

Cinema and Psychoanalysis - Oscar & Wilder: **A limital case**

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Abstract

Abstract

This article aims to analyze the theme of borderline patients and trauma through an analysis of the Oscar & Wilder: Improbable Love film (Closet Monster). The film portrays the story of Oscar, a boy who goes through traumatic moments throughout his childhood, which, due to his subjective construction, have been updated in adulthood through the particular defense mechanisms of the borderline subject. We seek to understand how a traumatic situation is presented in a borderline structure, focusing on some works by Green and Ferenczi, among others, and relevant concepts from Freud for Psychoanalysis. Important themes are addressed regarding the subjective construction of these subjects, concerning the care of infants in the phase of primary narcissism, the concept of a dead mother, the drive circuit, the cleavage process, and the defense mechanisms that were evidenced in this structure of the main character. The approach to the theme of artistic production in these borderline cases is included, reflecting on these manifestations as a form of drive discharge in contrast to driving destiny.

Keywords: *hallucination, borderline state, sexuality, sublimation, trauma.*

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar a temática dos pacientes limítrofes e o trauma através da análise do filme Oscar e Wilder Amor Improvável (Closet Monster). O filme retrata a história de Oscar, um menino que passa por momentos traumáticos ao longo da sua infância que, devido a sua construção subjetiva, atualizaram-se na vida adulta, através de mecanismos de defesas particulares do sujeito limítrofe. Procura-se entender como se presentifica uma situação traumática em uma estrutura limítrofe, debruçando sobre algumas obras de Green e Ferenczi, entre outros, além de conceitos importantes de Freud para a psicanálise. Aborda-se temas importantes sobre a construção subjetiva desses sujeitos, em relação aos cuidados ao infans na fase do narcisismo primário, o conceito de “mãe morta”, circuito pulsional, o processo de clivagem e os mecanismos de defesa que ficaram evidenciados nessa estrutura do personagem principal. Inclui-se a abordagem da temática da produção artística nesses casos limítrofes, refletindo sobre essas manifestações como uma forma de descarga pulsional em contraponto a um destino pulsional.

Palavras-chave: *alucinação, estado limite, sexualidade, sublimação, trauma*

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la temática de los pacientes límite y el trauma por medio del análisis de la película *Oscar & Wilder Amor Improbable*. La película retrata la historia de Oscar, un niño que pasa por momentos traumáticos a lo largo de su niñez, que debido a su construcción subjetiva se actualizaron, en la vida adulta, por medio de mecanismos de defensas particulares del sujeto límite. Se busca entender cómo se presentifica una situación traumática en una estructura límite, volcando en algunas obras de Green y Ferenczi, entre otros, además de conceptos importantes de Freud para el Psicoanálisis. Se enfoca en temas importantes sobre la construcción subjetiva de estos sujetos, en relación con los cuidados a los infantes en la fase del narcisismo primario, el concepto de madre muerta, circuito pulsional, el proceso de clivaje y los mecanismos de defensa que se mostraron en esta estructura del personaje principal. Se incluye el enfoque de la temática de la producción artística en estos casos límite, reflejando sobre estas manifestaciones como una forma de descarga pulsional en contrapunto a un rumbo pulsional.

Palabras Clave: alucinación, estado límite, sexualidad, sublimación, trauma.

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser le thème des patients borderline et des traumatismes à travers l'analyse du film *Closet Monster*. Le film raconte l'histoire d'Oscar, un garçon qui traverse des moments traumatisants au cours de son enfance, dont les effets se réactualisent à l'âge adulte en raison de sa construction subjective, à travers des mécanismes de défense caractéristiques du sujet limite. Il cherche à comprendre comment une situation traumatique est présentée dans une structure limite, en se concentrant sur certaines œuvres de Green et Ferenczi, entre autres, ainsi que sur des concepts clés de Freud pour la psychanalyse. Il aborde des questions importantes sur la construction subjective de ces sujets en lien avec la prise en charge des nourrissons dans la phase de narcissisme primaire, le concept de mère morte, le circuit pulsionnel, le processus de clivage et les mécanismes de défense, tels qu'ils se manifestent dans la structure du personnage principal. Il inclut l'approche du thème de la production artistique dans ces cas limites, en réfléchissant à ces manifestations comme une forme de décharge pulsionnelle en contrepoint à un destin pulsionnel.

Mots-clés : hallucination, état limite, sexualité, sublimation, traumatisme.

This work aims to trace the psychic construction of a borderline patient, through the elements that the film *Closet Monster* (Dunn, 2015) provides to the implication of trauma and the particularities of defense mechanisms. The narrative brought about the desire to focus on this theme which, despite being increasingly common in clinical practice, is a theme that requires further study of its structure and characteristics, for a better understanding of this form of subjective construction so recurrent in clinical practice. psychoanalytic.

Regarding the course of this article, firstly, it seeks to clarify what would be a borderline case, having the main character of the film, Oscar and Wilder: An Unlikely Love, as the focus of observation and analysis. The understanding of trauma in borderline subjectivity begins, based on readings of texts by Ferenczi and using Freud's concept of drive, mainly the death drive, and then Green (1966-67/1988) and his theory on the psychic apparatus in the text "*Primary Narcissism: Structure or State?*". In this second moment, which is central to the objective of this article, Green's questioning of his theory of the patient's inability to develop his functions of neutralizing and minimizing external excitations is brought up. In addition, regarding the same author, the concept of "dead mother" will be addressed to explain ego formation, in addition to reflections on cleavage as a defense process and its implications in cases of borderline state.

Trauma in borderline subjectivity

"If you're forced to walk in shit, you have to develop thick skin." With this emblematic phrase from the 2015 feature film *Closet Monster*, directed by Stephen Dunn, who also wrote the script for this 91-minute film, we begin our analysis of Oscar's story, who, as a child, went through traumatic events that returned in his adolescence, especially when his sexuality blossomed.

When we begin our analysis of the first phase of the film, Oscar is between six and seven years old. During this phase, he goes through two traumatic moments that will be reflected throughout his story: his parents' separation and the experience of a violent scene.

The first moment was the separation of his parents when his mother left the house where they lived and he saw in this separation his mother's abandonment, a moment that struck him with anguish, according to Ferenczi (1934/2011b, p. 127): "*the immediate consequence of every trauma is anguish. This consists of a feeling of inability to adapt to the unpleasant*

situation”. It is the feeling of anguish, due to abandonment, that he will carry throughout his life. His father reaffirms this feeling of abandonment when he tells Oscar about the separation. At other moments in the film, Oscar talks to his mother about how traumatic this separation was and the guilt for everything bad that happens to him.

Still in the first traumatic moment experienced by the character, his parents give him a hamster as a gift, at the same time announcing their separation. The animal then bites Oscar’s finger, which bleeds. He goes to his room and, faced with his parents’ breakup, refuses to do so by covering his ears so as not to hear the argument between the two in the living room. At that moment, he has his first outburst and starts talking to the rodent. The dialogues between the boy and the animal will be constant at various moments in the film. The act of biting the rodent, the pain felt, causes Oscar to displace the trauma onto the little mouse. “The ‘shock’ is equivalent to the annihilation of the feeling of self, of the capacity to resist, act and think to defend the Self” (Ferenczi, 1934/2011b, p. 125). Faced with an excess of energy in the psychic system, and therefore great displeasure, there needs to be an escape mechanism for this excess, the only option being self-destruction.

Freud understood the death drive (1920/2020) as an organic pressure to return to a previous state, inertia. Therefore, the work of the death drive would have as its objective the discharge, the lack of life, that is, death. According to Ferenczi (1934/2011b), consciousness is the easiest thing in us to destroy, and the result is psychic disorientation.

Disorientation helps: (1st) immediately, as an escape valve, as a substitute for self-destruction; (2nd) by suspending the broader perception of evil, in particular of higher moral suffering – I no longer suffer, at most a part of my body; (3rd) by a new formation of wish-fulfillment from the fragments, at the level of the pleasure principle. (Ferenczi, 1934/2011b, p. 127)

The second traumatic moment is made up of a sequence of events that will also help us understand Oscar’s subjectivity. At school, during a break, he sees a group of older boys chasing another boy, knocking him to the ground and beating him with kicks. Then, one of them inserts an iron bar into the fallen boy’s anus, twisting it as he pushes it deeper. The boy cries, but his tormentors are not intimidated and continue their savagery.

Oscar, upon seeing the scene, orders himself to do something. As he takes a few steps to try to do something, he accidentally steps on a branch. The noise scares the group away, who flee the scene, dropping the iron bar. He approaches with the wooden stake in his hand and sees the bloody iron bar next to the boy lying on the ground. At that moment, he runs and vomits, feeling pain in his stomach. Later at home, watching the news on television with his father, he asks why the boy was so brutally attacked, to which his father responds that the reason for the violence was because he is *gay* [sic] and that, for that reason, he had already warned him to cut his hair. He immediately refers to his father’s words as a joke that was made on him, in which, due to the way he positioned his hands, he was said to be *gay*.

In the following scene, Oscar appears in his room cutting his hair alone. It is clear how the character transferred the act of violence and death to the representative “*being gay*”. The psychic representative death and violence, when united with the representative word, *gay*, and the representative thing, an iron bar, will reverberate in the character’s sexuality. Later on, we will explain in more detail the defense mechanism of borderline patients, but we can already say that the impossibility of enduring displeasure, due to a precarious ego formation, gives rise to extra-representational defense mechanisms, as if the subject “was trying to say something through a very primitive communication that requires the artifice of body language” (Mendes, 2020, p. 26), as in the case of Oscar, because every time he gets excited the iron bar appears in place of the penis.

The psychic apparatus has a barrier, a “para-excitation” that is capable of resisting external excitations that, according to Green (1966-67/1988), are capable of cushioning, transmitting without causing modifications, that is, transmitting the unspeakable, the trauma, with its weakened strength. The “para-excitation” also has the function of blocking large inflows of energy.

Since Oscar has a psychic apparatus with a fragile ego, consequently, the “para-excitation” cannot perform its operations satisfactorily, both as a barrier that minimizes the impacts of the external world, and as the internal process of repression of pulsional excesses. Due to the inability of the system to, through “para-excitation”, develop its functions of neutralizing and minimizing external excitations, this barrier will be replaced by a “mirror where the illusion of the abolition of tensions can be reflected. And the “this” will become, according to Freud’s beautiful expression, “the second external world” (Green, 1966-67/1988, p. 118). In the case of borderline patients, this ability to differentiate the sources of excitations is reduced, they are perceived by them as coming from everywhere, that is, these patients are susceptible to confusion about the location of the source of excitation. According to this author, the body can transmit sensations and feelings such as pain.

However, there is a result: the comparison with the peripheral organs that receive external excitations allows for an analogy, and Freud says “that as far as the terminal organs of sensations and feelings are concerned, the body itself occupies the place of the external world” (Green, 1966-67/1988, p. 119).

We can see that these events caused psychological trauma in Oscar. Zimmerman (2008, p. 419) in *The Contemporary Vocabulary of Psychoanalysis* defines that trauma “(...) is more directly linked to real external events, which surpass the ego’s capacity to process the anguish and psychic pain that they cause.”

The psychic structuring of borderline patients

To understand how Oscar, through his subjectivity, deals with these traumatic situations, it is necessary to understand how his psychic structure is organized, since the way each subject deals with the excess drive, that is, the trauma, is related to how this subject has structured himself psychically. The events that were within the scope of the traumatic for Oscar happened after the phase of primary narcissism:

In the context of the second topic, Freud returned to this question of the location of primary narcissism, which was then situated as the first state of life – prior, therefore, to the constitution of the ego –, characteristic of a period in which the ego and the id are undifferentiated. (Roudinesco & Plon, 1944/1998, p. 531)

For Freud, the child does not have a formed ego at birth; we can compare the psychic apparatus to a blank canvas. What we have, initially, is an I-Self, which is governed by the search for instinctual satisfaction. At birth, the child does not differentiate between what is internal/external, the self/other. What is felt are the instinctual demands in search of satisfaction, and, for them to be satisfied, the mother's substitution is necessary. In other words, the mother is beyond the care in the biological field; Green (1966-67/1988) says that the mother is in the field of desire and the signifier. Based on Green (1966/67/1988), the mother becomes the subject's framing structure; "the subject is built there where the investiture of the object was consecrated instead of its investment" (Green, 1966-67/1988, p. 135).

The loss of the breast, contemporaneous with the apprehension of the mother as a total object, which implies that the process of separation between the child and the latter has taken place, gives rise to the creation of a necessary mediation to alleviate the effects of its absence and its integration into the psychic apparatus, outside the action of repression, whose purpose is different. This mediation is the constitution, in the Self, of the maternal framework as a framing structure (Green, 1966-67/1988, p. 125).

At this point, events leave deep impressions that will shape the subject's subjectivity. A child who "is inflicted with even minimal harm at the beginning of his or her life: this can cast a shadow over his or her entire life" (Ferenczi, 1928/2011a, p. 6). Children have a limited psychic apparatus to suppress instinctual excitations. Therefore, events in the primary and secondary phases of a child's psychic constitution can leave indelible marks on children's subjectivity. Since they do not yet have a symbolic framework ready to deal with the vicissitudes of life and since trauma is in the field of the unspeakable in both adults and children, in childhood, where representational construction is precarious, symbolization cannot occur, according to Pereira (2007). The anguish of death invades the child and he or she is unable to fantasize, and the ghost of the trauma will haunt him or her as something strange, causing fear and horror that will lead to a great state of confusion.

Oscar's mother tells the adult character that she needed to leave because she was "*dying in that house*" [sic], talking about all the difficulties she had faced since he was born. We can see that the mother was not psychologically present, despite physically taking care of him as a baby. She could not invest libidinally in him in the face of the problems of the marital relationship. Green (1980/1988) uses the concept of "dead mother" to exemplify these cases and show the impact that this has on ego formation. "The dead mother is, therefore, contrary to what one might believe, a mother who remains alive, but who is, so to speak, psychologically dead in the eyes of the little child she cares for" (Green, 1980/1988, p. 240).

The libidinal investment in the child by the mother is what frames the self, and when this investment cannot occur because the mother is psychically dead, according to Candi (2020), the initiative for narcissistic satisfaction is annihilated. When maternal libidinal investment cannot be used as a frame for an empty picture, where the subject will structure itself, what we can see is the collapse of the psychic organization. "The framing structure establishes a psychic continent and mediates between Ego-drive and Ego- External Object, functioning as an interface between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective" (Mendes, 2020, p. 104).

The lack of possibility of investment prevents the subject from being able, according to Mendes (2020), to guarantee drive satisfaction and the functioning of the pleasure principle. Therefore, instead of framing, what there will be is an attempt to block the invasion of these forces considered bad and psychic destructuring.

Oscar has a troubled relationship with these primordial objects. The maternal figure was not available at that moment to invest sufficiently libidinally in her son, in addition to an extremely invasive and oppressive father. Therefore, the two figures accessible to the child, who should play the role of a container, of an auxiliary Ego, were in fact perceived as evil. A fragile Ego, which, in addition to having to deal with its internal instinctual demands, had to defend itself from this external object, which was felt as evil.

Sublimation or pulsional discharge?

According to Freud (1915/2019), one of the possible destinations of the drive is sublimation, that is, the desexualized libido that can be displaced to non-sexual activities, such as intellectual activities, artistic creation, among others.

“Sublimation is defined as the latitude that a human being has, or rather, the plasticity of his libido to be able to move freely. This possibility of displacement is undoubtedly the essential character of sublimation” (Attié, 1997, p. 150).

Throughout the film, Oscar applies artistic makeup to monsters. Initially, this artistic manifestation is understood as a form of sublimation. However, when we analyze Oscar’s psychic structure, we realize that in his psychic construction, instead of being invested libidinally, that is, with a life drive, he was struck by great anguish.

Anxiety is perceived as a danger to the subject, a danger of destruction and death. When this anxiety erupts in the subject at a young age, instead of protecting himself from internal drives in search of satisfaction, he needs to defend himself from the external object felt as evil, and as a result, his narcissistic self is constituted in a fragile way. Since the sublimatory process is the search for satisfaction of sexual drive indirectly, according to Nasio (1997), for the sublimatory process to occur, the intervention of the narcissistic self is necessary. Thus, as previously argued, the character’s self cannot invest narcissistically because it is constantly trying to defend itself from a large flow of energy, due to the fragility of the intrapsychic and intersubjective barriers.

According to Attié (1997), sublimation does not connote something that is not going well; on the contrary, “where there is sublimation, we tend to say that there is something that is going, that is going well, and even very well. Sublimation represents an important sign of success” (Attié, 1997, p. 146). Therefore, what we can observe in Oscar would not be a form of sublimation, but rather a quick way to discharge the tension contained within the psychic territory, causing immediate relief. This exit is important so that the Self is not destroyed by this deadly force, driving the subject to madness. Therefore, the discharge of the instinctual tension can be understood as a substitute for the subject not going mad.

Defense mechanism in limit states

Throughout the film, it is possible to see that Oscar has hallucinations when he is overcome by great anguish. According to Green (1976/2017), the borderline subject has a unique organization due mainly to the fragile intrapsychic and intersubjective limits. Faced with this trauma, borderline patients use as a defense mechanism, according to Candi (2020), archaic mechanisms “such as cleavage, projection, idealization, foreclosure and denial” (Candi, 2020, p. 262), with cleavage being the main defense mechanism in these cases. According to the dictionary of psychoanalysis, cleavage is a

Term introduced by Sigmund Freud in 1927 to designate a phenomenon typical of fetishism, Psychosis and Perversion in general, and which translates into the coexistence, at the core of the self, of two contradictory attitudes, one which consists of refusing reality (denial), the other of accepting it (Roudinesco & Plon, 1944/1998, p. 121).

Given that psychotic cleavage is a contradiction in acceptance and rejection of reality, for Green (1976/1988), the cleavage in borderline individuals develops on two levels, between the soma and the outside world, producing hallucinations and acting-out. The second level of cleavage results in transforming the subject’s psychic system into islands that do not communicate with each other, resulting in a lack of cohesion and coherence in the self. Coherence is in the field of thought, affections, contradictory fantasies and the overlapping of the principles of reality and pleasure-displeasure, with neither one nor the other prevailing. As a result, thought is affected. The lack of cohesion is in the field of detachment, where this type of subject cannot perceive himself in the other. Green (1976/1988) says that the manifestations of this type of patient are expressions of the emptiness that inhabits the subject.

We can observe how Oscar translates this issue throughout the film, when he is overcome by great anguish in the sexual realm: he has hallucinations, the iron bar, which was present in the traumatic event experienced in his childhood, overlapped with issues of his repressed sexuality, that is, the reality principle mixed with issues in the realm of pleasure-displeasure, are experienced as a hallucination where the bloody iron bar replaces the penis every time he is invaded by an anguish generated by the possibility of satisfying the sexual drive.

At other moments in the film, we can observe the *acting-out* in Oscar’s actions, for example when in a fight with his father, his father pushes him into the closet.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the film highlights traumatic situations and their impact on the subject’s life, and how some people move between neurotic and psychotic structures, using objects, animals, among others, as a kind of supporting wall, which prevents the subject from becoming disorganized to the point of going crazy. It is important to highlight that the symptoms that Oscar presents are not linked to homosexuality, but to his psychic structure that uses the trauma experienced associated with this signifier as a way of seeing reality. Thus, this mechanism urgently requires continuous research and analysis from a clinical perspective.

The film, through a narrative constructed in a game between image and word, depicts the peculiarity of borderline subjectivity and trauma. Cinema has the beauty of illustrating many subjects in the field of psychoanalysis, and it is possible,

through cinematographic works, to delve into human subjectivity and seek greater knowledge about the subject. In this way, and through the work Oscar & Wilder, we learned a little more about trauma and the borderline subject, as well as the defense mechanisms inherent to this structure. Therefore, and without the slightest intention of closing the subject, we hope that this research will lead to the emergence of many others, to try to understand the complexity of borderline states, that is, of human subjectivity.

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