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IN 'EXTREMIS': A COLLISION BETWEEN FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND MTV

BY ANNA MICKELSEN '99

A Freudian psychoanalytic critique of the music video "extremis," which was conceived and written by the group HAL, might strike the casual reader as a bit bizarre. However, such a reading offers insight into the way that the unconscious tensions that drive humanity are represented in a medium that is not often used for critical purposes. Seen through the lens of psychoanalysis, this text presents the drama of female desire for her father and the struggle between the superego or the "conscience" of cultural norms to repress this desire, concluding ultimately that her self-fulfillment within a waking-dream world is outside the bounds of sanity and society.

Video summary:

Bright lights fade into a black and white city scene where brightly lit skyscrapers predominate. Cars and trucks move in incessant, repetitive patterns along the street. A man's voice speaks, and a male face appears, superimposed on the buildings. Somewhere else, in a place with color, a pale woman lies in bed in a white room that appears to have no walls or other furniture. This woman seems to be asleep, and the setting fades from her "reality" to her dream, where she walks toward a gilded "statue" of a man and woman joined. A voice-over reveals the thoughts of the sleeping woman. Her eyes and mouth appear in stark contrast to her skin and the wall-less background, mirroring the "reality" world. At this point, the "womb-woman," a woman in a blue, fluid environment, attached by some kind of cord, appears. She rotates slowly, arms outstretched, and her image materializes briefly at various times. The dream-woman kisses the male statue, awakening both man and woman to life; strangely, they "flash" between a vaguely robotic form and a normal organic form as they move, but only express their mechanical sides when she is near. A series of interspersed images of a flea, a root system, and blood cells appear along with the womb-woman and the sleeping woman, spliced with shots of the sensual statue-couple. Black and white images of city and male figures also intrude. After voyeuristically viewing their sexual activity, the dream-woman approaches the couple, and as her dress caresses the head of the shifting automaton man, he leaves his partner and follows her on his knees, ultimately rising to confront her. At this moment, the dream returns to reality, as the over-voice asserts its need to know, feel, and taste the future. The womb-woman flashes in and out. The statue-man from the dream appears and wakes the dreamer in "reality." The male voice returns, as does the black and

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white cityscape, and the video ends as it began, in a blur of light.

Freud understood that dream material had to be substantially altered or disguised from its true purpose in order to escape internal censorship on the part of the “conscience” or “ego ideal,” which will “arise [in the subject] from the critical influence of his parents (conveyed to him by the medium of the voice) to whom were added... his fellow men—and public opinion” (Freud, “On Narcissism” 153). Censorship is provided by both the societally-determined “conscience,” which is the ideal self, and the ego, which mediates between this force and the unconscious and chaotic elements that have been repressed. The process of displacement, Freud explained, is crucial in disguising the repressed unconscious material in dreams; elements with a high psychic value are transferred by overdetermination to new elements with low value as a result of this internal censorship (Freud, Interpretation 148).

This becomes relevant for “extremis” when the dream-material becomes too blatantly uncensored, threatening to cross the line between conscious and unconscious. At this point, the ego ideal attempts to reassert control of the dreaming process by introducing repressors, realized in the dream by figures of patriarchy and technology. By reasserting its primacy, the ego ideal attempts to legitimize its distance from the primal desires of the developing ego, enforcing socially and culturally determined “norms” of behavior. The conflict takes place within the flesh of the automatons, who remain organic in form as long as the dreamer maintains a safe distance; as soon as she approaches with the intent to become involved, the ego ideal (associated with the repressive mechanized world) asserts its authority, appearing in the flesh of the automaton couple.

The source of all adult psychic anxiety, for Freud, can be traced back to the formative stage of the identity in childhood, during which the child passes through the Oedipus complex and into the repressive realm of societal norms. According to Rivkin and Ryan, Freud proposed that “the female child experiences an early desire for the father which takes the form of a simultaneous desire to be her mother, to take her place as the father’s sexual object,” however, the female child represses this desire in order to properly develop her gender identity (122). Though that desire has been repressed (and is in fact at the root of all repression), it still exists in the unconscious. Freud stresses the necessity of understanding the symbolism of dreams; the fundamental symbolic relationships of dream characters provide the key to understanding the content and meaning of a dream (Freud, Interpretation 131-2). Freud, for example, immediately makes the connection between glistening apples on a tree and female breasts, emphasizing the infallibility of this association (Freud, Interpretation 138). If, for example, we notice in the dream-text of the video that the dream-woman’s mouth is consistently open and that she is repeatedly shown in a sexually suggestive way, we might conclude that the openness of her mouth could coincide with her sexual availability, as the mouth has traditionally been associated with images of the vagina and the womb. Graciously assuming Freud’s mantle of infallibility as an interpreter, we naturally conclude that this is indeed a correct interpretation of the dream. The dream-woman’s overt sexuality thus reveals her identity as a creative power, as her

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womanhood is consistently associated with womb and vaginal images that stress her fertility; her creative power is confirmed when she brings inanimate beings to life and motion.

Freud also emphasizes the importance of words and phrases that appear in dreams; there is, he says, “an invariable rule that the words spoken in the dream are derived from spoken words remembered in the dream-material” (Freud, Interpretation 145). In the dream world of the video, the words spoken aloud by the dream-woman have a greater significance than those uttered only by the inner voice, which is demonstrated by their placement at critical moments of the dream-text—an indicator of the moment at which her desires exceed the boundaries of social and cultural acceptability.

Freud claims that literature is like a dream text, and his essay on “the uncanny” is an attempt to apply that principle. Freud’s belief rests upon the idea that “the heimlich (the familiar or ‘homelike’) and the unheimlich (the strange and unfamiliar) are embedded in each other,” which means for him that an “uncanny” experience is merely the resurgence of the familiar repressed material from our unconscious to our conscious lives (Gray 59). A sense of the uncanny often occurs when a strange repetition of events provokes a “gut feeling,” but is also present where there is difficulty discerning living beings from dead material, in the psychic “double,” in belief of control over destiny, and “in the belief that the other’s gaze can inflict psychic harm, always a projection of the internal critical gaze” (Gray 59). The sense of the uncanny is played out in the video through the viewer’s difficulty in determining the difference between dream and reality, between live and automaton flesh, and in the appearance of the “critical” eye at a pivotal juncture.

The structural frame of the video, a realm of mechanical and male-dominated activity, also introduces the first conscious presence in the video: a man’s head and voice. This section was shot in black and white, perhaps to convey the dullness and repetitive motion of the outer world as opposed to the woman’s vivid dream world. Things in this framing world are mechanistic and linear: cars, buildings, and the flow of traffic. However, the male face on the building walls is within these things or is embodied by them, and he has the power to enter (if only briefly), the world of the dreamer, as demonstrated by the intrusion of black and white images into her colorful dream world. It is this male figure that represents the authority of societally-determined repression, in its implied participation in the patriarchal structures of society as expressed by a linear and daunting world of buildings and lights.

The transition from this framework, to the color-ful room in which the woman sleeps, and from there to the dream-state, is achieved through a blurring of reality en route to the dreamer’s unconscious (which could also potentially stand in for a sort of universal unconscious). Because the viewer is unclear which of these worlds (frame, sleeper’s, or dream) is actually the “real” world, a strong sense of the uncanny accompanies the transitions from frame to dream. This sensation is further augmented by the intermingling of all three realities within the world of her dream, and an additional awareness of the uncanny (for the audience) is supplied by the appearance of humanoid figures whose identity as living beings is uncertain. The action of the video
When uncanny moments occur, they do so with the feeling or awareness of repetition, conflict this process involves: “Deep down traumas hound me for days” (HAL 18). When uncanny moments occur, they do so with the feeling or awareness of repetition or familiarity, as material that should have remained in the unconscious leaks up into the realm of the conscious. This line is significant not only in its suggestion of repetition but also because of the fact that it is spoken within the dream, revealing the fact that it is a conscious concern which has been carried into the dream realm. It might almost be conceived as a reverse-uncanny (assisted by the repressive ego); in this case, material from “outside” the dream, the conscious, has access to the unconscious world of the dreamer, emphasizing the potentially “traumatic” effects of her dream-actions.

The psychological development of gender identity through the Oedipal experience is crucial to the development of the dream-text in two ways. First, the visions of the dreamer represent her displaced desire to achieve her father’s physical love in a way that allows her to escape (at first) the censorship of the ego ideal. By presenting herself as observer, she initially avoids being censored; however, as she takes an active role, the awakened figures become not only the embodiment of her repressed desire for her father, but through their alternately mechanical and organic nature, they represent the conflict between her conscience and repressed desires. The social activity (driving cars), rigid, linear buildings, and looming male figure of the frame world indicate a sort of “hive” mentality—organized group activities, ceaselessly repeated movement, and colorless staring windows seem to represent a set of social and behavioral norms that is necessarily repressive of destructive primitive desires. In contrast, the realm of the dreamer is fluid, nearly featureless but still vivid, multivalent, colorful, and full of sexual energy, which represents the realm of the unconscious or repressed.

Secondly, the male object that the dream-self animates pursues her and the phallic symbol that she possesses as he passes through his own Oedipal stage. Though her desire for a mechanical/organic man of questionable origin might be suspicious, it “feels” quite natural when he pursues his awakening “mother,” forcing the viewer to reassess her conception of Oedipal development as a universal that goes beyond gender. It is significant that the dream-woman possesses control through both her sexuality and the usurped phallic symbol within the world of dreams, as it indicates the creative (and potentially chaotic) power that she possesses.

When the woman appears, both dreaming and waking, the primary focus is on her sexuality: her mouth, breasts, eyes, and spread legs are emphasized and the viewer witnesses the erotic caresses she gives herself and the statue-beings. Images of root systems and blood reinforce the idea of sexual intercourse—sharing, intertwining, primitive, bodily—as well as images that have received displaced psychic energy. When she approaches the statue-couple and animates them with kisses to the male body, she is overtly participating in an act of creation, bringing life and sexuality in “a union of liquid and virtual flesh” to what was previously inanimate (HAL 12). The union will turn “virtual” flesh to reality in the dream-woman’s world, ultimately triumphing over the repressive attempts of the superego to regain control and slide the images of the dream to less charged objects.

At this time, the viewer is also introduced to the “womb-woman,” a woman who rotates slowly in her liquid blue environment, attached to some unspecified object by a sort of umbilical cord. Because of the placement of this image in the dream-text, it seems that she is being offered as a vision of grounding or completion; her full-color identity places her in the inner world rather than the outer, but she is a constant in both the “reality” and the dream of the woman. The womb-woman also has a fully defined face and is fully clothed, unlike the automaton-couple, her appearance suggests that she could successfully bridge worlds as the dreamer does, providing perhaps an alternate ego ideal for the dreaming woman.

As the dream-woman kisses and touches the male (and later “steals” him from the female), it is clear that she desires him (kissing only him and “gazing” at him) and identifies with the woman, whose face is better defined, more human, than the male’s. Interestingly, the newly “born” man and woman are not detailed in their sexuality—the female has obscured breasts, and the male’s genitals, when visible, seem unformed, contributing to the sense that they are not fully formed in her fantasy. This suggests that the phallus has not yet been defined as an entity in the mind of the dreamer because she was never able to physically consummate her desire for her father. The figures thus reflect the infantile nature of the fantasy that she is reproducing as she watches the automaton-figures engage in sexual activity.

An image of the womb-woman intrudes, interspersed with glimpses of the twisting couple and the sleeping woman, creating a sense of connectedness between waking/dreaming and inner/outer life. The dreamer watches voyeuristically at first, open-mouthed, the phallic heel of her shoe foregrounded as the couple writhe in the background. Her possession of both creative maternal power and phallic symbol is indicative of her ability to create both man and woman in her fantasy made flesh, but this is only possible in the unconscious. As long as she keeps a safe distance, the couple retains an organic form, ceasing to slip uncannily between that state and automated flesh, but when she approaches again, the conflict between the mechanistic world of the superego and the force of her desires becomes obvious in the shifting identity of the man and woman.

The uncanniness of her desires reveals itself in two ways: in her need for sexual activity with a figure that is a representation of paternity, and in the fact that this figure continues to shift between organic and mechanical forms. Her need to actively participate in the seduction of the male brings her repressed desires to the forefront, signified by her dream-speaking of the word “extremis,” which becomes a symbol of her self-liberation beyond the strictures of societal repression even as it represents real-life concerns transferred to the dream-arena. The action of speaking this word in the dream causes the desires to regain some of the energy that had been displaced and revealing her true motives to the ego ideal, which attempts to warn or censor the dreamer.

Her dream self is not content to simply watch and participate indirectly. This is the crucial moment of her dream, and the music (which to this point has been rather throbbing and backgrounded) suddenly changes tempo. As her primal desires reassert...
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themselves, the liquid eye makes its first appearance, warning that her inner censor is attempting to reroute her dream activity to safer channels; the dream-material has become too overtly un-repressed for both the censor and the black and white world of society, which intrudes into the realm of the dream itself in the form of repressive male figures (some might think it was the band making its cameo appearance, but we know better). In this way, the waking self touches on the repressed desires, forcing her to evaluate them in the mechanistic terms of society, perhaps hoping to repel her attraction by revealing their mechanical nature. This attempted intervention and the reawakening of the mechanistic side of the formerly inert bodies as she approaches them alerts the viewer to the renewal of inner/outer psychological conflict and indicates the importance of this moment.

Disregarding these warnings, the dream-woman allows the train of her dress to slip over the head of the ascendant male, prompting him to look up after her with an uncanny robotic/human gaze. Abandoning the female automaton, he focuses on her phallic heel and crawls after her, attempting to appropriate the life-generating power of the “mother” who created him, continuing the Oedipal cycle. The moment of their confrontation transfers the action back to the “real” world of the dreamer, which is largely indistinguishable from the dream world. The boundaries are further blurred when the automaton man from the dream appears in conscious reality, after the sleeper’s dream voice asserts the needs that she has been unable to speak consciously:

I don’t want to hear about the future
I want to see it
I want to feel it
I wanna taste it (HAL 25-28)

This assertion of the immediacy and magnitude of her instinctive desires places her in “extremis,” beyond the reach of the repressive forces of society, and it enables her to join with the dream-man she has created, who assumes a final form as organic, bearing no trace of the mechanistic outer world. These images are interwoven with images of the womb-woman, who seems to form a vital part of this ultimate fulfillment. This acceptable male must be formed within her imagination, and their consummated relationship, untainted by reference to the black and white world (completely within the realm of instinct), might be perceived by the outer world as “madness.” Indeed, her mere conscious wish for fulfillment from the father-figure places her outside the boundaries of proper societal behavior.

It is undoubtedly significant that her voice, not the societal voice of repression, is the last to be heard in the video, whispering the word “extremis.” This word has come to represent her own freedom through extremes: sexual activity and the fulfillment of her psychic desires across the realms of sleep and dreams as well as conscious and unconscious. In the same way, her “uncanny” experience has partially, in the form of the automaton man, materialized in the realm of the conscious, creating a disturbance in the dominant order. The conclusion reached, then, is that “extremis” provides fulfillment outside the bounds of society. This consummation may be designated by that order as “insane,” but offers her with the opportunity to assert the validity of her creative and instinctual desires.

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