



Oral Stage as a "Strange Attractor" in Kechiche's Film *The Secret of the Grain*

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Abstract

Abdellatif Kechiche is an actor, screenwriter, and film director of Tunisian origin with several works produced in France. Recently, a lot has been written about him, not only because, as a director, he won cinema awards, but also because he directed debatable films such as *The Secret of the Grain* (*La graine et le mulet*, 2007), *Black Venus* (*Vénus noire*, 2010), and especially *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* (*La vie d'Adèle - Chapitres 1 et 2*, 2013). If we view these films in terms of their manifest content, we see that they pose controversial issues related to cultural and/or sexual otherness. However, if we do a closer reading of some of these films from a psychoanalytic perspective, which seeks to find other idioms contained in the visual narratives, we find a consistent pattern of images organized around the mouth. In this paper, I shall try to show this close relationship between images and mouth in the movie *The Secret of the Grain*, and I will argue that the oral stage, as Freud and other psychoanalysts have shown, can act as a mental organizer, as a "strange attractor" of ideas, on which are founded several artistic discourses and imagery.

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First let me quickly review the main ideas that Freud, Karl Abraham, and Melanie Klein wrote about this important phase of human sexual development.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud initially characterized the first phase of pregenital sexual organization with feeding, calling attention to the fact that it is not yet possible to make a distinction between activity and passivity. However, he links the process of identification with the oral, recognizing that ambivalence exists at this stage, because for the

child to assimilate the object he also needs to annihilate it. In other words, to love the other is also to eat him, to destroy him. So orality is related to cannibalism, and in his 1913 book, *Totem and Taboo*, Freud recalls that the children of the primal horde ate the father, and the siblings of the Christian Eucharist identify with Christ, the older brother, and symbolically eat him. Later, in a 1918 paper, *From The History of an Infantile Neurosis*, Freud expanded his theory, showing that we regularly refer to the oral in language, particularly when we treat our love objects with words referring to food: "sweet", "honey", and so on. And in a 1938 paper, he further expands his theory, also showing that we can find orality in Greek mythology, for example in the myth of Cronus. As Freud writes:

This fear of his father, too, was silent on the subject of castration: by the help of regression to an oral phase, it assumed the form of a fear of being eaten by his father. At this point it is impossible to forget a primitive fragment of Greek mythology which tells how Kronos, the old Father God, swallowed his children and sought to swallow his youngest son Zeus like rest, and how Zeus was saved by the craft of his mother and later on castrated his father. (Freud 278)

Freud's reflection on orality was later taken up by Karl Abraham, in a paper originally published in 1924, entitled *A Short Study of the Development of the Libido, Viewed in the Light of Mental Disorders*, which introduces the concept of the oral-sadistic stage. Abraham identifies two moments in this stage: the first connected to suction, and the second connected to biting, i.e. sadism, a period marking the beginning of the ambivalence toward the object. Throughout this paper, Abraham presents various examples of cases of melancholic patients who unconsciously associate the mouth with sexual acts, and he states that we usually see in melancholic patients numerous oral-sadistic tendencies (to bite, to eat, or to sting), which can be highly problematic when such tendencies are directed toward themselves. Abraham writes:

In their pathological symptoms, their phantasies and their dreams, melancholic patients supply us with a great number and variety of oral-sadistic tendencies both conscious and repressed. These tendencies are one of the main sources of the mental suffering of depressive patients, especially in the case where they are turned against the subject's ego in the shape of a tendency to self-punishment. It is to be noticed that this situation is in contrast to some neurotic conditions of mind in which particular symptoms can be seen to be substitutive forms of gratification of the oral zone. (Abraham 89)

Melanie Klein further developed this theory, claiming that oral-sadistic desires are active in the human mind from the beginning of life. In other words, Klein hypothesizes that the life and death drives act together from their beginnings in early childhood, merging in an oral-sadistic phase, thus disagreeing with the

hypothesis of the two differentiated phases advocated by Karl Abraham. As Klein writes:

However, the infant's oral-sadistic desires, which are active from the beginning of life and are easily stirred by frustration from external and internal sources, inevitably again and again give rise to a feeling that the breast is destroyed and in bits inside him, as a result of his greedy devouring attacks upon it. These two aspects of introjection exist side by side. (Klein 67)

It is with reference to these hypotheses related to the oral stage and developed by Freud, Karl Abraham, and Melanie Klein that I will analyze the movie *The Secret of the Grain*, directed by Kechiche in 2007. Throughout the paper, I'll try to show that it is possible to find various signs of orality in this film, not only in terms of images or visual narrative but also in the dialogues and the themes that support such assertions.

Slimane Beiji is the main character of Kechiche's film. He is about 60 years old, divorced, has several children, and has worked in a French city for 35 years in a shipyard, a job from which he is about to be fired. His status at work has been greatly reduced. The head of the shipyard forces him to accept fewer hours. Slimane therefore is experiencing a crisis which is both financial and emotional. On the one hand, money is scarce and he can no longer pay child support to his ex-wife; he has already failed to pay the previous two months. On the other hand, his financial position and the anxiety it causes him affect his relationship with his girlfriend: he has become sexually impotent.

In order to overcome this crisis, Slimane decides to build a restaurant on a boat where he may serve couscous fish, which is, ironically, a specialty of his ex-wife. He can count on the help of his children to rebuild the boat, as well as the help of his stepdaughter in negotiating the bureaucratic problems that the process of starting up a new business venture creates. In fact, all the intrigue of the second part of the film focuses on Slimane's project and the difficulties he faces, notably because of his North African origin.

Looking from the perspective of the manifest content, the film addresses labor and cultural issues of postcolonial times. Slimane belongs to a community of immigrants from former French colonies of the Maghreb who came to France in the 60s and 70s in order to work and to have a better life, and continue to be seen by most native French people as foreigners. But considered from a psychoanalytic perspective, many moments in the film clearly refer to the oral stage.

First, the film focuses on numerous images centered around the mouth. The scene that takes place during Sunday lunch at the home of Slimane's ex-wife is an obvious example. The couscous fish that the matriarch makes weekly, gathering the whole family around the table, is highly praised and very special, because, as stressed throughout the film, the meal is made with much care and love. During the long sequence devoted to this meal, the viewers are shown a

celebration of the commensal act of orality. It is as if the director momentarily forgot the story, and has become fascinated by the family's mouths, their lips, and the act of eating. The whole scene is deeply sensual, and it makes the viewer feel like he or she is also sitting at that table, enjoying that act of love derived from vicariously sharing in the family meal.

The conversations that occur during this family lunch also relate to issues associated to orality. The family members discuss the Arabic language and the contexts in which it should be used instead of French. From the dialogues of the daughters, we learn that the mother tongue is used in acts of love, when they want to whisper, or when they are upset and want to express their anger: In other words, in love, intimacy, but also in anger and hatred. It is as if the Arabic is used for moments of authenticity, intimacy, and deep emotion, and French is left for other occasions when it is necessary to survive, to disguise. In a certain way, the mother Arabic tongue of early childhood still remains governed by the principle of pleasure / displeasure, and the French language, acquired later, by the reality principle.

The second example in the film that emphasizes the structural relevance of orality is in a scene concerning a chamber pot. One of Slimane's daughters is deeply upset because her youngest daughter does not want to urinate in the little pot. Slimane witnesses the reprimand his daughter gives his granddaughter, distressed because the child still has to wear diapers. In a parallel scene that occurs in the midst of this "debate", the adults discuss the financial crisis they are experiencing, blaming the bosses who prefer foreign labor, which is ironic when we consider that once Slimane was also an immigrant. But their concern shows, too, that Slimane's sons already consider themselves French people and do not appreciate foreigners who are coming to "steal" their jobs.

This scene lasts eight minutes. The question we should ask here is why the director devotes so much time to an interaction between a mother and her daughter about diapers versus peeing in the child's pot? Incidentally, a few moments later, already in another context, the question of peeing in the pot will return, although this time the central topic of the adults' discussion is the high cost of diapers. The answer to the recurring function of this episode lies once again, I think, in the central issue of orality on the unconscious level. The little girl remains in the oral stage and refuses to move on to the next stage of control of the urethra. The child senses the crisis around her, which governs the speech of adults, and prefers to stay in the oral maternal comfort of object relationship. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that the mother had shown her daughter that the fish has teeth that will bite. The fear of castration shows itself unconsciously, giving reasons for the child to remain in the oral stage. In a sense, this scene betrays the director's unconscious, projecting in the refusal of the child his own fears, as well as his desire to return to orality.

The third example of the focus on orality is related to the film's final sequence, which lasts a long time and remains unresolved. As mentioned, the

second half of the film focuses on Slimane's desire to build a boat-restaurant where he can serve his ex-wife's couscous. However, the realization of this dream faces various bureaucratic and financial obstacles, leading Slimane to have to do a marketing operation: serve a dinner of couscous to a group of influential people who will serve as potential investors, entrepreneurs, and the like.

In the last part of the film, after Slimane has overcome the major obstacles to his developing business and when it seems that he will accomplish his goal, an unexpected problem arises, which provokes a new crisis and creates a new turning point in the narrative. His eldest son, seeing his French lover, the wife of the mayor, arrives with the dinner guests decides to leave hurriedly. He drives off in his car, carrying with him his mother's couscous, which was still in the trunk. Since it is impossible to contact him on his cellphone, which has been turned off, Slimane, with no other alternatives, must ask for help from his ex-wife, which brings us to a long final scene of helplessness, represented by the aging Slimane in search of his motorbike, which, to make the situation even worse, has been stolen by some teenagers while he was looking for the matriarch. The ones who save him are the women.

First, his stepdaughter entertains the guests with a lengthy, erotic belly dance, which excites the audience, especially the men. This erotic dance is a way to replace the oral drive by the scopic drive. The food for the feast is missing, but there is a body. It is as if the woman says: this is my body, take and eat.

Second, the daughters, who have to face the wrath of the increasingly angry guests, find a solution for the lack of food by serving them alcohol. In this regard, the dialogue between one of his daughters and one of the guests is particularly relevant. The latter had been very surprised at the size of the breasts of one of the daughters and asked if they were real. She replied positively, that among Arabs, everything is authentic, which brings us once more to the field of maternal orality. The original mother's breasts are authentic, huge, hearty, and natural; the breasts of the French are false, fake, and "civilized."

Finally, Slimane's girlfriend, seeing that the situation is getting worse, decides to act and to make a new couscous. Throughout the film, through various dialogues, we know that her couscous is not good enough; however, lacking the true couscous of his first wife (should we read mother?), it is preferable to have the couscous of his girlfriend. We see here an echo of Freud's theme of the three caskets. The mother is gold, the girlfriend is silver, and the third woman is death, which is apparently what happens to Slimane at the end of the film, after having run numerous times after the kids who stole his motorbike and are enjoying his impotence. Obviously, even in phantasmatic terms there isn't any possibility of Slimane getting back his mother's body: only through death.

Actually, we're not sure about what happens to Slimane in the end. We only know that he could not recover the motorbike, and fell exhausted to the ground. Did he die? Did he faint? Will he stand up? We won't know. The film ends here, leaving an open ending. We only know that Slimane wanted to build a boat called La Source—origin—that refers again to the idea of the mother, the original support as a solution to the crisis. We have again the oral drive acting as a “strange attractor” of the whole narrative. In the film's manifest content there is a drama of a man who faces a crisis, in the latent content, the desire to return to his mother's lap and the safety of the oral stage.

In other words, the whole movie is a compliment to women in general and to the mother in particular. In the manifest content, the protagonist is Slimane, but in the latent content, the protagonist is his ex-wife, a gifted cook who unites around the table her family community. This character is the Great Mother, the good object, “the good breast” in Kleinian terms, who nurtures and gathers the entire family around the meal, in clear opposition to the false breasts, made of silicone, and the plastic food of the French. The Great Mother is further supported by her daughters and by Slimane's other women (his girlfriend and his stepdaughter), who solve his crisis. The villain of this story is Slimane's eldest son, who has extramarital affairs with French women, putting at risk the Arab community. The moral of the story? Arab breasts are authentic, abundant, and trustworthy; French breasts are unreliable.

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