



Is Social Justice just an Obscure Object of Desire?

John Alderdice

The phrase an obscure object of desire is not a common one, so I have taken it to be a reference to the critically acclaimed 1977 film *That Obscure Object of Desire*. It was the last film directed by the great Spanish filmmaker, Luis Buñuel who was in his 80s when he made it and I think it would be reasonable to regard it as a considered valedictory piece summing up the focus that he seems to have had on the perversity of human desire and also, as he once wrote, his wish to convey to his viewers, “the absolute certainty that they do not live in the best of all possible worlds.”

The film is set in Spain and France with a backdrop of repeated terrorist incidents and tells the story, through a series of flashbacks by an ageing French aristocrat, Mathieu. He recounts his experiences to some fellow train passengers as he returns from Seville to Paris. He had become besotted with a beautiful young Spanish woman, Conchita, who is played interchangeably by two different actresses, with different characteristics. The young woman had come to his home to work as a maid but fled following his early amorous advances. This pattern is repeated as he meets her again in different contexts where she repeatedly stimulates and then frustrates his romantic and sexual desires.

While he gives her (and her naïve, pious Catholic mother) presents, money and his total attention, she teases him with alternating seductive interest and humiliating rejection, but always refusing actual sexual intercourse. Each iteration of the process increases their passion, frustration, and entanglement until the climax where at her request he buys her a house in her home city of Seville, to which he has followed her. However, when he responds to her invitation to come to her in their new home, she locks him out on the other side of the grill gate to the courtyard of the house, says how she utterly hates and despises him, and then makes love in front of him, with one of her young men.

Mathieu is demented and when Conchita comes to try to repeat the cycle at his apartment the next day, he slaps her about, leaving her face bloodied and bruised. However, there is again a kind of making up on the train to Paris and the film ends with the two of them window shopping in an arcade in Paris where Mathieu's attention strays from Conchita to a seamstress in a shop window who is mending a torn and bloodied garment. A voice on the arcade's public address system announces that right-wing and left-wing terrorist groups have come together to wreak havoc, and as Mathieu and Conchita walk down the arcade an explosion and fireball obliterates the scene, and one assumes the two of them.

The story of this relationship reminds me very much of René Girard's 1965 book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* in which he traces perverse relationships in the novels of Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky and sets out, for the first time, his ideas about mediated desire. He challenges our notion that we simply desire things or

people ‘just because we do so’ and maintains that our desire is actually mimetic – I want that because s/he wants it, and I am in mimesis or imitation with him/her. This idea that ‘desire is about’ the mimetic process rather than the desired object is emphasised in Buñuel’s film by the fact that Mathieu is utterly besotted by this young woman, but at the same time she is two different actresses – a French sophisticate and a Spanish dancer.

Girard describes what he calls ‘triangular desire’, I want her even more profoundly and irrationally when she is wanted by someone else and, in the film, the more she wishes to be free to leave and be with some other person or in another place or engaged in another life or activity, the more Mathieu is entangled with her. But she too is entangled with him and cannot stay or leave. At times we have the thought that she is there just for the money or the nice houses, but as she points out, she leaves them at the drop of a hat and says that what she wants is the freedom to do what she wants with whomever she desires. She says that she does not value money or things. One is also left with some questions about how far she may be linked with some of the terrorists – moments after an attack outside Mathieu's house where she is staying, she shelters a young musician of her acquaintance who just happens to be there, and understandably this enrages Mathieu to whom she has just refused sex. However, was the young an perhaps not a lover, but a partner in crime? We do not know.

This connection between complexity in the relationships of individuals, and cultural and political problems in society, including terrorism, is not only adverted to in Buñuel’s film but is also taken further by Girard, especially in his 1972 book *Violence and the Sacred* – interestingly enough, it was first published in English in 1977, the same year as the film. Girard links his ideas with those of Freud, especially associating mimesis with identification, but he insists that Freud and later psychoanalysts focus too much on object-desire and not on the triangular imitative process of desire. In the case of the film, the intensity of the desire for Conchita results not merely from an inherent desire, but from Mathieu's perception that he as an older man is of much less lasting interest to Conchita than the young men with whom he sees her – young men who want her and are more exciting than he, and he tries to sooth this gnawing fear that his age is a problem by showing that he can do more for her through his wealth, all the time fearing that this will never compensate for the excitement of youth.

As you are carried through the story you alternate between sympathy for Conchita and sympathy for Mathieu, seeing each as a victim at some stages, and then later feeling that they victimize each other. This is a recognition that what is key is not to see one as the good, and the other as bad, but to understand the destructive nature of the relationship. The reason that this has been a key insight for me comes from my political experiences. Faced with any societal conflict or struggle one's instinctive response is either to empathize more with one side than the other, or to turn away from the whole situation in despair. In Northern Ireland it was very difficult not to identify more with either British or Irish; Unionist or Nationalist; often depending on one's own background.

In Israel/Palestine it is a real struggle to not allow oneself to identify more with the Jewish side or the Arab side, and the same is true in any such situation of profound conflict, including conflict about what is social justice, and the different perspectives about how we want to live and run our communities. But the problem is that when one falls into this natural identification, one has simply become part of the conflict and cannot bring anything new to the situation that may resolve it. The alternative reactions are bring anything new to the situation that may resolve it. The alternative reactions are either to turn away and feel that it is intractable and hopeless, or to focus on the problems of the relationship itself. In politics, the situation is often more complex than just one relationship – in the Northern Ireland case it was at least three sets of relationships, between the two sides in Northern Ireland, between North and South and between Britain and Ireland. But what was key was not to blame one side of any of these relationships but to focus on how the problems of the relationship itself could be addressed. It seems to me that Buñuel's film was entitled *That Obscure Object of Desire* precisely because the reality of the object that was desired was obscure – it was less important and clear than the process of the desire and this is also true of the terrorism that kept popping up in the film. Literally from start to finish and all the way through, the film was punctuated by terrorist attacks and killings, but there was no exploration or explanation of what the terrorists wanted. At the end it becomes clear that those on the right and those on the left have combined to escalate the threat to order and safety, just as Mathieu and Conchita had escalated the disturbance in their relationship to the point of physical violence. The key to understanding this mimetic violence is that the relationship is triangular. It is not just Mathieu and Conchita – others enter in, notably the young men that Mathieu envies and suspects. When he sees their desire for her, his mimetic desire becomes unmanageable. The tactic of terrorism is also triangular. The victim of the terrorist is not the target of the terrorist. The victim is attacked and killed to undermine and provoke the responsible government or authority, so that they will respond in such a way as to lose their authority and be drawn on to territory where they cannot win. Mathieu cannot win in the rivalry with Conchita's younger admirers but the warnings by Mathieu's friend that he would be better to just walk away and find a young woman who would not tease him in the way Conchita did, falls on deaf ears. In an analogous way the United States and its allies, get caught after 9/11 in a dynamic, so powerful that they cannot heed the warnings of history. The Soviets in the 20th century and the British in the 19th century had suffered their most catastrophic defeats in Afghanistan, and their 21st century counterparts were never going to win in Afghanistan either.

Does this mean that we should never enter the fray and take one side against the other, in the struggle for social justice? Should we not take a political stance and fight for it? The answer of course is that any of us may indeed do so, and if our patients show a wish to engage in some political struggle on one side or another our job is not to persuade them to abstain from it or to take a different side. We are working with an individual who has come along to ask for our help because they have a problem in carrying out their wishes and our job is to try to see what it is that obstructs their satisfactory engagement in the struggle as they see it. However, if we approach a societal problem and ask what psychoanalysis can contribute to the resolution of the societal problem as psychoanalysis,

it cannot be satisfactory to simply contribute in the same way as ordinary politics for then there is no distinctive contribution. It seems to me that the unique selling point of psychoanalysis – the USP as it is called - is found by drawing back from supporting one side or the other and instead to try to understand the nature of the disturbed relationship. Isaiah Berlin pointed out that in many situations there is not, nor can there be, any agreement on ‘the good.’. What is good for the fox is not good for the rabbit, and vice versa. To back one understanding of what ‘makes for the good’ as one or other side sees it, is entirely legitimate, but no different from what everyone else will do. People generally look at the object of the desire to see how it may be had. But when we speak of social justice, how it is seen or interpreted is quite different by those who approach it from conservative, liberal, socialist, or ecological perspectives. One can easily get into an argument about what social justice is, and who is standing for it or against it, and one can rail or struggle against those with whom one disagrees. That is a perfectly legitimate position, but it seems to me that is politics, not psychoanalysis. The object of social justice is itself more obscure than at first appears. Some describe it as equality however while this is an easy mantra when people are clearly in the lower half of society, it is not at all clear that when people move to the upper half, they still want equality. Very few people would be interested to follow football if the result of every game was a draw. Football supporters want to win. Every parent that I know, and increasingly it is grandparents rather than the parents with whom I am most familiar, but in either case they rarely have the ambition that their children or grandchildren will be the same as all the others. They constantly look for the ways in which they demonstrate excellence in comparison with their peers. If it is not equality, then perhaps it is freedom and fairness, but Mathieu and Conchita, the protagonists in the film, did not agree on how to measure freedom and fairness any more than we can identify when social justice has actually been achieved. It seems to me therefore that social justice is a motivating aim, but an obscure object of desire, and that it is better for psychoanalysis to address societal problems by examining the disturbed relationships at the heart of the social, economic, or political conflict rather than get caught into the search for that obscure object of desire.

Lord John Alderdice is a Senior Research Fellow at Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford, Director of the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict, and an active Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords. As Alliance Party Leader he was one of the key negotiators of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, then first Speaker of the new Northern Ireland Assembly. He was also President (now *Presidente D’Honneur*) of Liberal International, the worldwide family of more than 100 liberal political parties. In his professional life he was a Consultant Psychiatrist in Psychotherapy and established, and for many years ran, the Centre for Psychotherapy in Belfast