it developed his 'romanticism':

Randy: I think it just... it made me always see... relationships just having to be special. [...] It is a cliché about... movies and stuff [...] But I don't think... It is not – as it were – romantic in a love sense? I think it is in a life sense? Making me more – less cynical, I think. And believing that

think it just made me view, about how friendships, or relationships might be. And I think possibly, one of the reasons why... I stopped watching as many movies, because I got to enter strong a personal relationship (Zittoun 2008: 94).

Films made him develop a generally 'romantic' frame of mind, and this led him to enter relationships with certain expectations: using the films, he imagined how his relationships might work out. Thus, general values seem to have consequences for specific courses of action and emotions, which can then be encouraged or dismissed.

The use of symbolic resources can also facilitate thinking about experiences in *time* – in relation, that is, to past and future experiences. Some films are used as a means of recreating or keeping alive memories of the past. Hence the narrator of David Gilmour's novel *The Film Club* tries to understand why his adolescent son seems to be watching a particular film over and over again. He eventually realises that the film's main character resembles his son's former girlfriend, who had left him heart-broken: 'And I understood suddenly why the movie had caught my attention, why that particular movie, *Chungking Express*. Because the beautiful girl in it reminded him of Rebecca; and watching the movie was a little bit like being with her' (Gilmour 2010: 139).

On the other hand, a film can be used as a means of reflecting on the future. Also interviewed in the UK project, Lily, in her twenties, spontaneously mentioned the film *After Life* (Hirokazu Koreeda, Japan, 1998) as having made a great impression on her when she was faced with decisions about her own future. The film is about dead people stranded in a kind of limbo: they have to choose the best memory of their life, and this will be recreated as their personal eternal paradise. This is how Lily describes it:

I think it was called *After Life* – it is a Japanese movie [...] it is like an immigration office, and they have to pick up a memory... and it is all about the selection process... So you have young people, you have old people, and all kind of people. And it is all about this process, you know, about going, choosing, and being able or not unable to choose, and these people who are unable to choose, so they are stuck there, for centuries. I always think of that – I think about that often for one reason or another. [...] It is interesting, because when I watched that movie, I didn't think automatically, what would I choose? But the people I was watching the movie with, just asked me – what would I choose, I really don't know – it would be sort of logical, but I didn't ask myself [...] I think about it when

between being content, and not, or having lots of energy, or not much energy. I mean all these things I have been thinking for a long time, it is a schedule for life. So every time these things come out, and because I am thinking about the future quite a lot right now, and about people, whether they are staying my life or not staying in my life. Because how people choose their memories, has a lot to do with how people choose their lives (Zittoun 2007: 120).

Here, Lily describes how, at her friends' request, she began to wonder what 'best memory' she herself would choose were she dead; and how this in turn brings her to question how she must live in the future, so that in a hypothetical afterlife she might have enough good memories to choose from. The film has become a symbolic resource that Lily draws on now that she has to make choices: it enables her to imagine hypothetical future positions, and from these to guide her current choices.

People engage in cultural experiences such as films, for which they have to draw on their inner worlds and life experiences as well as on their understanding of films as cultural constructs. My main argument here is not only that people engage with, or immerse themselves in, these fictional experiences; but also that, because of the very specific semiotic constitution of these cultural experiences, they consequently actually develop new means of distancing themselves from, and reflecting on, their lives. Hence films become symbolic resources that enable people to take progressive distance from affective experiences; to name them, organise them, and from this develop general orientations in life. They also enable the individual to maintain a sense of continuity with their past and with persons and places that are no longer in their lives, and to play with and imagine possible futures.

The use of symbolic resources can thus be seen as a form of everyday creativity, an adult variant of playing, enabling people to see what is there in a fresh light and to imagine what might be. Taking place in potential space, the use of symbolic resources can affect both one's relationship with oneself and one's relationship with the 'real world'. On the one hand, such creativity has consequences for people's sense of who they are: thus Ismaël uses *Remember the Titans* to reflect on his identity as a racist and to change his understanding of himself and his relationships with others; Jurgensen reflects on his own situation as a young man who, for the first time, has to take decisions for himself; Randy's film-cultivated romanticism helps him develop a romantic

or works through, a lost relationship with the help of a film. On the other hand, the use of films as symbolic resources can also be part of people's reading and understanding of the world in which they live, the socially shared reality. So, for example, Ismaël finds support in *Remember the Titans* in coming to terms with the harshness of world politics; Jurgensen develops an acute understanding of social demands on young people's trajectories through his viewing of *The Graduate*. In all these cases, the core process is *playing* – in the sense of manipulating what is given by the films, drawing on inner experiences, and creating new forms of understanding in the potential space offered by the film experience. Hence, Lily, Ismaël and Randy not only consider what *is*, but also – thanks to fiction – imagine what *might be*, or what would be if things were different: in this way, they create their own life paths.

* * *

Winnicott described three distinct zones of experiences; and what I have shown in this chapter is that the use of films, which develops through cultural experience taking place in potential space, engages a sort of creativity in which an individual may actually change her relationship with the two other spheres of experience: her inner life and her relationship with the external world. This circulation between the three zones – the potential zone of experiencing films, interiority and socially shared reality – is what Winnicott called *creative living*, the process by which we can constantly refresh our gaze on the world around us:

In creative living you or I find that everything we do strengthens the feeling that we are alive, that we are ourselves. Once can look at a tree (not necessarily at a picture) and look creatively (Winnicott 1986b: 43).

Notes

- 1 This research project, co-directed with Michèle Grossen from the University of Lausanne, with the collaboration of Olivia Lempen, Christophe Matthey, Sheila Padiglia and Jenny Ros, and supported by the Swiss National Fund (FNS no. 100013-116040/1-2), aimed at identifying the variety of cultural experiences in which young people aged 16–20 engaged, in and out of school. The research documented cultural activities of about 200 young people in three secondary

and semi-structured interviews with teachers and with about 20 young people (see Grossen, Zittoun and Ros 2012; Zittoun and Grossen 2012).

- 2 Randy was interviewed as part of a research project on youth transitions in the UK, based on 20 case studies. He was part of a group of students approached because they had recently moved onto campus to undertake university studies. The interview was 'on the role of culture in your life, especially in times of change'; and questions addressed changes recently experienced, past transitions, and plans for the future; they explored what the interviewee found 'helpful' in these times of change; and particular attention was given to mentions of cultural elements such as films, novels, etc. (Zittoun 2006).

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