

# Couple and Family Psychoanalysis

An international journal promoting  
the theory and practice of working with  
couple and family relationships from  
a psychoanalytic perspective

**Special issue**  
**Couples and families in film**

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### Address for enquiries about submissions and books for review

The Editor, *Couple and Family Psychoanalysis*,

Tavistock Relationships,

10-11 New Street, London, EC2M 4TP

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## COUPLE AND FAMILY PSYCHOANALYSIS

### Aims and scope

*Couple and Family Psychoanalysis* is an international journal that aims to promote the theory and practice of working with couple and family relationships from a psychoanalytic perspective. It seeks to provide a forum for disseminating current ideas and research and for developing clinical practice.

We welcome contributions from around the world, whether full papers or shorter review articles, on subjects relevant to the journal. Such subjects may include clinical case studies, theoretical perspectives, literature reviews, historical contributions, qualitative research, clinical training and supervisory practice, policy, and service developments.

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## EDITORIAL

### ***Perrine Moran and Martha Doniach***

In producing a special issue of the journal on *Couples and Families in Film*, we intentionally kept the title as broad as possible, inviting contributors to interpret the theme freely. What resulted is a rich array of articles, and we wished we had enough space to include more. Like dreams, films tell stories that reveal truths. Psychoanalysis enriches our understanding of film, and films, in turn, illuminate aspects of our patients' lives—and our own. Unanticipated connections between articles and reviews revealed common thematic threads that we chose to follow organically. Consequently, we have modified the usual format of the journal and woven film reviews into the larger discussion rather than presenting them in a separate section.

Starting with the impact of early trauma, Christopher Clulow reflects on the intricate and often painful interplay between abandonment and adoption, highlighting how these experiences contribute to shaping an individual's sense of self. Following the internal and external journey of the Franco-Korean female protagonist of Chou's film *Return to Seoul* (France, 2022), Clulow explores identity formation, focusing on the complex dynamics of cross-cultural and cross-racial adoptions. Through a sensitive analysis of the film, he illustrates how early disrupted attachments can influence a person's ability to cultivate and sustain meaningful relationships in adulthood and how conflict over commitment, heightened by adoption, interferes with experiencing a coherent sense of self and felt security in couple relationships.

Cristelle Lebon's review of the South Korean film *Broker* (Kore-eda, 2022), provides a compelling reflection on the "process of family subjectivation". She examines how a group of marginalised individuals, each grappling with personal histories of loss and abandonment, unexpectedly form a makeshift family. Together, they embark on a journey to find adoptive parents for a baby that one member has decided to relinquish, portraying the complex ways in which familial bonds can emerge and evolve in the face of adversity.

Massimiliano Sommantico stresses how unresolved mourning and loss affect identity and sibling dynamics. He offers a thought-provoking analysis of the consequences of being a replacement child and how this influenced the complex and troubled relationship between Vincent and Theo van Gogh, thus giving prominence to the fraternal link, an area that psychoanalysis has historically neglected. Connections are made between Vincent's life struggles, mental health, and the nature of his art. The article also demonstrates that selected experiences, "facts", and memories can lead to significantly different interpretations, as illustrated in the two films Sommantico examines: *Vincent and Theo* (USA, 1990) by Robert Altman and *At Eternity's Gate* (co-production, 2018) by Julian Schnabel.

Andrea Sabbadini examines the profound effects of unresolved mourning on family dynamics in his exploration of Pasolini's *Theorem* (Italy, 1968), Moretti's *The Son's Room* (Italy, 2001), and Vinterberg's *Festen* (Denmark, 1998). Sharing a common theme, the three films centre on traumatic and disruptive losses that prompt the characters to reconsider their relationships and values. Sabbadini reminds us of Freud's original intention with psychoanalysis: its primary purpose is not to "normalise" individuals but to challenge the status quo, disrupt existing systems, and initiate meaningful change. The pathological patterns observed within individuals often mirror societal issues, particularly through institutions such as the family that thrive on keeping secret that which ought to be exposed.

This aligns with Krisztina Glausius' review of Jonathan Glazer's film *The Zone of Interest* (co-production, 2023). The film tells history from the perspective of the seemingly idyllic family life of Rudolf Höss, the Commandant of Auschwitz, from his home, just behind the wall of the concentration camp. The horror and scandal of the atrocities being committed are concealed—yet not truly hidden—behind the façade of normal family life, and we experience first-hand what turning a blind eye means. Glausius points out how easily one can even be led to empathise with Höss and his wife's anxiety when a possible move threatens their marriage, while simultaneously being repulsed by their inhumanity.

Joanna Rosenthal evokes the fragility and resilience of long-term relationships through her examination of Richard Linklater's *Before Midnight* (USA, 2013), the final installment of a trilogy. In this last chapter, the couple have been living together for close to ten years. Rosenthal's interpretation of their emotional journey over a day and a night employs the metaphor of hide-and-seek to examine the psychological mechanisms that maintain love in the face of accumulated resentment and regret. Her analysis identifies the significance of "seeking" and "being found", both within the couple's intimate dynamics and in the therapist's work, and their use to foster emotional connection and deepen or prevent intimacy.

Kate Thompson's review of Justine Triet's film *Anatomy of a Fall* (France, 2023) dives into the darker aspects of couple rivalry and their damaging consequences, raising important questions about gender roles and maternal and paternal stereotypes. Thompson's examination underlines how parents of a disabled child may try to protect themselves by isolating their child from the outside world. Often, children become sidelined but still find themselves caught in the middle of their parents' conflicts. In this film, a blind child who is the first to find the body of his dead father has enough insight to influence the outcome of a courtroom battle.

Shifting from parenting a disabled child to parenting an imaginary one, we now focus on the long-term relationship portrayed in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Mike Nichol's classic 1966 American film. Aleksandra Novakovic presents an exploration of the concept of "couple fit" as illustrated by the couple at the centre of the film. In the first part of her article, Novakovic argues that the inner representations of couples reflect various unconscious dimensions



related to parental relationships and other significant internal figures. In the second part of her article, she departs from traditional analytical writing by citing extracts from an experiential discussion of the film within a group that usually meets to discuss poetry. This juxtaposition invites the reader to respond with an open mind to different ways of engaging with the same material.

In her review of *Maestro* (Cooper, USA, 2023), a biopic about Leonard Bernstein, Marian O'Connor praises the film's attention to period detail and the intensity of the musical sequences, yet observes her lack of emotional engagement with the film. Pointing to the potential denial that can obscure couple dynamics, she reflects on the film's lacunae and wonders about the true impact on the couple and the family of Bernstein's homosexuality, which was illegal, and the confusing secrecy that surrounded it. When his wife's terminal illness brings the couple back together after the actress' brief bid for freedom, O'Connor suggests that Bernstein's devotion to his wife, as portrayed in the film, may have owed less to genuine love for another than to narcissistic self-delusion.

In "The phoenix of alterity", Judith Pickering examines two films. *Into the Darkest Night*, made by her in Australia in 1977, is a black and white 16 mm film about a young couple's relationship, set in the 1960s. The film depicts the process of idealisation and the disillusionment that follows it. The second film, *Shadowlands* (Richard Attenborough, UK, 1993), dramatises the relationship between C. S. Lewis and Joy Davidman, portraying the progression to a mature love and marriage rooted in altruism and the appreciation of a loved one beyond the distortion of mutual projections. Emmanuel Levinas' concept of alterity—acknowledging the unknowable nature of the other—provides a useful framework for analysing the theme of love in both films and the journey from the despair of disillusionment to the wonderment of a love anchored in reality and made stronger by the confrontation with mortality and death.

Cinema, like any art form, has the potential to be both entertaining and transformative; this is reflected in the following two book reviews. In Andrew Asibong's book *Post Traumatic Attachments to the Eerily Moving Image: Something to Watch Over Me* (2022), Robert Monzo praises the author's insightful exploration of trauma in "eerie" cinema. He highlights that while these haunting films may reflect the pain of survivors, they also provide a space for healing and personal growth.

Catriona Wrottesley's review of *A Jungian Perspective on the Therapist–Patient Relationship in Film: Cinema As Our Therapist* by Ruth Netzer (2024) underlines the book's valuable contribution to Jungian film studies. Wrottesley appreciates Netzer's personal insights and accessible writing style, which illustrate how films can reflect the complexities of therapy and the roles of archetypes. By presenting cinema as both a mirror and a guide, Netzer also invites therapists to see films as transformative tools for self-reflection and professional development.

The tension between the determination to open one's eyes to reality, be it internal or external, and the tendency to turn a blind eye is characteristic of

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both psychoanalytic work and cinema. Both aim to show what is often hidden. We hope that by presenting an exploration of what the two together reveal about family and couple dynamics, this issue of the journal will inspire readers to continue to confront, analyse, and represent, through therapy or art, the deep contradictions and struggles of the world in which we live and love.