Psychoanalytic Elements Within and Around "Back to the Future"

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The 1980s were an odd time for American film. It followed a trend that had been started in the late 1970s, with filmmakers continuing to look for a means to find the golden ticket that was then known as a "super-grosser", a term that Paramount Pictures ex-CEO Michael Eisner attempts to coin in an early definition, stating, "The super-grossers are things that become cultural phenomena. There is no way that you can work out on paper what a cultural phenomena should be."[1], with this term later evolving into what movie-goers now know as the "blockbuster". And, despite Eisner's words of warning, almost all filmmakers tried to mimic the equation of films that includes *Jaws, The Terminator,* and *Star Wars,* that is: massive budgets, incredible effects, and tremendous acting ability.

As this trend began marching forward, filmmakers soon realized that there were two keystones that seemed to harness a film's ability to increase sales: the first being that they needed a healthy amount of situations in which spectacular events (or recently, effects) could be experienced, and the second being that, with some planning, it was possible to get a movie that would appeal to movie-goers of *all* ages—a concept that stopped them from having to choose just a third of a market that seemed to consist of just kids, just teens, or just adults. These two realizations then become a perfect explanation for movies that did extremely well in the 1980s, a list blanketed with movies such as *Ghostbusters*, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial,* and *Raiders of the Lost Arc*. These films, with help from the newly-created PG-13 rating, allowed the film producers to begin hassling filmmakers to create movies with just enough action, just enough humor, and a healthy spread of special effects.

However, toward the mid-eighties, this formula became just that, and movies began to get

tiresome. A very notable shift took place in Hollywood, and everyone began to take notice.

Whereas films of yesteryear (ex. *Godfather* and *Gone with the Wind)* had a focus on story telling,

of presenting viewers with difficult questions and intriguing themes, and of portraying three-

dimensional characters, the movies of the 1980s were quickly becoming forgettable tropes or

gimmicks, movies that were fun to watch, but only until the latest and greatest video effect came

out.

However, in 1985 and after many tribulations, two screenwriters finally saw the release of

their movie, *Back to the Future*. And although this film was going to radically shift the paradigm

of many professionals in the film industry as well as the general, movie-going populous, it was

not given a warm welcome. In fact, one of the writers of the film, Bob Gale, says in an interview

that he and his partner, Robert Zemeckis, had tried over forty times to find a studio to get the

movie made, and that the studios had "... no expectation that the movie was going to amount to

anything."[2] Interestingly, the movie actually shared many of the same qualities that other high-

grossing films possessed: it had popular actors, a high dose of action, and good effects. So why

the animosity? The difference was in the detail; *Back to the Future* was a film that actually

featured a blunt, very stark, and impossible-to-ignore Oedipus complex. This Oedipus complex

was *not* going to be glossed over, was *not* going to gilded with impossibility, and was going to be

one of the main themes of the film. In a time where filmmakers were trying their hardest to

make films attractive to spectators of all ages, it was certainly sounding like an image that not

too many viewers wanted to be faced with.

Of course, everyone knows how this story turns out—the film went on to be one of the

highest grossing films of the eighties[3], and the Writers Guild of America has even declared it one

of the best screenplays of all time[4]. And even with the genre of science fiction growing more and more every day, with the plots getting more intricate and the effects getting more dazzling, many critics are still considering *Back to the Future* as one of the greatest science fiction films of all time[5].

The entire story of *Back to the Future*, that is, not just the plot points within the movie (and certainly not just the Oedipus complex), but also the events surrounding the actual making and distribution of the film, has incredible ties and correlations with psychoanalytic theory. Once viewed through Freud's toolset, the viewers can attain a much higher understanding of the events that occur within the film, the thought process of the characters, and even of the mentality and surroundings of Zemeckis and Gale as they were writing the screenplay.

Ever since the film was released in 1985, there has been an infamous thorn in the sides of many fans, best expressed by Darach McGarrigle in an article in which he attempts to shed light on massive plot holes within classic movies. In targeting *Back to the Future*, he writes, "The Plot: Marty McFly goes back in time, helps his parents get together, invents rock and roll... The Hole: ...and everyone promptly forgets he was ever there the minute he leaves."[6] However simplified, McGarrigle is correct in stating that the issue lies firmly in the paradox that asks, why don't Marty's parents question why there son looks *exactly* (to the extent where he is even wearing the same clothes) like the boy who once got them together? It seems that Marty's parents were far too eager to completely forget about the person who ended up having an extremely profound effect on the rest of their lives. However, with some analysis, this issue becomes the first of many fine examples that show just how clear the film's concepts become once they are studied with psychoanalysis. What has happened, and the reason for this perceived

plot hole, is that, due to the time that has passed since Marty left his parents in the 1950s to get

back to where he left, time has enabled his parents, George and Lorraine, to push such events

into their subconscious.

In a homage to one of Freud's most important aspects of psychoanalytic study (the

strengthening and the preservation of the self), Lorraine and George have been given enough

time for them to subconsciously change the course of events, so that in their minds, it is not their

son who was pivotal in them coming together--he just happened to be there. After both of

Marty's parents have subconsciously perceived Marty as a threat to their abilities to have control

over their own lives, they have subconsciously diluted his influence on their relationship by

pushing it far into the back of their minds. In doing this, they have effectively turned themselves

into the real creators of the relationship. Therefore, it would make sense that, if his parents then

agree that it was indeed themselves who formulated the relationship (and, more importantly, the

rest of their lives that resulted thereafter), there would be no reason to remember Marty as more-

than-averagely defined or as vital as he might have been. Once pushed so deeply into their

subconscious, he has fallen from the creator of the relationship to just a guy who happened to be

around them when they decided that *they* were going to get the relationship going. Also, the

screenwriters have notably nurtured this process of pushing the events into the subconscious by

letting several decades pass before they see Marty McFly as he was in the 1950s. In such time

they have experienced careers, children, and whatever else life might throw at a young couple in

a span of a couple decades. The writers have also helped the situation by making sure that Marty

left as soon as his parents get together, giving his parents almost no reinforcement of his real role

in the forming of the relationship. This, then, would also explain several more inconsistencies

within the plot. For example, towards the end of the movie and right as Marty McFly leaves his parents in the 1950s, Lorraine seemingly foreshadows that she will name her son Marty. However, it becomes clear later on in the film that Lorraine has in fact not named her *first* son Marty. Why the wait? If she was going to name her child Marty, would there be a reason for it to not be her first son? The answer is because, at the time, Marty had been pushed so far into their subconscious that they simply had no recollection of the kid who had been around when they got together back in high school. In an attempt to rationalize their own self importance within the framework of events that ended up shaping their entire lives, they have pushed the memories of Marty so far into the back of their minds that he can safely be regarded as just another guy, no more worthy of remembrance than anyone else.

The above example begins a trend with the screenwriters, alluding to Freud and his concepts. Toward the end of the movie, there is another simple yet eloquent nod towards the strengthening of the self, noticeable when Marty returns to the present. Throughout the film, it gradually becomes evident that Marty isn't being careful to not change the past, and that the changes he makes could have vast changes on what he considers present day. Even a small change in the past could have a tremendous affect in the present, even on one's literal self as stated by Doc, "If I know too much about the future, I could danger my own existence!"[7] And indeed, when the film is brought back to the present, the audience sees that Marty has had a massive affect on everyone in his family: his mom is no longer an alcoholic, his father stands up for himself, and Biff, the bully that no film from the 1980s could do without, has ended up as the family's henchman. However, Marty has remained completely intact and unchanged. Thus begins the parodying of Freud's ideas by Bob Gale and Robert Zemeckis; with these concepts,

they comically begin to present the viewers with "what if" variables attached to some of Freud's most influential theories.

Continuing on the concept of Freud's ideas on how one conceptualizes the self, there is a fascinating quip on the subject that can be seen nearly every time Marty has a conversation with the 1950s-version of his dad. For example, while going through lines that Marty wants his dad to yell to a man that Marty knows will be bullying Lorraine, George becomes unsure, saying, "Do you really think I oughta swear?", with Marty sharply replying, as would a parent to an unwilling child, "Yes, definitely, George, swear!"[8] Here, the writers are playing on the norms of psychoanalytic practice. Generally, Freudians accept that at the early, undeveloped stages, the child will often see their parent as themselves in a concept known as imprinting. This allows the child to fill a growing yet premature identity within the child. In this example and as seen throughout the film, Marty is trying as hard as he can to get George to be more like him, more abrasive, more willing to stand up for himself, and more ambitious in getting what he wants. The subtlety of this allusion to Freud is that, now that Marty is talking to his future father, the roles have completely reversed. The situation has now become that the under-developed character, or the character who is unsure of his identity and is therefore willing to be imprinted upon, has now become the father rather than the child. In *Back to the Future*, it is the child, Marty, who is imprinting their identity onto the parent.

More allusions to psychoanalytic theory are seen when the parental practices of childhood empathy come to mind, another particularly important aspect of psychotherapy that receives most of its attention from the self psychology school of psychoanalytic theory. The self psychology school contends that many neurological problems that come forth in children is a

result of the parents' inability to empathize with the children. The simple fact that parents have forgotten how it feels to be a child or the fact that the parents simply do not care to put themselves in such a position, makes the child feel out of place or unimportant. This concept is also brought up within *Back to the Future*, albeit with another "what if" variable. In the film, Gale and Zemeckis implore the viewer to think about it, fittingly, in reverse. The interactions between George and his son Marty are seen as the result of what happens when the *child* is put in the *parent's* position, a topic that the children have probably never thought about. These ideas force Marty to empathize with his parents as two real people with a genuine problem and as people that were at one time very much like himself. Again, this is something that Marty, much like the unempathizing parents previously mentioned, has probably never put much thought into.

However, it should be noted that not all of the allusions to Freud's ideas are nontraditional or parodied. In shifting the importance away from Marty's interactions with his father, and onto the interactions between Marty and his mother Lorraine, things become far more traditional. Once the film makes it clear that Marty has indeed gone back in time, the audience is presented a scene wherein Marty finds himself extremely attracted to the 1950s-version of his mom. And from that point on, there are shots of a torn and very confused Marty, even though many people hold a belief that they would find it relatively easy to restrain themselves upon realizing that the person they were attracted to was their parent. Yet, traditional psychoanalytic theory says that Marty's feelings towards his mom are to be expected[9]. There is no shame in Marty being "unusually" attracted to Lorraine, he has just been helped a little bit. Because of the time machine, he has been pushed further into this dilemma than most people have the ability to go. Marty has never been so endowed with so much real potential to take over his father's role with

his mother, and he is unsure of how to act. Throughout Marty's entire life, he has seen his father

with his mother, his father clearly being the dominant roll, and Marty has been unable to act on

any Oedipal feelings he might have. But, once Marty has gone back in time, he has essentially

fallen into a position in which he really needs to fight himself if he wants to avoid taking his

father's entire position with his mother. This is tied even further into Freud's concepts once the

viewers realize that his literal self is at stake. Indeed, should he fail to resist temptation, not only

will he be left with these conflicting feelings, but it could also mean that Lorraine will never

meet George, which would result in Marty never existing. Notably, the writers have tied two of

Freud's most important theories into a center conflict within the film: in order to preserve

Marty's self, or to make sure that his existence is not erased from time, it is absolutely a requisite

that he resists his Oedipal desires.

Eventually, this Oedipus complex climaxes with Marty kissing his mom. But, it is

important to notice that it does not happen until he comments to an unknowing Lorraine about

the situation, asking, "Have you ever been in a situation where, well, you know you have to act a

certain way, but when you get there, you don't know if you can go through with it?"[10] With this

line, it is clear that Marty is falling victim to his Oedipus complex, and he is unsure of whether

or not he can do the right thing and resist temptation. And right as Lorraine throws herself upon

her son, the very instance where the viewers are left asking themselves what will happen next,

the films cuts to other actions within the film. Cleverly, the writers have incorporated the extra

shots so that the viewers don't have to watch Lorraine and Marty make out. However, the

viewers are left to assume that time is indeed passing while these other shots occur. How much

time is passing? Seconds? Minutes? While the question is subjective, it is certainly clear that a

good amount of time is passing, and while the viewers *are* watching the events that are

happening elsewhere, they are left assuming the action between Lorraine and Marty continues.

And interestingly, when the camera returns to them, the viewers are presented with Marty saying

nothing. Shocked and rigid as he appears both before and after the breakaway shots, he is not

doing or saying anything that might stop Lorraine, his mom, from kissing him. So it seems that,

not only have the screenwriters incorporated a fine usage and explanation of an Oedipus

complex, but they have also incorporated it in such a way that the main character has actually

fully succumbed to it.

In moving towards other areas of psychoanalytic practice, the concepts of metonymy and

condensation are also present within *Back to the Future*. If it is agreed metonymy is the idea of a

piece of a larger variable standing in for its entirety (generally found within dreams), it certainly

could be applied to Marty's actual goal, that is, to ultimately get his parents back together. And

while there is certainly a vested interest in forming the relationship (as mentioned previously), it

is not true that that is all there is to the situation. Although the process of metonymy does not

say which parts of the whole are more important than others, it could still be assumed that at

least part of what Marty is trying to achieve is the maintenance of tradition, or a "normal"

outlook on the events that are happening around him, as well as finding the ability within himself

to push out that which society has labeled as taboo. If he can get Lorraine and George back

together, solidly and without question, it means that he has effectively trounced his desires. If

they are together and happy, there no longer stands any room for Marty to take his father's place.

Marty is fully aware that once they get together, it would be so solid, so concrete that he simply

would not have to worry about these feelings he is having. So while it is true that Marty needs to

get his parents back together, metonymy allows the viewers to see that it is just one piece of the larger goal, that is, he needs to create a safeguard against those previously mentioned Oedipal desires, he needs to maintain the existence of himself in the future, and he needs to reject the taboos that are happening around him.

Likewise, the concept of condensation, or an item standing in for an entire concept, can also be seen within several key objects within the film, most notably clocks (including the clock tower) and the DeLorean. One of the most obvious deductions is that the clocks as well as the clock tower represent time, with the film being situated around what humanity accepts and understands about the notion of time. The clocks have been condensed in an effort to display the paradox of time being both the problem as well as the solution, all while not having any bias, any variables, or any tribulations. All time can do is move forward, yet it has somehow become an enemy, not only in the film but in the eyes of many people in everyday life. Furthermore, the clocks can also be harnessed to point out the screenwriters' views on the problems that come with obsessing over the past or wanting to revisit and change past events, which leads into the next object of condensation—the DeLorean. The DeLorean stands as a metaphor for the complete capability to fix one's problems. It stands as a question to Marty, to the Doc, and to the viewers, asking what would they do if they could go back and modify anything that has happened. The DeLorean stands as a metaphorical pathway towards ultimate desire—with it, there is nothing the participant can not do or get. However, much like time, it also stands as a tribute to there being no right or wrong within objects, only people, and that it is not within an object that answers are found. And similar to the concept of time, the DeLorean can be used for anything, be it good or bad, and it is up to the person to decide what to do with it. This metaphor

can go even deeper, stating that any human dilemma is just that, a human dilemma, created and perpetuated by the people that it affects.

Previously stated was that an analysis of *Back to the Future* provides more information than that which just occurs within the confines of its script. Not surprisingly, there is a profound amount of psychoanalytic subject matter within and among the situations in writing and producing the film. For example, during the time period in which the film was made, there was an uncommon amount of movies that had a plot that was driven by the notion of time travel.[11] One explanation for the sudden surge of time-travel based filmography was that Americans were uneasy about the future, as stated by Sorcha Fhlainn, "... films rarely attempted a vision of the future, and when they did, as in *The Terminator*, the future is bleak and apocalyptic."[12] In this case, it is possible to use Freud's tools to actually analyze the mindset of the American audience, in an effort to look for an answer to this odd surge of time travel movies and perhaps one of the reasons why *Back to the Future* did so well at the box office.

In these films that featured time travel, the past is being presented to the viewers as the pleasure principle, or in Freud's terms, the id. In other words, it stands as everything society could ever want to change. For example, if a man wants a new job, he simply has to go back in time and get it. If someone wants to have more money, they simply need only to go back in time and do something different from what they had done the first time around. In Freud's teachings that say the id is the most basic of impulses, and that is also represents most desires,[13] the past falls nicely into the mold, representing infinite possibilities, a blank slate, or a feeling of utmost freedom. One could essentially change any aspect of life, simply by going back in time and changing the course of events. So, in figuring out the mindset of America during this time

period, it seems that society was feeling uneasy about the future, and was being drawn

subconsciously toward the id and movies that displayed it more than usual. With the surge of

time travel movies came the audience's ability to imagine themselves, if just briefly, in the

position of a main character, as someone who was not locked into the vice-grip of the future.

In that same train of thought, the superego could be portrayed as the future. Freud saw

the superego in complete opposition of the id, and thus the future can be metonymized as a

completed action or as the fear of ultimate determinism. To live and think always in the future

would mean one has a mentality that there is no fighting causality and that whatever happens is

going to happen without a shadow of a doubt. It represents the absoluteness of everything that is

happening to and around the audience. With it comes the idea that the individuals are going to

be locked into the objects around them, whether they be the people they are around, the jobs they

are doing, or the unsettling futures they see themselves heading towards. Whereas the id or the

past might have stood for a blank slate, similar to how a child feels that they may grow up to be

or do anything, the future stands as a cold statement to the audience that they will be end up

exactly where they think they are headed, or possibly even worse. So, when the issue is looked

at with this ethos, it becomes easy to explain why the future was hardly seen in the

cinematography of this time, and in the sparse moments when it was, it was portrayed as a place

of unhappiness, as a dark and lonely atmosphere.

Lastly, the ego, in this circumstance, would be represented as the present. In *Back to the
Future,* the writers have simply reinforced Freud's concepts within the film, displaying the

present as a tool that must balance the feelings of stone-cold, locked-in causality and, on the

other hand, the complete freeness of uncompleted actions. To think about either of these for too

long is unhealthy and nearly impossible. As the audience sees in the film, Marty does not need to dabble for very long in the past before something goes horribly awry. However, the writers are also trying to say that, if done in moderation and in collaboration with the thought of the future, it is okay to give way to the id impulses a little bit, as seen where it has helped Marty turn his dad into someone who stands up for himself or in his mom not becoming an alcoholic. In this paradigm, the entire movie becomes another reaffirming lesson from Freud; that the ego is absolutely necessary in healthy development and that a healthy person is one who maintains a strong ego to keep their id and superego at bay.

Although the film can (and should) be thought of as a masterpiece of psychoanalytic story-telling, in being PG-13 and in trying to be successful all while the main character (and, traditionally, the protagonist that the teens are supposed to be relating to) is kissing his mom, the film had to make a few compromises. In the scene where Lorraine finally kisses Marty, an event that has been building up since the beginning of the film, the viewers seemingly get short-changed. The kiss is abruptly ended with Lorraine sharply pulling back, saying that she feels weird and that, "I almost feel like... like I was kissing my brother."[14], a statement that has absolutely no logical merit. Why is she mentioning her brother? What does her brother even have to do with anything? Why did it take her until now to pull back? And why does the aforementioned feeling even exist as if the laws of the universe were obliged to let Lorraine know that she was doing something immoral? The unfortunate fact is that Lorraine had absolutely zero pre-knowledge of the situation, had no idea that the guy that she has been chasing wasn't just a regular guy, and therefore had no reason to back away from this person who she had been lusting on throughout the entire plot. Where at first it might have seemed that

the Oedipal plot should have been concluded with the son succumbing to his urges, the viewers

are left with an awkward scramble towards normality, leaving them with an empty sense of

"film-logic". Even more unfortunate is the fact that, up until this point, the writers had made

sure that everything was explained to a tee, that every detail was analyzed and logical, and that

every loose end had been tied up neatly and without issue. Yet, at the climax of a complex issue

that in many ways was driving the plot, the writers present the viewers with a laughable wrap-up.

Why?

It is very likely that the writers knew they couldn't realistically let that be the end of

things. The writers knew that society would scorn the movie if the Oedipus complex ended with

the son bluntly succumbing to his feeling of desire. They therefore decided to give the Oedipus

complex the most outlandish ending possible, making an effort to let the critics know that the

stumbling sets of events that stop Lorraine and Marty from getting any more physical are there

only to be a safeguard, not only against the movie's possible distributors, but also against some

of the viewers who might not be self-assured enough to deal with such an ending. The writers

are artfully concealing their belief that, in reality, it is much more likely that Marty and Lorraine

would have simply kept going, leading to who-knows-where.

In conclusion, it is clear that psychoanalytic theory saturates the entire story of *Back to

the Future*. And while it may be true that some people recognize this, they only do it on the most

basic of levels and usually only when they see the interactions between Marty McFly and his

mother. But, if one takes the time to thoroughly analyze the film and put Freud's theories to

work, the amount of knowledge that can be lifted from the movie is astounding. From the

fundamental understandings of characters and the actions they make, to the statements

concerning the nature of humanity, and even to the information one can arise from the mindsets

of the writers and the film's audience, it is staggering how much usage comes out of using

Freud's theories to study *Back to the Future,* proving that it is truly one of the finest examples of

psychoanalytic theory in the film medium. All of this in a movie that, even to this day, is seen by

many as just another good film from the 1980s, in which a kid almost has sex with his mom.

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1   Shone, p. 28
2   Originally published in Empire magazine
3   According to many of the film-gross-counting companies such as Box Office Mojo, and AMC's Filmsite
4   Writer's Guild of America
5   IMDB's Top Rated "Sci-Fi" Titles
6   Cracked
7   Gale & Zemeckis, p. 84
8   Gale & Zemeckis, p. 63
9   Keitlan, p. 49
1   0   Gale & Zemeckis, p. 69
1   3   Berg, p. 52
1   4   Gale & Zemeckis, p. 70