

Aestheticism and Creativity in  
*1900: The Legend of the Pianist  
on the Ocean* by Giuseppe Tornatore  
(Italy, 1998)

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The authors consider Giuseppe Tornatore's film from a psychoanalytic perspective as a metaphor of the difficult individuation–separation process of Max. He tells the lifestory of his friend Nineteen Hundred, the main character of the film, a virtuoso pianist who spent all his life on board a transatlantic ship in motion between the old continent and the new. Brought up by a black stoker in the deep noisy belly of the ship, music becomes, for him, the substitute for his unknown mother's body, his only *raison d'être* and the structural aspect of his personality. In fact, he can never abandon the transatlantic, where he dies in the final explosion. Max, the trumpeter, telling his story to the old instruments dealer, works through the loss of his grandiose fantasy of perfection and omnipotence, represented by his friend Nineteen Hundred,

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and he finds a safer dimension of creativity and life. As in the analytic encounter, the possibility to narrate one's story to someone capable of listening and holding, opens the way to the psychic change. Nineteen Hundred, on the contrary, represents the destructive/split part of the personality, unable to leave the grandiosity of the infant Self, compelled to die, because it is linked to primary fusionality and Ego Ideal.

**1** *900: THE LEGEND OF THE PIANIST ON THE OCEAN*, (1998), A FILM adaptation of Alessandro Baricco's tale "Novecento," tells the life story of Danny Boodman T. D. Lemon, alias Nineteen Hundred (Tim Roth). The film's first person narrator, a down-on-his-luck jazz trumpeter called Max, sells his instrument to a second-hand dealer, but before handing his trumpet over, he asks to play it one last time. The melody is tender and moving and the old shopkeeper recognizes the music of a mangled recording, which he had pieced together again after he found it inside the piano aboard the ocean liner *The Virginian*. Listening to the recording, Max realizes that the pianist is none other than his friend Nineteen Hundred, who is still inside the ship, which is about to be demolished. The dealer is the unwitting owner of the only recording ever made by Nineteen Hundred, and Max is the only person alive who can testify to the existence of Nineteen Hundred. The story unfolds as a series of flashbacks between Max's memories of his relation with Nineteen Hundred and his desperate search for his friend inside the deserted, rusting hulk of the ship to persuade him to come ashore before the explosion.

We have chosen this film by Giuseppe Tornatore because, as the tale unfolds, two aspects of aestheticism find expression in the two main characters, Nineteen Hundred the pianist, and his friend, Max the trumpeter. The film illustrates aestheticism both as an element of psychic growth and as a potentially fetishistic killer.

Our first aesthetic experiences are sensation-based, a link reinforced linguistically because *aesthetic* is derived from the Greek *αἴσθησις* for sensation. They are not the result of psychic growth, but its prerequisite, and they take shape along a path, which is not devoid of difficulties. It requires tolerance of uncertainty, in a predominantly sensorial, prelogical dimension, capable however of fostering the growth of the psychic dimension and creativity.

Aestheticism, on the other hand, is not so much an experience as an attitude affected by idealization, leading to the quest for beauty and perfection.

The anxiety and horror felt toward all that is imperfect or unfinished may recall the intolerable experience of separation/castration; the need for beauty, on the other hand, may become a debilitating fetish. As the expression of an indissoluble bond with the mother's body, aestheticism can be immobile and immobilizing, thus enhancing grandiosity and omnipotence and distancing the subject from relational life.

In Max's flashbacks, we learn that Nineteen Hundred had turned up mysteriously on the first day of the century, as a foundling in a lemon crate abandoned by the piano in the lounge of the transatlantic liner, *The Virginian*. He was brought up deep in the belly of the ship by a black stoker and became, inexplicably, a virtuoso pianist.

Photographed with Freud and Thomas Mann, Nineteen Hundred charmed the ship's passengers with his prodigious playing ability and his proud but ingenuous personality. Although critical and distant towards the powerful, he sympathized with suffering humanity in the form of the emigrants on the ship and fell in love with a girl of humble origin. For her, he made his only attempt to go ashore, an attempt doomed to failure. His entire life has been spent on board *The Virginian*, in perpetual motion between the old continent and the new. It was there that the performances took place that made him so famous throughout the world that Jelly Roll Morton, the greatest living jazz pianist, came aboard to challenge him.

Max had lost track of his friend Nineteen Hundred at the beginning of the First World War when the luxury *Virginian* was transformed into a hospital ship. Now, Max realizes that his friend Nineteen Hundred is still hidden deep in the belly of the ship where he was brought up. At the moment when they blow up *The Virginian*, Nineteen Hundred decides to go down with the ship, despite his trumpeter friend's insistent pleas.

The quality of the narrated story and the powerful nature of the images facilitate our imaginative immersion in that *reality which does not exist, but which could forever exist*, and is a specific feature of cinema. The film lends itself to various levels of interpretation, including the relationship between the filmmaker and his own work and with such great masters of cinema as Stanley Kramer with his *Ship of Fools* (1965) and Federico Fellini with his *And the Ship Sails On* (1983). What makes the film most interesting for psychoanalysts is the theme captured in the words of the narrator Max at the beginning of the film: "You're not completely finished as long as you've got a good story to tell and someone to tell it to."

The spectator is attracted from the very start by the twofold registers of historical narration and the unconscious dimension (Zizek, 1999). We are immediately involved in a story of self-generation from the chaos of primary narcissism, thanks to the basic ingredients of the tale: the dark hold of the transatlantic liner, the belly that contains and generates all possible stories, the helpless newborn baby, and the sea journey. To this is added the artistic dimension of the music, even if the length of some scenes sometimes impedes the enjoyment of the beautiful tale.

The passage from noise to melody at the moment in which *Nineteen Hundred* lives the first great mourning and separation from the primary object (the death and sea-burial of the old stoker/his putative father), seems to crystallize into a psychic second skin (Anzieu, 1985) that envelopes him and gives him an identity, enclosed in his contact with the keyboard, a corporeal contact, inside the mother-ship he will never leave.

In fact, at that moment, he perceives for the first time a sound, which is imitable from amidst the indistinct mass of noise. Music becomes the substitute mother's body and provides him with the aesthetic experience of saturating omnipotence, for him both a celebration of his grandiosity and his narcissistic idealization, psychic death, and finally physical death. Aesthetic experience, which contains within it the potential to promote identity development, becomes in him enveloping and dulling, more arty than aesthetic in register, preventing the developmental process (Di Benedetto, 1997).

*Nineteen Hundred's* perceptive sensorial experience, consisting first of chaotic noise, then music, protects him from psychotic anxieties, but denies him the opportunity of forming a real object relation. For him, there is no object capable of giving affective significance to his experiences; the object remains inanimate for him, unless *Nineteen Hundred* himself activates it by touching the keyboard. He learns to play piano initially by imitation, in order to be (Gaddini, 1969), by selectively isolating a reproducible sound like a legacy from his bizarre putative parent. At the moment when the stoker's corpse disappears into the sea, the sound becomes fixed in his corporeal memory. Thus, the shift from noise to music is his first creative act, an expression of an internal mourning and of the urge to recreate his lost object.

This process remains unfinished in him; the music, potentially fostering development, stops it, becoming his only code for interpreting relationships, the only way he can read the map of the world. *Nineteen Hundred*

translates people's faces into musical notes; he seizes their secrets and transforms them into music, his only affective dimension. Even with his only love, the girl in the porthole, he does not find words, just notes and music. He falls in love at first sight with the face of the girl and transforms this new emotion into music.

He looks at her as if he were recognizing someone he'd already met, without remembering who it is. And gradually, the cheery, rhythmical tune he is playing, changes into a melody as mysteriously seductive as that face he cannot take his gaze from. Nineteen Hundred is reading those notes in the eyes of that stranger. (Tornatore, 1998, p. 94)

Like Ariadne's thread, he remains tied to sound as the key to his fragile identity but he also remains claustrophobically trapped in the sound box represented by the music/ship/maternal belly. Because he is unable to do without it, he has to die there: without the psychic skin provided by sound, he would dissolve.

"I'm afraid of ending up in a million pieces just at the thought of that enormity," Nineteen Hundred says about the great city, which appears before him as he attempts to leave the ship and go ashore to follow the porthole girl, his only love. There in the city "on that infinite keyboard, there is no music you can play. Within these eighty-eight keys (on the contrary) you are infinite" (Tornatore, 1998, p. 137).

Faced with the vastness of the metropolis, the lack of external limits formed by the ship/music/psychic skin forces him to experience for the first time the anxiety of the *hilflosigkeit* (helplessness) he cannot cope with. In a very moving scene, he turns back up the ladder, which separates him from the world of relations, compelled to give up his dream of love.

Nineteen Hundred misses his chance of love and begins his inexorable decline: The girl remains just a face beyond the porthole, and he makes his only recording, the sole record of his existence and his music, which he will end up destroying because he cannot give it to her. It is the same record that the old shopkeeper will put together and play for Max: This will be the point of connection between past and present.

The framework for the character Nineteen Hundred is, however, the encounter between Max, the first person narrator, with the old dealer and the story he tells. Nineteen Hundred, trapped in his own infantile grandiosity, may embody the omnipotent destructive narcissism of Max himself. For

his individuation and separation, Max himself must emerge from his delusion of omnipotence and consequently leave the ship. Yet, in this passage, he runs the risk of destroying his own creativity and therefore losing himself, as he tries to get rid of his trumpet. We can now give a more clearly analytical significance to his encounters with the second-hand dealer, during which he retells his story and historicizes it. Max is saved because he still wants to tell his story to someone who loves to listen and take pleasure in mending and keeping things of the past. The film's story can be taken as the tale that Max/patient tells to the dealer in musical instruments/analyst, who listens to it and in the end, gives him back the trumpet he wanted to rid himself of.

In order to live, Max thought he would have to get rid of it, thus stifling his capacity for artistic expression; but the old dealer, having heard his tale, gives it back to him as an expression of his restored, and no longer omnipotent, creativity. However, it is the old dealer who keeps the recording, as a tangible memory of the tale/reconstruction, which they had carried out together. His capacity to draw on his love for old objects in need of restoration, bring them back to health, turns him into both witness and keeper of the memory of things past, as well as the maker of possible projects for the future.

The omnipotent perfection represented by *Nineteen Hundred* has to be lost, though the final explosion reveals the difficulty and dramatic nature of such a sacrifice.

It might, perhaps, be thought that the capacity to elaborate with regard to the primary object cannot be carried out within that relationship. The recording, which remains in the hands of the dealer, represents a split nucleus that cannot be worked through, and this justifies the old dealer's imperfect analytic conduct: He allows himself to be corrupted and waives the rules, as he gives Max back his trumpet without payment, because he is seduced by the beauty of the tale and the myth of the perfect artist.

Max has lost the excitement bound up with the omnipotent infantile fantasy of being the greatest musician alive; his nostalgia has become more tolerable, less destructive. As Max walks away from the shop, clearly moved but smiling, "a customer with a violin case in his hand comes up to the shop. The old man shows him in and then follows" (Tornatore, 1998, p. 143). The analyst, who has taken leave of one patient, partially reconciled with his emotions, receives another: Another story begins; the analysis starts up again and continues, like the need human beings have to be listened to, give meaning to their memories and reconstruct their tales.

### *Conclusion*

Nineteen Hundred represents the illusion of the never-ending tale; in fact the film lasts too long, 2 hours and 40 minutes, but it also contains the germs of an enchantment with the creator becoming dependent on his own creation in a mutual fantasy of infinite narcissistic nutrition. The virtuosity of the film's main character may be partially interpreted as one aspect of the virtuosity of the filmmaker Tornatore, who, charmed by his own creation, has to free himself of it violently, with a final explosion.

The quest for perfection prevents him from finding a satisfactory conclusion, a type of creativity that can restore to health and reconstruct, without falling for certain excesses that have penalized Tornatore, exposing him to the cuts of external censors.

Within the interminable nature of his creations, there lies the risk of aestheticism, linked to a sensorial way of functioning. The difficult work of the artist reproduces a similar difficulty of the analyst who, unable to drag himself away from the fantasy of constructing the perfect analysis, falls victim to a patient who is too gifted and creative.

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