

## LOVING THE PERFECT OTHER\*

GABRIEL LAZĂR\*\*

**ABSTRACT.** The article brings together a Charles Bronson ‘false’ western and Jacques Lacan’s ‘theory of the four discourses’ in order to illustrate the excessive symbolization of the hysteric jouissance, in its manifestation as a quest against satisfaction, a quest for the perfect Other. Employing Freud’s concepts of death drive and repetition compulsion, the hysteric position is further distinguished from both the obsessional subject and ‘non-hysteric’ woman, which has access to a non-phallic, supplementary jouissance. A thief that stole a widow’s heart is believed dead, and she uses his death to raise their short relation to a perfect, ideal level. When the thief returns, he is rejected, so that she can maintain the absolute, symbolic love for his *dead-perfect* alter ego.

**Keywords:** *hysteric jouissance, Lacan, perfect love, theory of the four discourses, death drive.*

It is certainly not a famous movie... It was released in 1976 in United States, and it stars Charles Bronson and Jill Ireland, who is actually his real-life wife. They also played together in several other movies – at the time *From Noon till Three* was released, they were married eight years and starred together in twelve productions. This movie is advertised as a “western comedy”, since it has plenty of amusing scenes; yet, if we look only at its ending (one of the two main characters shoots herself, and the other ends locked up in the loony bin), we could see that there's more to it than a comedy. It could be called a “false western”, since it has the right setting and the basis of the plot also fits – a bank robbery gone wrong – yet it is about something else entirely.

Charles Bronson is known for playing in much more action-oriented movies, some of them quite violent, in which he usually plays the role of a fighting hero, a “tough guy”, a “real man” so to speak. For example, in *Death Wish* (1974), he is an

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\* A reading of the movie *From Noon till Three* (USA, MGM Studios Inc., 1976).

\*\* Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Electronics, Telecommunications and Information Technology, Communications Department. Founding Member of the Forum of the Lacanian Field Romania.

architect who takes revenge for the death of his wife by hunting the street punks who killed her. In *Death Wish II* (1982), he plays mostly the same role, avenging the death of his daughter and housekeeper. *Death Wish III* – it's a friend's death that must be avenged. In *Death Wish IV* (1987), his girlfriend's daughter dies from an overdose, and Charles Bronson destroys the responsible drug cartel... *Death Wish 5* – his fiancée is killed... A lot of blood, gunshots, death and not too much love in these movies.

In contrast, *From Noon Till Three* is a slow paced movie, and much more focused on the “affairs of the heart”. It's certainly an atypical movie for Charles Bronson, and that, for me, makes it even more interesting. Just a few words about the director – Frank D. Gilroy – he is also the screenplay writer and, moreover, the author of the original novel on which the screenplay is based<sup>1</sup>. He also wrote plays, and his movies also seem to retain that theatre-like quality, sometimes not to his advantage; his 1977 *Nero Wolfe* adaptation for the ABC television waited two years before being broadcast, because the ABC executives felt that the movie was too slow and the actors were talking too much.

## Plot

The movie's very first scene starts with a dream: Graham Dorsey (Charles Bronson) is part of a gang, on their way to rob a bank in a small town nearby. They stop in a forest, and Graham takes a midday nap – and has a nightmare: he dreams that the robbery fails and his comrades are shot one after another, and he wakes with a scream right when a gun (in his dream) is pointing at him, ready to take his life. The nightmare leaves a strong impression upon him and seems to give him second thoughts about the robbery, and – after they resume their journey – he leads his horse into a prairie dog hole, without anybody noticing, in order to make its leg go lame. They now have to shoot the horse, and, since they need another one, the gang stops at the ranch of the widow Amanda Starbuck (Jill Ireland), still at some distance from the town. She denies having a horse and Graham is sent to check the barn. He does see a horse, but lies to his men about seeing one, so what he wanted happens: he is left behind at the ranch, to wait three hours for their return. Since he's also quite impressed by the beautiful widow, he convinces her into showing him all the rooms in the house, including the bedroom... of course, just to make sure that there's nobody else there hidden in the house. There, he finds out that the widow still keeps his dead husband's clothes lying on her bed,

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<sup>1</sup> The full name of the book is: *From Noon Till Three: The Possibly True and Certainly Tragic Story of an Outlaw and a Lady Whose Love Knew No Bounds* (Frank D. Gilroy, Doubleday, 1973).

undisturbed, just like they were on the night he died. She didn't use that bedroom since, making the room a museum, and much the same thing happened to the music instruments room. At this point, he throws away his gentleman's mask and tries to force upon her. After a fight, Mrs. Starbucks gives up, but resorts to another trick, by playing dead in the bed: "Enough! If you're so depraved you'd inflict your desires on an unwilling body, then – proceed!" Graham retorts with a similar trick, by pretending he is impotent, that, since "the one he loved" passed way, he can't... get it up. She believes him and, trying to help, the whole situation ends up with the "eunuch" making love three times with the former "unwilling body". In the time they have left, they declare their love to each other, bathe in a lake, talk about their future and dance to Amanda's mechanical music box, with Graham dressed in Mr. Starbuck's clothes. Soon they find out that the robbery went wrong, the gang members were caught, and they will be hanged at 5 p.m. that afternoon. Graham is actually quite happy with the situation, since all he wants now is to stay with Amanda, but she doesn't see the things in quite the same way: he's a man, he has to save his friends, with any cost, even if this means giving up everything, her person included. Graham sees that he must play along, and he rides out pretending to go after his comrades. His idea in fact – is to only take another nap, after he'd left her sight.

In the meantime, and unfortunately for him, the town citizens formed a posse, knowing there's a missing outlaw, and they start chasing him. Graham has to run, hide and, in order to escape the hunters, he forces a dentist he meets on the way to swap clothes. The dentist is shot, and everybody assumes Graham died, including Amanda, who faints at the moment she sees the body covered in blood and dressed in Mr. Starbuck tuxedo. Because they recognize the tuxedo and seeing that Amanda is wearing that day a lively red dress (after two years of mourning and black dresses), the town people realize that she was having an affair with Graham. At first, they ostracize her, but a courageous act from her part, going in the middle of the town and professing her love to the dead outlaw, makes everybody's heart melt. The town forgives her, and she's admired for her honesty and love. She's also heard by a writer that happened to be that day in the city; and soon enough, her story becomes a worldwide bestseller, followed by a stage play and a popular song that follows the notes from Amanda's music box. Her house becomes a museum, and the city blossoms with tourists coming to visit her house and take autographs. She's now wearing white, and she's wealthy and famous. Meanwhile, Graham lives the destiny of the dentist whose clothes he had stolen: the dentist was for some time replacing gold teeth with "cheap substitute that didn't last a week"; and soon Graham is arrested and put in prison for one year by a judge with thick spectacles and a front ugly-looking tin tooth ...

After a year, Graham returns in a disguise to the town. After visiting his grave, he goes to Amanda's ranch, with a group of tourists, staying again behind and trying to show himself to her, hoping to renew their relationship. **She doesn't recognize him**, even after he removes his false beard: "he's not as tall, nor as handsome, as the Graham in her book". And when he chases her again to the bedroom, in a desperate repetition, shouting to her things about them that he believes nobody know, she shouts "That's in the book! It's in the book!". In the end, she does recognize him, when Graham shows her the only thing that... wasn't in the book. She is now completely lost; his "not-dying" act is for her a huge blow: the legend she created, about Graham and Amanda, will now be destroyed. He can't even pretend to be somebody else, and live with her, since this would still ruin the legend. In her words: "That was before, when there were just the two of us! Now we have all the others to consider [...] All the people throughout the world, who have been affected by our story!" and "You and I have become more than ourselves. Being more than ourselves we're obligated to subordinate our lesser selves to our greater selves!"

Of course, Graham doesn't want fame, he just wants a happy life. In a final pretense, she hugs him, and taking his gun, shoots herself, after first pointing the gun at him. Now Graham has lost everything: the woman he loved, and also – his real identity. Women he'd known before, outlaws he'd ridden with, they all fail to see through the veil of the shrouding legend. At the same time, he can't escape it: the music of the music box now plays in every bar, driving him mad, and he even walks in on a stage production of his love story. Everybody laughs when he says who he is, and in the end he's sent to an asylum; at this point the movie ends with the big smile on Graham's face: finally, people recognize him.

### Analytical detour

In his XVIIth seminar<sup>2</sup>, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan answered to the '68 events with his "theory of the four discourses", each based on a minimal number of places and variables (four), and each establishing a specific social link. This theory was built on a number of concepts elaborated in his previous seminars, including careful, thorough readings of a number of Freudian texts. Lacan's efforts aimed to recast Freud's psychoanalysis in a more modern framework, free from any mythical dimension, in which discourse is analyzed as an algebraic, structural form, a "logico-mathematical" reduction. The purpose of such an endeavor being that of an

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Sem. XVII - The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 1969-1970.

easier integration into the analytic practice of certain Freudian theoretical innovations that, according to Lacan, Freud didn't take into account well enough in his practice.

The first terms involved as variables in Lacan's discourses theory come from an older, almost invariant like definition given by him during his teaching to both the signifier and the subject: "the signifier ( $S_1$ ) is that which represents the subject ( $\$$ ) for another signifier ( $S_2$ )". More precisely elaborated, the signifier  $S_1$ , called the *master signifier*, represents the subject for *all other signifiers* ( $S_2$ ); the latter are also called "the field of Other", "the battery of signifiers" or "knowledge" (*savoir*). The notion of the signifier is taken from Saussure, Lacan keeping the idea of "signifiers" as related to language, acting as differential elements that constitute what Lacan called *the symbolic order*. This definition provides the basic matrix on which the discourse apparatus will be built:

$$\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow S_2$$

We can say here that the  $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$  relationship presents the first half of the structural apparatus proposed by Lacan, but one in which the *traumatic* aspect is still missing – it shows a logical articulation completely caught in the dimension of the signifier<sup>3</sup>.

In order to complete the schema, Lacan adds the traumatic event, in its relation to the concepts of *repetition* and *jouissance* derived from Freud's text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*<sup>4</sup>. In this writing, Freud uses, among other elements, the recurrent dreams of war neurotics to infer the existence of something beyond the pleasure principle, older and more fundamental, that he calls "the principle of repetition compulsion" and advances the notion of a "death drive". He attributes this compulsion to every neurotic, as something often unpleasant, related to their behavior, which can be traced and retraced during their lives: personal fate, essential trait of character. The definition given to the purpose of a dream is changed too: instead of "satisfaction of a desire", the primordial role is rather a protective investment of psychic energies in order to master the traumatic impressions. At last, trying to connect sexual drives and the death drive, Freud searches for a common element and finally he states that every drive is an "inherent tendency of the living organism to *reproduce* [repeat] a state from the past".

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<sup>3</sup> J.- A. Miller, *Illuminations profanes*, Cours 11, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1990.

For Lacan, this “*reproduction* of a state from the past” is tightly woven with knowledge - a knowledge without an Ego, which appears together with the drive, so that its origins elude us. The knowledge involved in the drive is such that, through repetition, creates a loss of *jouissance*, imposing limits in the deathly “too much” of the satisfaction provided by sexual drives. In this loss of *jouissance*, another, substitutive, *jouissance* can appear – similar to the “drive sublimation” mentioned by Freud in his *Fort-Da* example. This surrogate *jouissance* will be called by Lacan “surplus *jouissance*” (Fr. *plus-de-jouir*) and its notation gives us the fourth element in the discursive schema: the lost object of primordial satisfaction – *a*:

$$\frac{S_1}{S} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

At the level of *jouissance*, the subject is at first only this lack (a *trou*-matism) and here Lacan advances a new definition: “the subject [is that] which a certain loss represents”. In this empty place, repetition and loss will create the subject’s unary trait, his “essential” character, the first master signifier:  $S_1$ . The first articulated relation  $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$  can now take place and, with it, the subject represented by  $S_1$  is born. At the basis of the four discourses we thus find *jouissance*, trauma and repetition. How did Lacan arrive at his theory? One year earlier, in his XVIth seminar<sup>5</sup>, he starts from the Freudian distinction between the hysteric position and that of the obsessional, based on their relation to the traumatic event. For the hysteric, the lost object is seen as an aversion, an object of dissatisfaction, while the obsessional perceives it as a “too much”, an excess of pleasure – in another words, they start by choosing a different side of the coin (i.e. the drive). Lacan translates this difference as a different wager, punctuated by repetition, to be placed by the future subject when entering the world of the signifier; a Pascalian wager made by the subject with the Other, with a different stake: the man risks his life, while for the woman, the stake is her *jouissance*.

This “risk of life” will be next associated by Lacan with the Hegelian master-slave dialectic ( $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$ ) and the “fight to the death” for recognition from the Other: the one fighting to the end is the master, while the other one chickens out but saves his body, keeping his *jouissance* - the slave, and here we're already very close to the “discourse of the master”, already illustrated in the last formula. Repeating the process, risking this unknown life more and more, makes the master alienate himself: he can get new slaves, new priceless objects, he will still be giving up his life, and

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Sem. XVI - From an Other to the Other*, 1968-1969.

get farther and farther away from any relation to *jouissance*, which he can get only piece by piece from the others. Lacan models this as a Fibonacci series with an infinite limit and associates it with Freud's "interminable (infinite) analysis". Whereas in the case of the hysteric, since the stake is different, the series has a limit, which is  $a$  – the price of the hysteric as object of the Other's desire. Here the analogy is with Freud's (successful) "terminable (finite) analysis" and it is another way of saying that, in analysis, the subject should be put through a hysteric position, in contrast with enforcing his obsessional theories (as an aside: in the first case, we can see how the "discourse of the hysteric" is created; in the second, the "University discourse").

Due to her closer relation with *jouissance* (which, we saw, is coupled with knowledge), the hysteric is the one animated, throughout her life, by the "desire to know". The hysterics were those who made Freud listen to them and allowed him to build and advance in his conception of the unconscious. Things are here more complicated: for those in the feminine position, Lacan differentiates two types of *jouissance*:

- one which is not specific to the hysteric, associated with her body, "already there" – and which will become, much later, the "pas tout" of woman;
- the second one – of the relation with a man, or with the Other, that of being "the woman of a man", a *jouissance* satisfying itself with the *jouissance* of the man – and something that the hysteric tends to symbolize in excess, to render "absolute", *perfect*. Hence the effects: she will be dissatisfied with any other, non-absolute *jouissance*, and her symbolic relation with a man can become much more important than the actual, physical relation with him.

To conclude this detour, man's position can be seen as associated with  $S_1$  (placed in the dominant position in the discourse of the master), which can be interpreted in various ways using concepts such as "univocal", "self-consciousness" or even "the illusion of the continuity of the I" as Lacan puts it. The hysteric position rotates the variables in their places with a quarter rotation (the specific *jouissance* of the "non-hysteric" woman will be discussed by Lacan in later seminars) and thus places the divided subject on the dominant position, questioning the supposed unity of the master ( $\rightarrow S_1$ ). The hysteric "makes the man" (Fr. *faire l'homme*) by trying to make him "want to know" ( $S_2$  as product) what her price is outside any discourse, what is her truth ( $a$ ):

$$\frac{\mathcal{S}}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

What Lacan does criticize in the case of the hysteric is its absolute, excessively symbolized *jouissance*, which makes her give up *any* other *jouissance*, thus cutting off her own roots for any other - even sublime, "mystic" - *jouissance*. In this respect, Lacan also "attacks" some of the myths proposed by Freud: the concept of a primordial, primitive father for example, enjoying all the women and suggesting a master who also masters *jouissance* will only enforce the Superego and the idea of a "combined parent" that is all-knowing and all-loving, a perfect being... An analysis where the analyst occupies the place of mother-and-father for the hysteric patient can only finish with *Penisneid* and a major dissatisfaction. For Lacan, on the contrary, the master is also castrated, he's not a master of *jouissance*, and he is a master only because he managed, somehow, to prove that he can put language to a good use: in Sophocles' tragedy, Oedipus is not Oedipus because he killed his father and slept with his mother, but because he answered to the riddle of the Sphinx in a *certain* way.

### Interpretation

We can now return to the movie, and try to give it an interpretation, based on some of the notions raised above and also with an eye on this "hysteric excessive symbolization of *jouissance*". The music played by the mechanical music box, on which they dance, acts like the repetition, around which everything revolves: it's the same music with which the movie begins, the one on which they dance, dressed as Mr. and Mrs. Starbuck, and the same driving Graham crazy towards the end. A melody played by a "dead", mechanical instrument, repeating a tune similar to that from a ballerina music box; and even if the song remains the same, its perceived significance constantly changes, from something nice and innocent at the beginning, to something almost infernal to the end of the movie. Amanda will only make love with Graham when his ruse ("can't get it up") makes her believe she's the only one who could save him, the one who could make a man out of him, the one who could raise his dignity to its former status.

Before making love with Graham, Amanda was dressed in black; her husband, dead two years ago, had 67 years at the time of his death. And she was still keeping the bedroom untouched, as a museum, to honor his memory. It's a little bit unclear what type of physical relation they had, even when he was alive, but we can see, from her behavior after two years of his passing away, how much she was still attached to his symbolic stature. Although, not enough *yet* - she will have to repeat this process with Graham Dorsey, by putting him in the place of his dead husband (he literally occupies Mr. Starbuck's place, sleeps in his bed and wears



his clothes, invited by Amanda); when they hear about the hanging of his comrades, she basically sends him to his death – we could say, on one hand, in order to complete the repetition and reach her former widow state. On the other hand, it's more important for her how one dies, than how one lives – which again reveals the importance, for her, of the symbolic register. After bathing at the lake, while they hold together, she tells him: “If I should die this very minute, I wouldn't care a bit”, to which Graham retorts: “Well, if it's all the same to you, I would rather live”. This dialog shows perfectly their positions, the two sides of the coin, so different even when they're together: she's ready to die for their love, while he will do anything he can to save his skin (and keep his *jouissance*)... They are both true to their words: when the people in the town start blaming her for sleeping with Graham, she goes to confront them with no fear of being lynched. At the same time, Graham knows perfectly well how **not** to risk his life, and he manages to stay alive throughout the whole movie; yet, stripped of all his symbolic status, he can't find a single place in the world that would recognize him, with a single exception (the loony bin).

The “historical” dimension, associated with the hysteric's trauma and memories, is also quite present in her discourse: at the lake, when Graham tells Amanda that their gang, after robbing a bank, won't claim the heist but will rather announce that other gangs did it, she is shocked: “But they will go down in history, and you'll be unremembered!”. In the creation of her written love story, and believing him dead, Amanda rises the man she loved, and their relation, to an impossibly high status (not in the least, by describing him as *taller* than he was). This time the entire house becomes a museum, and she is also a part of it: dressed in white, she receives visitors, she's a part of the tour. At his return, Graham has no chance of competing with his *dead-perfect* alter ego. When faced again with the choices, “live a happy life” with him as a future banker, or fame, death and the immortality of their love story, she chooses the latter, sacrificing, in her own words, her “lower self”. A love larger than life, boundless. When the veil of her beautiful story was ripped, the only other defense she had against her lack was death. Compared with Amanda, while she choose her *jouissance* of the perfect love story and the perfect (dead) man, and nourishes it, making also the town prosper and making them famous in the whole world, Graham suffers all the effects of the spreading of their legend, wherever he goes: her choice of *jouissance* changes the world, she has created a new myth, and this is now hunting him, and his only escape is to hide from the symbolic order, to hide from the world.

Where I find the movie touching is in the three hours of happiness they briefly enjoy, like a small parenthesis in their destinies: they can actually “meet” because she's not yet completely taken with the perfect *jouissance*, and, for his

part, he could play the role of the master in the Lacanian sense, at the right time: he knew what to say, to make her love him. A beautiful image of the “sexual relation that doesn't exist” as Lacan says: when people meet, they meet by luck, by mistake, or when they manage somehow to cheat their fate. Otherwise, both characters in the movie seem like puppets driven to their fates by choices decided for them (by them?) a long time before the movie action even begins.

In the end, coming back to Charles Bronson and Jill Ireland as a real-life couple playing together in this movie, it may have been a chance for them, by enacting Graham and Amanda, to extract, let's say, that possible “fate” from their own marriage. They probably, maybe, didn't quite need it, but I think it is interesting that, playing in this “comedy”, they were at least given this chance.

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