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A Journey to the Imaginary:

Tim Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

Steve Nolan in *Film, Lacan and the Subject of Religion* says that “a film offers the spectator a character-actor/ star with whom to identify (a pseudo-identification)” (155). By analyzing a film and its narrative, spectators get to know the “‘reality’ that is always ideologically loaded and in which the spectator will become a participant” (155). Children’s film is the best example to support such an idea. Tim Burton’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was a hit when it was released in 2005. Adapted from Roald Dahl’s same-name novel, the film brings spectators from every age to an imaginary world which is constructed by chocolate. Spectators go through a journey from the reality to the imaginary film and then to the symbolic chocolate factory. Like Charlie Bucket the protagonist, we also experience a dream-like adventure. However, in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, we identify with Charlie the poor boy first, but in the end we also pity Wonka the rich chocolatier. What exactly is this children’s film trying to tell us? Besides children’s desire for numerous candies and adults’ wish to be lucky enough like Charlie, what else is the ideologically founded thing in the movie? A Lacanian perspective to view the film is worth discussing. Willy Wonka’s incomplete family results in his fetishism of chocolate and it is an obvious difference from Charlie Bucket’s loving family. In some extent, we either experience Wonka’s story or Charlie’s experience when we grow up. I think this is the reason why the movie would attract so many audiences. In this paper I am going to discuss how the

failure of the paternal function leads to Wonka's construction of the imaginary chocolate factory, and how this fantasy functions in the view of Lacanian film theory.

As a famous and honorable dentist, Dr. Wonka sets strict rules on little Willy's eating habit, especially on candy. Dr. Wonka would say to Willy that "just last week I was reading in a very important medical journal that some children are allergic to chocolate. Makes their noses itch." "Maybe I'm not allergic, I could try a piece." "Really? But why take a chance?" However, Charlie has decided to be a chocolatier when he was very young. The father and son's argument is as follows:

Dr. Wonka: [*knowing his son wants to be a chocolatier*] Candy is a waste of time. No son of mine is going to be a chocolatier.

Little Willy Wonka: Then I'll run away! To Switzerland! Bavaria! The candy capitals of the world!

Dr. Wonka: Go ahead. But I won't be here when you come back.

A remarkable scene takes place when Willy with the ugly orthodontic headgear knocks door by door for Halloween candy. Holding a basket of Halloween candy in hand with delight, Willy is thinking about which one to start first. However, immediately Dr. Wonka appears and throws the candy away into the fire without any words. Nolan makes a good remark on the symbolic Dr. Wonka. He says that:

Cast in the terms of a Lacanian Oedipal economy, the respected Dr. Wonka represents the Symbolic (signified by the brass plaque by his door), and his paternal efforts to compel his son to disavow destructive self-indulgence threaten to castrate the young Willy (signified by the monstrous orthodontic headgear that makes eating candy an impossibility). (163)

Since the film never mentions Willy's mother, I would suggest that Willy's lack of a mother makes him to transfer the desire to the forbidden candy. The symbolic order of Dr. Wonka is so strong that after the Halloween incident, Willy left home and started

his own life. He wants to be the master of his life and uses candy to make up what he has lost in childhood. Willy's chocolate factory is successful for a certain period of time but the secret recipe of chocolate is stolen by some employee and Wonka's factory soon goes out of business. Again, Willy is "challenged by harsh capitalist (Symbolic) realism in the practices of competitive adults" (Nolan 164), and would not trust adult (includes the symbolic world) anymore with the closing the factory. Willy Wonka is under threat by two kinds of symbolic order: the paternal and capitalist symbolic. His reaction to resist the symbolic is to immerse himself in the imaginary factory. His fear of the symbolic order can be interpreted by what Kidd, Kenneth B. in "Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature: The Case for Complementarity" uses of Melanie Klein's idea:

For Klein, fear and anxiety motivate symbolization...not only does symbolism come to be the foundation of all phantasy and sublimation but, more than that, it is the basis of the subject's relation to the outside world and to reality in general. (122)

According to Klein, it is Willy's fear of the father and the capitalist society that results in his change into the phantasy, and what connects his phantasy and the outside world is this symbolization. As long as the symbolization exists, Wonka would still pay attention to the outside world and can't live in his phantasy alone. But we know that he is not willing to accept the outside world anymore. So, how did Wonka break this tie?

After the recipe stolen incident, Wonka's chocolate factory has become a myth to people all over the town because they have never seen any workers enter the factory but strangely children still can find various chocolate in candy shops every day. Who does the work actually? The secret is not revealed until the five lucky golden ticket finders enter the factory. Since "Wonka could not trust an adult, hence

he invited five children, the least rotten of whom would win the factory” (Nolan 164) and one of them would be his heir. We can say that Wonka lives in his own phantasy because he is accompanied by Oonpa-Loompas, a kind of creature only. He relies on Oonpa-Loompas entirely; from having a haircut, getting counseling to inventing all the brand new candies. After living with those creatures for such a long time, Wonka even loses his ability to communicate with people. A scene to prove this is when Wonka wants to talk to the five golden ticket winners and their parents for the first time, he has to use flashcards to say what he wants to convey. He has lost the ability to master language. What’s more, Wonka has trouble pronouncing the word “parent”. When greeting with the winners’ parents, Wonka says: “And the rest of you must be their p-p-... “ “Parents?” “Yeah! Moms and dads!” [*expression darkens*] “Dad? Papa?” He can’t say the word loud because he still suffers from the symbolic pressure even though he has left home for a very long time. Also, living with Oonpa-Loompas shows his ignorance of the symbolic society:

Mik Teavee: Are they real people?

Willy Wonka: Of course they're real people. They're Oompa Loompas.

Mr. Salt: Oompa Loompas?

Willy Wonka: Imported. Direct from Loompaland.

Mr. Teavee: There's no such place.

Willy Wonka: What?

Mr. Teavee: Mr. Wonka, I teach high school geography, and I'm here to tell you-

Willy Wonka: Well, then, you'll know all about it and, oh, what a terrible country it is.

Willy doesn’t want to hear the adult’s lecture because he has his own logic. Oompa Loompas have their symbolic meaning, too. They are a group of people that would

devote their whole life to searching for their favorite and only food: cacao beans. After being betrayed by the society, Willy found them and made a contract with them that they work for him in the chocolate factory and they can enjoy endless cacao beans and chocolate. Oompa Loompas happily agree and work for Willy without any complaint. In some way Willy Wonka and Oompa Loompas share the same trait: in their life only chocolate (cacao bean) has a meaning and all the other things are meaningless for them. In the movie, all Oompa Loompas look the same and wear the same uniform. They even sing in the same tempo! They have no reaction or emotion toward life because all they have to do is maintain the production of chocolate. They live in a world without connection with the outside world.

Actually, the chocolate factory is exactly a place that makes no sense at all. One of the lucky children, Mike Teavee, asks “Why is everything here completely pointless?” Wonka just replies: Candy doesn't have to have a point. That's why it's candy. This sentence tells the inner voice of Wonka's desire and wish for candy. The most surprising place in the factory would be The Chocolate Room. After going through a small door, what at sight is a colorful dream-like world with a river running with hot, melting chocolate; a waterfall with mixed chocolate; a meadow made of delicious grass..... Wonka proudly says that:

Willy Wonka: Do you like my meadow? Try some of my grass! Please have a blade, please do, it's so delectable and so darn good looking!

Charlie Bucket: You can eat the grass?

Willy Wonka: Of course you can! Everything in this room is eatable, even *I'm* eatable! But that is called "cannibalism," my dear children, and is in fact frowned upon in most societies.

At this point the movie flashbacks to Wonka's childhood memory and reinforces the forbidden candy picture. In Wonka's own world, everything is eatable and he really

wants to make up for the lost opportunity in his childhood. But, he seems to go too far. Another place called The Inventing Room is filled with his peculiar inventions, like Hair Toffee or Television chocolate that wants to break through into the adults' imaginary. Willy Wonka's behavior can be seen as fetishism. In Bruce Fink's *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, he mentions some structures of perversion, and one of them is fetishism. He says that

[T]he perversion (that is, the fetish) serves to multiply the force of the father's symbolic action (putting the mOther's lack into words), to supplement or prop up the paternal function. The name given by the father is a start, a first step, but does not go far enough. It needs support, it needs amplification (183)

Dr. Wonka's "no candy" policy only results in Willy's stronger desire to try and find more candies. After that Halloween night, little Willy knelt down beside the stove, trying to find any left candy. I would say that in the rest of his life, he just keeps finding and inventing different kinds of candies / chocolate (like the inventing room) to supply those candies that were destroyed by his father. As a result, the act to invent candy is like a rebellion to the father's symbolic force. Fink also mentions that "the pervert knows that his own father is not such an Other, but makes this Other exist via the perverse act. Having served as that which completes the mOther (as her complement), the pervert attempts to complete the Other as law" (184). Indeed, as a pervert, Willy still maintains the fight against his father though Dr Wonka can't interfere with his choice and life anymore. He has his own logic and way of life because he dose not trust the symbolic society at all. Only Charlie Bucket can redeem Willy Wonka in the end.

Unlike Willy, Charlie is from a traditional loving family with kind but poor parents and grandparents. He not only has warm parents that would fulfill his birthday

wish with a chocolate bar every year but also an optimistic grandma who would encourage him that nothing in the world is impossible. In the end of the movie, Wonka tells Charlie that he could have the factory if he would give up his family. Nolan says that “Wonka wants Charlie to make the same journey he did, abandoning the Symbolic to revel in the Imaginary” (164). However, I think he is only partially right because obviously Wonka is not really happy in the imaginary factory, and the way that he publicly announces the finding of an heir has already involved the tie between the symbolic order and phantasy. As a result, he does not want someone like Charlie to make the same journey because in his inner heart he still has something lacking. Charlie emphasizes his uncertainty and the desire to find the lost family by firmly tells him that “I wouldn’t give up my family for anything” and he is very sure about it. Wonka, on the contrary, slowly says that “I am not certain at all now” because candy is the only thing he is certain about. What’s more, there’s a significant dialogue between Wonka and Charlie:

Willy Wonka: I don't feel so hot. What makes you feel better when you feel terrible?

Charlie Bucket: My family.

Willy Wonka: Ew!

Charlie Bucket: What do you have against my family?

Willy Wonka: It's not just **your** family, it's the whole idea of...

[balks]

Willy Wonka: You know, they're always telling you what to do, what not to do and it's not conducive to a creative atmosphere!

Charlie Bucket: Usually they're just trying to protect you, because they love you.

[Willy looks away]

Charlie Bucket: If you don't believe me you should ask.

Willy Wonka: Ask who? My father? Ha! No way. At least not by myself..

Charlie Bucket: You want me to go with you?

Willy Wonka: Hey! Hey, what a great idea! Yeah!

Step by step, Charlie evokes Wonka's memory of family and taking him back home later. Surprisingly, the first thing that Dr Wonka does to Willy is to check his teeth:

Dr. Wonka: Heavens. I haven't seen bicuspid like these since... since...

[long pause]

Dr. Wonka: Willy?

Willy Wonka: Hi, Dad.

[long pause]

Dr. Wonka: All these years and you haven't flossed.

Willy Wonka: Not once.

Actually on the wall of Dr. Wonka's surgery room, there are numerous newspaper cuttings about Willy's success stories. As Willy still lives and fights with the imaginary father after leaving him, Dr. Wonka can't totally ignore his son either.

Those newspaper cuttings symbolize his forgiveness and love for his son. Though there's something strange between the two, the reunion is still a remarkable one: "Their awkward embrace in the great doctor's surgery unites the Symbolic and the Imaginary and so 'saves' both Wonkas" (Nolan 164). What Nolan says about the combination of the Symbolic and the Imaginary is understandable, but I doubt whether it is the combination that saves both of them. I think what saves them is not the integration of the two since the Symbolic and the Imaginary belongs to different categories and levels, and it is not possible for a perfect match of the two. As a result, I think it is after both abandoning their roles (Dr. Wonka gives up the role of the

symbolic father and Willy Wonka gives up his imaginary role) that the reunion becomes meaningful. What's more, Dr. Wonka's lack gets transferred to the perfect teeth and Willy's lack is completed with the father's recognition. Charlie's redemption of Wonka fulfills the spectators' wish because "it's fair to say that, for most of its running time, the film is, like the candy that comes out of the factory, sweet but rather lacking in substance."¹ The lack here is exactly the failure of the family function for Wonka, and luckily in the end of the movie Wonka finally sees the value and makes change for both Charlie and himself. As the last lines of the movie: "In the end, Charlie Bucket won a chocolate factory. But Willy Wonka had something even better, a family. And one thing was absolutely certain - life had never been sweeter." I think this is the key reason that we can identify with this children's movie. After all, it combines the real and the imaginary.

Still, we need to take into consideration how the Lacanian psychoanalysis works in film theory. To begin with, Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle in *Lacan and Contemporary Film* emphasize the importance of the signifier's dependence on failure---"the role that failure plays in the effective functioning of the signifier" (xvi). They further indicate that "failure is necessary because the signifier must open up a space through which the subject can enter", and that is what Lacan called the gap. The gap is necessary because "the symbolic order cannot exist without gaps at which its control breaks down" (xvi). If we say that with the symbolic order what Tim Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* wants to tell us is the importance of family value, then we must witness Willy Wonka's trauma first so that we can identify with the movie. As a result, there's an interesting relationship between subjectivity and ideology:

If the symbolic order were whole and if it functioned smoothly, the very

¹ From The Tim Burton Collective, web.

question of subjectivity would never manifest itself. As a result, ideology cannot be said to produce the subject; instead, ideology functions to conceal the void that is the subject, to fill in this void with a fantasmatic content.

(xviii)

As spectators, we get our subjectivity because we know that in the end the movie is going to tell us something. A movie like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* which has a fantastic content exactly functions to fill the void subject. Also, since the Real is often full of traumatic experiences (no matter in the movie or in the reality), it is through the fantastic content that we establish our subjectivity again. McGowan and Kunkle further indicate the function of interpretation. They think “no interpretation of a text ever strikes us as definitive and yet Lacan claims precisely this for psychoanalytic interpretation” because “it proceeds not in the direction of meaning but in the direction of non-meaning” (xxii). This “non-meaning” means that “interpretation discovers meaning through the isolation and identification of the point at which meaning fails” (xxii). Lacan wants to emphasize that not all meanings are interpretable, and only when meaning fails can one get the true interpretation of self. The case in Tim Burton’s movie would be that: there’s no meaning for the way Willy lives in and those peculiar inventions he’s trying to invent because he thinks “candy doesn’t have to have a point”. So, spectators can create their own interpretation under this circumstance. I think it would be good to use McGowan and Kunkle’s concluding words as a remark to the value of film: nowadays film is “a privileged site at which we constitute new desires, experiment with unhinging our fundamental fantasies, and imagine ways to resist the power of ideology” (xxviii). But why do people want to resist the power of ideology?

Todd McGowan in “Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes” argues that film theories often misread Lacan’s idea about the

spectator's gaze as mastery over the film. He indicates that actually this gaze should be considered as "an instance of the *objet petit a*" (27) because during film-watching, spectators have "a traumatic encounter with the Real, with the utter failure of the spectator's seemingly safe distance and assumed mastery" (29). McGowan wants to emphasize that originally people thought film-watching as a way to the Imaginary; however, they are actually facing the Real and other's desire when they see a movie. As a result, many films "retreat from the deadlock of desire---sustaining the gaze in its absence---into a fantasmatic resolution" and "through fantasy, the subject imagines a scenario in which the desire of the Other, the *objet petit a*, becomes clear"(36). In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the traumatic truth is the cruelty of adults' world, compared with children's innocent world. It is only through fantasy that we, as spectators, can see other's desire clearly. McGowan says that

Fantasy, for Lacan, has a double role in the experience of the subject. On the one hand, fantasy domesticates the gaze by locating it within a scenario or structure of meaning; on the other hand, fantasy threatens to expose the limitations of the ideological edifice that employs it. (40)

Lacan indicates the limitation of fantasy because it has some difficulty when dealing with ideology. Without fantasy, everything becomes too obvious. Moreover, McGowan says that "fantasy, unlike our sense of "reality", is always incomplete; it breaks down and loses its consistency at its edges" (40). When fantasy falls, spectators have to experience the traumatic Real.

Watching *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, we experience two levels of fantasy. One is the fantasy within the story, and the other is the fantasy the film provides. Both of them serve as healing for the traumatic real. Sarah Gilead in "Magic Abjured: Closure in Children's Fantasy Fiction" makes an investigation about such "return-to-reality closure" (277). She says that "the return-to- reality closure asserts

the conventional, ideologically mandated meanings and indeed relations between the concepts of “child” and “adult”, “fantasy”(or “dream”) and “reality”” (288). As a result, the journey to the imaginary is not only a way out, but also a one into our inner world. Gilead says “the ending also confesses the attraction of childhood for adults” (288). Through this journey to the imaginary, we experience childhood memory, no matter positive or negative one again, and get released in the end.

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