ABSTRACT
Responding to the popular fascination with psychoanalysis in the 1920s, *Photoplay* magazine commissioned American neuropsychiatrist Louis Bisch to write a series of articles that applied Freudian concepts to questions of film stardom and spectatorship, genres, censorship, and the cinematic apparatus. Markedly different from the 1970s canonical texts in the field, Bisch’s work articulated a psychoanalytic theory that embraces cinema’s lowbrow mass appeal and encourages spectators to adopt a demystified perspective on Hollywood. This article discusses Bisch’s texts as an early instance of film theory written primarily for a female readership and as a forgotten anti-modernist road not taken in the history of theorizing cinema.

Between August 1927 and August 1928, America’s foremost fan magazine *Photoplay* published a monthly series of articles about cinema and psychoanalysis. The articles evoked simplified Freudian ideas in an attempt to explain an ambitious array of cinematic phenomena, ranging from acting talent, star appeal, fandom, and cinephilia to film genres, censorship, and the cinematic

apparatus. To author this series, *Photoplay* commissioned American neuropsychiatrist Louis E. Bisch (1885–1963), who at the time was a professor at the New York Polyclinic Medical School and Hospital. Bisch was also a prolific author and columnist known for his contribution to the popularization of Sigmund Freud’s work. Central in his writings about film is an idea that has appeared in several variants in the history of film theory, according to which cinema corresponds in a unique fashion to the human psyche. Based on this idea, Bisch’s *Photoplay* articles—printed among pictures from recent Hollywood releases and advertisements for laundry soap and self-help books—presented psychoanalysis as an all-encompassing epistemological framework with which to understand the functions of film and, more broadly, the dynamics of film culture. In so doing, Bisch’s writings on cinema came to constitute a remarkably early attempt to devise what we may call today a popular *grand theory* of film.

From the standpoint of the current moment in film studies, when the discipline strives to excavate its own history in order to reassess its fundamental presumptions and identify forgotten futures, Bisch’s psychoanalytical film writings merit rediscovery. Several important works about the cultural history of Hollywood cite Bisch’s *Photoplay* texts, but his discussion of cinematic phenomena in psychoanalytical terms has not received much attention in theoretical debates in the field. However, as many film scholars today are returning to classical film theory in order to reinterpret the theoretical canon, and as vibrant debates about historicizing, reviving, and critiquing the legacy of psychoanalysis are still ongoing in the field, Bisch’s work offers a unique corpus of theoretical ideas to revisit from the perspectives of our current scholarly enterprises. Bisch was a contemporary of classical film theorists such as Rudolf Arnheim, Béla Balázs, and Jean Epstein, yet he did not share their ontological or aesthetic concerns. Instead, his writings anticipated by several decades film theory’s turn to psychoanalysis as a basis for inquiries about spectatorship and the apparatus. Furthermore, his articles on cinema exemplify an application of Freud’s ideas in discursive, cultural,

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and intertextual contexts vastly different from those we are most familiar with in the critical discourses of 1970s film studies. A notable popularizer of psychoanalysis in America, Bisch held views on cinema that were inseparable from the context of commercial mass culture. His writings, consequently, often echo conceptions about the movies and their audiences that the Hollywood industry had championed and that the fan magazines helped to disseminate.

As Mark Lynn Anderson proposes in his book on film and the human sciences in 1920s America, “psychoanalysis is always articulated at this historical moment through and alongside other discourses, and any understanding of its social effects must acknowledge its interaction with these other forms of knowledge.” Taking my cue from Anderson’s observation, in this article I discuss Bisch’s Photoplay writings of the 1920s as exemplifying a unique encounter between popular discourses about Freudian psychoanalysis that brought Freud’s theory to the awareness of the American public and debates that surrounded silent-era Hollywood. The fan magazines of the 1920s—chief among them Photoplay—famously played an important role in efforts to elevate cinema’s cultural status and to attract middle-class female filmgoers, particularly in response to popular attention given to the various star scandals of the period and to criticism from conservative social groups.7 As I shall demonstrate, by aligning with early Hollywood’s cultural aspirations, Bisch occupied a paradoxical position, for he used Freudian psychoanalysis, often associated with scandalous ideas regarding sexuality and irrationality, to defend the moral cleanliness and artistic legitimacy of the movies. My interest is not in critiquing Bisch’s frequent and inevitable reductions, simplifications, and distortions of Freud’s ideas. Rather, I wish to discuss how Bisch’s Photoplay articles, written against the backdrop of such an unlikely ideological amalgamation, represent an exceptional historical case of a film-theoretical project that emerged within the discursive context of the American fan magazines long before the institutionalization of academic film studies.8 By appearing on the pages of the popular magazine, this theoretical project also primarily addressed women readers—in an unusual manner for the era associated with the male-dominated canon of classical film theory. Nevertheless, as I will show, Bisch puts forth in his texts a conservative view on gender and a reductive view of women’s perspectives and lives. Bisch’s work, overall, allows us to think anew of questions of periodization in the history of film theory and of distinct possibilities that psychoanalysis could play in coming to terms with the cinema.

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8 I refer here specifically to the 1960s emergence of academic film studies institutions. For an earlier history of developments in the discipline, see Dana Polan, Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
LOUIS BISCH AND THE POPULARIZATION OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Louis Edward Bisch attended Columbia University, where he earned his undergraduate, medical, and doctoral degrees and worked as a lecturer until 1916. Outside of his medical and research work in hospitals, educational institutions, and a private clinic, Bisch’s career included conducting psychiatric research for the US Army, directing a psychopathic laboratory for the New York Police Department, and organizing the psychiatric division for the US Navy. Bisch was not professionally trained as a psychoanalyst, nor was he a member of the American Psychoanalytic Association. But in writing a series of popular textbooks and self-help books published between the early 1920s and the 1950s, he established himself as an important public commentator about psychoanalysis.

Bisch’s 1922 book *Your Inner Self* offers a comprehensive yet accessible introduction to Freudian ideas, ranging from the Oedipus complex and fixation to sublimation and dreams as wish fulfillment. The premise of the book is that by understanding one’s unconscious, one can maintain harmony with the conscious self and thereby avoid unease, worry, and depression. *Your Inner Self* was followed by a professional textbook, *Clinical Psychology* (1925), and several popular volumes, including *The Conquest of Self* (1923) and *Cure Your Nerves Yourself* (1953). Less explicitly indebted to Freud, these later popular books followed a particular fashion of connecting psychological concepts to modern American principles of self-reliance and the individual pursuit of better living. Bisch’s most memorable work remains *Be Glad You’re Neurotic*, a 1936 book that explained how to harness one’s neuroses to achieve success. The book became a bestseller; appeared in Spanish, German, Swedish, Japanese, and Czech translations; and in 2014 even received a commendation from Pope Francis.

In addition, Bisch often gave press interviews on contemporary matters, delivered lectures on the radio, and wrote two stage plays that were produced in New York theaters. Beginning in the 1910s, he wrote for the general public in numerous magazines and published a syndicated newspaper column, connecting his field of expertise to a vast range of topics, including marriage, child-rearing, education, advice on improving one’s memory, and overcoming shyness, as well as on issues related to dentistry, criminology, broadcasting, and advertisement. In these public writings, Bisch often displayed deeply

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sexist views, stating for example that women should not be appointed as jurors because they are too emotional and judgmental, that too much leisure time is harmful for women, and that for a young woman intelligence may get in the way of a happy marriage.14

Bisch’s intellectual orientation and institutional affiliations set him apart from other early critics who drew on psychoanalysis in writings about film. The most notable writers to introduce Freudian terms to cinema in that period—namely, Walter Benjamin with his ideas about innervation and the “optical unconscious,” the Surrealist filmmakers and critics, and the authors of the British journal Close Up—did so in the service of distinctly modernist projects.15 They were chiefly concerned with cinema’s affinities with hallucinations and dream states, with possibilities of subjective and irrational filmic expressions, and with the liberatory potential of disturbing conventional film forms and spectatorial practices. Bisch’s perspective could not be more different. The psychoanalysis he championed was not revolutionary, nor did it celebrate the liberatory power of the irrational. Emerging from a culture typified by what Michael North has called “a generalized anxiety about anxiety,” Bisch presented psychoanalysis as a scientific aid in the capitalist pursuit of individual success.16 These mainstream views, indeed, fit more easily within the ideology of the Hollywood fan magazines than within avant-garde circles or discourses related to critical theory.

In light of common practices of silent-era fan magazines, it is safe to assume that for Photoplay the choice to commission Bisch to write the series on “a psychoanalyst’s view of the movies” served a dual function.17 The series—originally planned for six installments but eventually extended to thirteen—gave the magazine an opportunity to tap into the already heated debates surrounding psychoanalysis, which drew a great deal of public fascination and permitted authors to address attractive, sensationalistic themes.18 Simultaneously, featuring articles by a figure like Bisch, whose byline always included the professional designation “MD, PhD,” provided the magazine with a veneer of sophistication, demonstrating that film is worthy of highbrow intellectual consideration.

If from today’s perspective it appears unusual for a film fan magazine to dedicate dozens of pages to discussions of psychoanalysis, it should be

17 Louis E. Bisch, “Have All Actors an Inferiority Complex?,” Photoplay, August 1927, 36.
18 Bisch, 36.
remembered that early twentieth-century popular magazines were in fact an important medium for the dissemination of Freudian ideas in the United States. At the beginning of the century, awareness of psychoanalysis was limited to small academic and medical communities and to small progressive cultural circles around New York City. The process of disseminating these ideas among middle-class readers was rapid and uniquely effective. According to historian Nathan Hale, by the end of the 1910s, several dozen items on psychoanalysis appeared in American magazines.\(^{19}\) Women’s magazines were among the earliest and keenest to engage with psychoanalysis. In their pages, discussions of Freudian ideas appeared as part of a broader set of negotiations of rapidly shifting social norms. Notably, *Good Housekeeping* published a two-part article on psychoanalysis as early as 1915, immediately following the appearance of the first English translations of Freud’s major works.\(^{20}\)

The article, titled “Diagnosis by Dreams,” avoided issues related to sexuality. Instead, like other early magazines, it focused on how “the new science” offers a cure for nervousness and pressure—from which, the article stated, women “are perhaps the chief sufferers.”\(^{21}\)

The 1920s saw the peak of what Hale has termed “a popular cult of psychoanalysis.”\(^{22}\) As the *New York Times* commented at the time, “It has become the order of the day to ‘psychologize’ everything, from our wandering day dreams to the color of our shoes.”\(^{23}\) Freud’s writings became bestsellers, with *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* selling 20,000 copies over the course of the decade, and simplified interpretations of his theories became omnipresent in advice columns, in college courses, on the lecture circuit, and in works of fiction.\(^{24}\)

Famously, in 1924, producer Samuel Goldwyn intended to invite Freud to Hollywood to assist in making the American pictures “more penetrating, truer, and more absorbing.”\(^{25}\) As in other discussions of psychoanalysis in the general media, Goldwyn refrained from alluding to Freud’s explorations into sexuality, referring to him rather as a “love specialist.”\(^{26}\)

However, during the same period, attitudes toward psychoanalysis in public discourses took a sharp turn. In concert with intensifying cultural and generational conflicts between America’s puritan heritage and modernity’s shifting social norms, conservative publications started denouncing Freudian...


\(^{20}\) Peter Clark Macfarlane, “Diagnosis by Dreams,” *Good Housekeeping*, February 1915, 125–133. *The Interpretation of Dreams* was translated to English in 1913 and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in 1914.


\(^{22}\) Hale, *Rise and Crisis*, 77.


\(^{25}\) “After Professor Freud,” *Motion Picture World*, December 27, 1924, 816.

\(^{26}\) “After Professor Freud,” 816.
theories as immoral and hostile toward traditional values. Their commentators discussed psychoanalysis superficially, in the context of xenophobic, antisemitic, and anti-intellectual attitudes. Furthermore, the fact that Freud’s ideas became a common topic of discussion was viewed as an attempt at rationalizing sexual promiscuity and political radicalism.27 Most notably, the high-profile press coverage of the psychoanalysts’ testimonies in the trial of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, two male students from Chicago who were charged with the murder of a teenage boy in 1924, strengthened the common association of the theory with notions of criminality and transgression.28

The possible influence of psychoanalysis on women was a particular concern for conservative voices in 1920s public debates. Newspapers warned “American society women, business girls, and flappers” not to become absorbed in psychoanalysis, claiming that theories of complexes and surpassed desires lead to moral dangers and morbid thoughts.29 The fascination of women’s magazines with psychoanalysis consequently also shifted to a more alarmed and negative tone. A 1922 *Ladies’ Home Journal* article claimed that for Freud “all adults are loaded to the gunwales with repressed sex desires” and that psychoanalysis denies free will, offering instead a doctrine of “inevitable and compulsory immorality,” which is “of little use and really harmful to the average run of humanity.”30

It was alongside such a vexed reception that psychoanalysis was introduced to popular writings on film. As several commentators have pointed out, American cinema started drawing on psychoanalytic themes in earnest in the late 1930s and 1940s, when the general attitude toward mental therapy started changing in light of the emergence of new cohorts of academically trained practitioners and a more positive outlook at psychiatry that formed during the war efforts.31 But already by the mid-1920s, readers would come across mentions of Freud’s theories in film magazine items. Stars brought up psychoanalytic terms in interviews, advice columns addressed questions about the theories, and critics used Freudian terms to explain films. The film magazines typically put forth a reductive and vulgarized image of psychoanalysis, though they were more liberal than women’s magazines in addressing notions of sexuality. The allusions to psychoanalysis in film magazines also indicate that their editors expected readers to have interest in and a familiarity with at least some Freudian concepts. Thus, for example, a *Picture-Play Magazine* critic wrote about a scene of a young woman bathing in the film *Miami* (Alan Crosland, 1924) that “the psychology of the situation would make old doctor Freud blush.”32 The following year, Sydney Chaplin noted

in an interview for the same magazine that his comedy exploits the principle of the inferiority complex (which he misattributed to Freud) by giving the audience “a chance to sublimate it.” In 1924, *Screenland* published a long piece consisting of observations about the character traits of selected stars and directors under the title “Psychoanalyzing the Causes of Film Success.” Even five-year-old star Baby Peggy underwent a psychoanalytic test, as *Camera!* magazine claimed in 1923. Happily, the test revealed that “she shows no signs of repression, which proves she likes the work she does.”

Bisch’s *Photoplay* writings stand out against the common superficial allusions to psychoanalytic concepts in other film magazines—if not for their greater depth or fidelity to Freudian ideas, certainly for the scope and ambition of his inquiries. In his articles, Bisch does not aim at interpreting symbols in films and only minimally addresses individual star personalities. Instead, his pieces strive to explain the very properties of cinema as a socio-cultural institution. Nevertheless, Bisch articulated his ideas about psychology and film in a manner consistent with the fan magazine’s effort to keep a delicate balance with respect to the address of conflicting cultural positions—especially, as Gaylyn Studlar has shown in her important study of 1920s fan magazines discourse, regarding contemporary shifting discourses about traditional femininity. As I demonstrate in the following sections, these factors determine not only what kinds of statements Bisch ultimately made about film culture but also how he portrayed the prospects of psychoanalysis.

**THE MIND OF THE FILM STAR**

Fan magazines were famously preoccupied with the Hollywood star system, and so it is unsurprising that Bisch’s first article in his series for *Photoplay* attempted to “solve the riddle of the actor from a scientific point of view.” The article, titled “Have All Actors an Inferiority Complex?,” regards psychoanalysis as an effective tool to understand “the why and the how of Hollywood,” given that people “think and feel and act the way they do . . . because of motives deep down inside themselves of which they are entirely unconscious and unaware.” Bisch develops this premise further as the series progresses, discussing other aspects of Hollywood stars’ personal lives, psychic make-up, and film acting talent. The articles about stars and stardom are, admittedly, not the locus of Bisch’s most compelling ideas about cinema (which, I would argue, relate to questions of spectatorship and the apparatus).

33 Smith, 57; and Don Ryan, “Two Hedonists in Hollywood,” *Picture-Play Magazine*, July 1925, 46.
34 Susie Sexton, “Psychoanalyzing the Causes of Film Success,” *Screenland*, February 1924, 44–46, 88–90.
35 “Psychoanalyze Baby Peggy,” *Camera!*, December 1, 1923, 10.
37 Studlar, “Perils of Pleasure?”
38 Bisch, “Have All Actors?,” 36.
39 Bisch, 36.
Yet his texts on stardom play a crucial role in integrating psychoanalytic theories into the fan magazine discourse as well as in inviting the film fan readers to think differently about their relation to the screen and toward the Hollywood industry.

Attempting to define the distinct qualities that lie behind an actor’s screen success, Bisch claims to have analyzed childhood memories and recurring dreams of several screen performers and found that “[a]ctors belong in a class by themselves and are fundamentally different.” As opposed to locating the key to success in the stars’ looks, talent, or charisma, as we find in other popular inquiries, Bisch stresses that all of his subjects shared secret feelings of self-depreciation, incompetence, and guilt that were imprinted on them since childhood. Blending a host of Freudian ideas with concepts from psychologist Alfred Adler, Bisch finds that the performers he allegedly analyzed unconsciously showed signs of exhibitionism, narcissistic tendencies, inferiority complexes, an infantile fixation with pretending, and an inability to fix their desires upon one single object. The childhood experiences shared by these performers, Bisch concludes, made them become obsessed with film acting, which in his final analysis allows those who suffer from an inferiority complex to become the part they play as well as to single out their individuality and feel important. Acting, therefore, is “the most likely job that will actually make an individual feel superior as an antidote for any inferiority fears he may suffer deep down inside his emotional self.”

The diagnosis of all successful actors as neurotics runs counter to the idolization of stars common in fan magazines and is certainly uncharacteristic for Photoplay, a journal that played a major role in marketing star personas and opted not to dwell upon the star scandals of the day. But we should not overlook what Bisch’s use of psychoanalysis actually shares with the period’s star and fan discourses. The article ultimately provides a pseudo-scientific validation to the common premise that the Hollywood stars are in fact a type apart. Moreover, Bisch sets out to reveal to readers secrets about the real lives of the stars. Fan magazines were concerned with revealing such details since their earliest days, disclosing the real eye and hair color of film stars, their marital status, hobbies, and so on. Bisch, therefore, evokes psychoanalysis in this context as an effective method for generating the kind of information that was sought after by the magazine readers. Indeed, by the late 1920s, the discourse on Hollywood already imbricated itself in the period’s “culture of personality” that was obsessed with revealing what personal traits make an individual stand out in a mass society. Both fans and the industry regarded the qualities that permitted one to become a desired star as stemming from unique personal traits, needs, and inner-world. Psychoanalysis offered

40 Bisch, 36.
41 Bisch, 145.
42 Studlar, “Perils of Pleasure?,” 271.
43 See, for example, Barbas, Movie Crazy.
45 Barbas, Movie Crazy, chap. 2.
an increasingly popular way to understand (and to act upon) the notion of modern selfhood, and for the fan magazines it provided a new language to discuss and legitimize conceptions of what constitutes magnetic personalities.

Whereas Bisch’s article on the stars’ inferiority complexes implies that the cinema has the therapeutic effect of a safe haven for those obsessed with performing, his follow-up articles about acting and stardom paint an increasingly bleaker image of the psychic life of film stars. Actors, he writes, “on the whole are a nervous lot. I have still to meet one who is not a neurotic. Each and every one is high-strung, keyed-up, over-emotionalized. It is acting that does that to them.”46 Movie acting allows for the actor the experience of being somebody else, but taking on a different character does not allow for self-expression, and as such it “makes the actor lose his own personality.”47 Basing his assessment on a simplification of Carl Jung, in particular his distinction between introverted and extroverted personalities, Bisch argues that only the introverts—those who are “all feeling, bundles of highly-charged emotion . . . sensitive, [and] more or less unstable”—would qualify for success in an acting career, though they are also more prone to nervous breakdowns (especially, according to Bisch, female introverts).48 In another article, he addresses the topic of the high divorce rate among Hollywood actors, providing a twofold explanation: that “the libido of the average actor is notoriously weak” and that actors cannot stop pretending, even in their private lives off-camera.49 Because they regularly pretend to fall in love in their film work, actors can neither express nor experience authentic love and “scarcely know what reality is.” According to Bisch, the impulse to get divorced is a physical manifestation of “flight from reality,” a concept he borrows from Freud’s description of psychosis, wherein the ego withdraws itself from a part of reality and tries to substitute it with something else in order to prevent a conflict between the id and the living environment.50 Film actors, like psychotics, are “continually fleeing from reality” and instead “grapple with phantoms and shadows.”51

What ultimately emerges from this application of psychological concepts to the star discourse is an interesting reversal of the roles of the film stars and their fans. As early as the 1910s, screen-struck female film fans were associated with an inclination for intense and uncritical overidentification with the fictional worlds of the movies, to a point of obscuring the perception of reality.52 Bisch’s observations, however, led him to ascribe this overidentification to the foremost source of women’s fascination with cinema—the Hollywood stars themselves. This way, more than just disseminating knowledge about the real life of the stars, the popularized psychoanalytic discourse that Bisch

47 Bisch, 68.
49 Louis E. Bisch, “Why Can’t They Stay Married?,” Photoplay, November 1927, 94.
52 On debates about the “hysterical female spectator” and its relation to later debates in feminist film theory, see Studlar, “Perils of Pleasure?”
promoted encouraged a critical and demystified view of cinematic representation, both on- and offscreen, suggesting that viewers have a better grasp of reality than do stars. One of Bisch’s articles explicitly warned his readers, paradoxically, to never depend “upon what an actor tells you about the picture he is playing in,” in sharp opposition, of course, to the very premise of the fan magazines as a supposedly reliable channel of communication between Hollywood and its fans. Psychoanalytical theories thus came to play an unlikely part in the efforts of Photoplay and other magazines to offer their readers “a superior, distanced awareness of the star-making process while simultaneously perpetuating an illusion of intimacy with the stars,” as Studlar puts it. After all, what could offer a greater illusion of intimacy as well as of demystification than an opportunity to peek into the stars’ own troubled unconsciousness?

FILM SPECTATORSHIP, GENRE, AND PLEASURE
The September 1927 edition of Photoplay magazine featured Bisch’s article “What Makes Us Movie Fans?,” his most comprehensive account of film spectatorship and arguably a psychoanalytic version of Hugo Münsterberg’s famous essay from 1915, “Why We Go to the Movies.” Much like this cornerstone of classical film theory (which was similarly written for a popular women’s magazine, appearing in Cosmopolitan), Bisch’s text seeks to explain the universal appeal of cinema by revealing the mental operations of film spectators. However, while Münsterberg argues that power of the medium stemmed from how filmic devices are modeled after mental activities such as attention, memory, and imagination, Bisch puts forth a medium-specific argument about the unique manner in which cinema engages the unconscious. As is the case with all of his Photoplay writings, Bisch never cites Freud (nor does he even mention his name), and so a discussion of the article’s relation to debates in film theory requires something of an intellectual game of tracing and piecing together the different Freudian references involved.

“If you don’t like the movies there is something wrong with you!” Bisch claims up front. Motion pictures, he argues, “gratify certain emotional cravings common to us all” and “dovetail with the physiological side of our make-up better than any other form of amusement that has ever been devised.” In Bisch’s account, the key to understanding the effective way that cinema engages the mind lies in the instinct of curiosity, which from infancy motivates our desire for learning and discovery, specifically by visual means. We are drawn to motion pictures because they satisfy the curiosity instinct “conveniently and completely”; they reveal to us “all kinds of intimacies and privacies and secrets that we speculate about, but can never be sure about through actual experience.” In addition, due to the compositional possibilities of editing

54 Studlar, “Perils of Pleasure?,” 273.
57 Bisch, 30.
58 Bisch, 31, 30.
scenes together, films also “cover the greatest amount of geographical and personal territory in the shortest space of time.” For this reason, Bisch asserts, one does not need to cultivate a taste for film, for we are disposed to enjoy them from infancy. To become a movie fan is not only natural; it is inevitable.

This description of how the curiosity instinct shapes the viewers’ responses to film is indebted to Freud’s early writings, which Bisch uses very selectively. According to Freud, the instinct of curiosity (or, as he also calls it, the “instinct for knowledge or research”) is not exclusively oriented toward sexuality, but sex plays an important role in its formation. Freud suggests that the instinct of curiosity might initially arise in childhood with respect to sexual life, so that part of the erotic pleasure in looking originally derives from satisfying the infantile sexual curiosity. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, he stresses that the instinct of curiosity makes use of “the energy of scopophilia,” and one of his dream interpretations even uses “the pleasure of looking” and “curiosity” as synonyms in the context of watching a theater play. Bisch—unsurprisingly, given the context of the middle-class fan magazine—eliminates any linkage to sexuality in his discussion of curiosity and film spectatorship. Whereas in his popular book on psychoanalysis he followed Freud by drawing connections between curiosity and sexual life, in the pages of *Photoplay* he describes curiosity primarily as what drives a child to learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic, and so the pleasure in film viewing remains free from sexual connotations.

In arguing this, Bisch sharply opposes later psychoanalytic film theorists in their approach to spectatorship. Several key texts of the 1970s and 1980s, including Christian Metz’s *The Imaginary Signifier* and Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” seek to understand the affinities between the institution of cinema and the (male) spectator’s “curiosity and the wish to look,” evoking the notions of fetishism, sadistic voyeurism, narcissism, and scopophilic fixation. Unlike these later theoretical projects, Bisch neither pathologizes the spectator nor roots cinema’s appeal in perversion. He was not interested in associating cinema or psychoanalytic theory with sexual deviance. In his account, psychoanalysis reveals that films in fact raise our curiosity in a fundamentally healthy manner and that “a liking for pictures is the same as saying that you are normal.”

Because he avoids the subject of sexuality, Bisch for the most part marginalizes the question of sexual difference in his theory of spectatorship and

only addresses it in a few intriguing cases, as I discuss below. Well suited to the pages of *Photoplay*, his theory does not suppose a universal male spectator; nor does he take male subjectivity as the basis for the Freudian concepts that inform it. This, too, distinguishes Bisch’s view from later psychoanalytic theories of cinema, in which the question of sexual difference became a crucial concern. Mulvey’s influential contribution, for example, stipulates that classical cinema catered to male viewers, which in turn generated further theoretical discussions about the visual pleasures (or masochism) of the female spectators. But when Bisch discusses sources of pleasure in film viewing, he does not see them as pertaining exclusively to male viewers.

Following on his observation about cinema’s correspondence to the instinct of curiosity, Bisch points to two other psychological factors that engender pleasure in the cinema. First, he makes an argument that anticipates claims of cognitivist studies of film spectatorship about the pleasure of comprehending and correctly inferring formal cues from motion pictures. According to Bisch, unlike description-heavy novels and stage plays, the visual richness of filmic expression allows movies (particularly those in the style we have come to associate with classical Hollywood) to provide a small number of hints necessary to make accurate guesses about further developments in their plot. This way, movies “flatter our egos and enhance our pride,” because correctly guessing plot developments “makes you feel intelligent and capable. You pat yourself on the back. Your ego gets a kick. You feel sort of good all over.”

Second, Bisch puts forth an argument about how motion pictures appeal to viewers by functioning as symbolic wish fulfillments. The Freudian concept of wish fulfillment originates in the work on the interpretation of dreams, but it is likely that Bisch bases his ideas on this score on Freud’s short 1908 text on popular literature, “The Poet and Day-Dreaming.” In this text, Freud argues that literary works—similar to fantasies and daydreams—give expression to unconscious wishes and suppressed desires of their writers and, indirectly, of their readers. For Freud, “The true enjoyment of literature proceeds from the release of tensions in our minds . . . this result consists in the writer’s putting us into a position in which we can enjoy our own daydreams without reproach or shame.” Bisch transfers this observation to the realm of cinema, claiming that films can provide imaginary satisfactions of unconscious wishes: “Throughout our lives we repress and hold ourselves in check . . . The law and social custom does [sic] not allow us to behave the way we want”—but at the movies, these frustrations are relieved.

64 See Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 6–18. For debates that the article has generated, see, for example, Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” *Screen* 23, no. 3–4 (September–October 1982): 74–88.


at least temporarily, get to feel triumphant as if they emotionally mirror the experiences of the onscreen heroes and heroines.

For Bisch, the vast range of film genres, plots, and types of film characters ensure that all viewers, regardless of their emotional strains, find pleasure in the movies. Interestingly, Bisch chooses to exemplify this with two hypothetical types of female viewers: a home-bound mother worrying about domestic duties who adores Greta Garbo’s coquetry, and a “worldly sister” who admires the simplicity of Lillian Gish’s characters. Each type of viewer, in Bisch’s account, identifies in films what they aspire to but are missing from their lives. Despite the differences between these two types, Bisch asserts that neither is corrupted by the pictures. Films thus provide a form of mental relief, and Bisch warns that without cinema’s emotional outlet for unfulfilled desires, “our instinctive natures positively die of starvation.” This claim seems to support the tone of mainstream Hollywood products, but it is worth noting that it nonetheless runs against a major cultural current of the time. The 1920s saw a process that Lea Jacobs succinctly describes as “the decline of sentiment” in critical and popular taste, which manifested itself in a turn away from romantic and sensational themes, first in literary culture and eventually in the cinema. American society’s turn to modern, masculinist etiquette championed the repression of strong emotions as an important middle-class trait, in striking contrast to Bisch’s call for the need to fully experience strong sentiments. In other words, Bisch’s idiosyncratic intertwining of psychoanalytic terminology and the discourses of the women-oriented fan magazine leads to an endorsement of the melodramatic heart of Hollywood cinema.

Bisch develops this position in a couple of follow-up articles on film genres, where he argues for a correlation between box office performance and the structure of a filmgoer’s psyche. Films, according to him, succeed when they are most suited to the healthy equilibrium between unconscious desires and the demands of culture, and they do so most effectively when they perform for their viewers what Freud called “dream-work” and “joke-work.” Presumably drawing inspiration from Freud’s 1905 *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Bisch explains the massive appeal of film comedies by suggesting that laughter signifies a temporary overcoming of inhibitions and an opposition to the mental forces of repression. Bisch describes film comedy as a “safety valve” for the psyche, which allows viewers to “reliev[e] pent-up emotion” in the form of laughter. This assertion brings to mind an observation Walter Benjamin makes about laughter in the cinema one decade later, in his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (which was also partly informed by Freudian psychoanalysis). But whereas Benjamin theorizes the liberatory potential of collective

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68 Bisch, 126.
69 Bisch, 126.
laughter as a release of repressed social pathologies or a “preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychoses,” Bisch remains interested strictly in individuals and does not consider cinema to have radical social-transformative prospects. In concert with the American popular version of psychoanalysis, Bisch emphasizes cinema’s therapeutic properties that protect subjects from external burdens—that is to say, he considers laughter in the cinema not as a means for collective cultural change, but rather as a method for individuals to cope with conflict and maladjustment in everyday life.

In a similar fashion, Bisch explains the unparalleled popularity of romance pictures by arguing they are uniquely effective in absorbing spectators’ surplus of repressed romantic emotions. Bisch bases this claim on a particularly distorted (and eerily sex-free) explanation of the Oedipus complex, according to which the idea of romantic love stems from love to one’s parents. In Bisch’s account of the Oedipus complex, we all spend our lives unconsciously searching for a love ideal that would resemble a mental image we have in our minds since childhood. This search is inevitably unsuccessful, always leaving our desires unfulfilled. An emotional investment in romantic film plots, however, offers a relief from repression and frustration by providing the spectator a form of identification, or empathy, with the experiences of the characters. As Bisch puts it, “Everybody, you see, is trying to pacify that relentless Oedipus Complex. And nobody quite succeeds! Is it any wonder, then, that everybody wants love in his entertainment?”

The discussion of romantic films brings Bisch to specifically acknowledge the female spectators’ experience of the movies. He quotes an alleged patient of his, a married woman who confessed that “attendance at the movies kept her from falling in love with some other man,” saying, “When my husband is cold and indifferent . . . I always select the most romantic picture I can find and I spend the afternoon there. It makes me feel better. It soothes the hurt. I let my fancy carry me along on the wings of love. I laugh and I cry and my heart beats fast—all by myself—where nobody in the darkness pays any attention to me. And then when I get home, after this emotional spree, my husband doesn’t appear such a bad fellow after all!” As different as can be from feminist film theory, this description aptly demonstrates Photoplay’s deeply contradictory gender politics.

For a discussion of gender politics in the fan magazine, see Studlar, “Perils of Pleasure?” 292.
female scopophilia as a cultural taboo. Simultaneously, however, insofar as the pleasure gained from this viewing experience proves therapeutic, the article confirms that the compliance to traditional patriarchal ideals is both healthy and desirable. This novel view on the psychology of the cinema thus invites the women readers of Photoplay to pursue the possibilities of pleasure in the cinema, but the reader/spectator is ultimately left suspended between the carefully balanced normative and emancipatory concepts.

CENSORSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS
Moving beyond the pursuit of the psychological appeal of motion pictures, Bisch dedicated a sequence of Photoplay articles to contemporary debates about cinema’s cultural legitimacy. Using his medical expertise to determine that it is unjust to consider the millions of moviegoers as “morons” because of their taste for film, he insists that cinema is an art form and rejects charges against the cinema as a cause of moral corruption and indecency. In his view, the filmic representations that come under attack, “nudity, jazz, drinking, petting, carousing—actually hold the mirror up to nature, as it were, and present life as it really is.” Returning to his praise for strong sentiments in the cinema, he also argues that the fact that films have the ability to make people cry is the best proof of the medium’s moral effect and adds that he has never been able to “establish in any case of waywardness or delinquency a single bad influence that could be charged directly to the motion picture.”

While assertions such as these are common in 1920s writings by commentators who set out to defend Hollywood’s moral image, Bisch is unique in deploying psychoanalytic theory to mount a counter-offensive against the cultural institutions that attacked the film industry. His first target is highbrow elitists, in particular lovers of opera and of Henrik Ibsen’s and August Strindberg’s plays who fear that a “commonplace taste” for films will affect their dignity. Bisch seeks not only to validate lowbrow taste (evoking “the scientific fact that the whole of mankind is very primitive and uncouth”) but also to define the highbrow public as neurotic. In his account, factors such as education, refined behavior, and high-cultural preferences make one out of tune with reality, since an exclusive taste for better things stands between the “unhappy highbrows” and their primitive emotions. “In almost every case of neurosis,” he writes, “one finds a distinct disharmony existing between what the emotions are craving and what reality has to offer by way of satisfying them.” By denying themselves the enjoyment of movies—which, as Bisch believes, offer an important outlet for the strong emotions we typically repress in daily life—the cultural elitists remain emotionally maladjusted, caught in a struggle with their own repressed desires.

80 Bisch, 92.
83 Bisch, “Unhappy Highbrows,” 34–35, 94.
84 Bisch, 35.
Next, Bisch targets film censorship. Siding with the studios’ resistance to external influence on their productions, he claims that the problem lies not with the morals of the movies, but with the censors themselves, specifically with the emotional state of “censor-mindedness” (see Figure 1). The causes for “censor neurosis,” which compels one to believe that their “own differences are correct and should become standard,” lie in repressed childhood feelings of self-accusation. In Bisch’s analysis, the censor is under the influence of an unresolved conflict originating from his relationship with his mother, “a most severe and censorious woman [who] would scold and humiliate him.” Because of the fixation on these childhood complexes, the censor is secluded, self-glorified, and suspicious of change and progress—all of which, Bisch argues, makes him unqualified to judge how a motion picture would affect the morals of the healthy, normal majority of the public.

In his critique of highbrow audiences and film censors, Bisch makes an unusual connection between cinema and Freud’s theory of the unconscious and the demands of civilization. Informed by Freud’s description of how
the subject’s desires and pursuit of pleasure are in an ongoing conflict with the societal demand for non-satisfaction of these powerful instincts, Bisch proposes a schematic dichotomy: for him, cinema and its promise to satisfy desires, release tension, and supply “primitive emotions” are opposed to neurosis and detachment from authentic feelings, which he associates with the ideals of civilization, elitist cultural taste, higher education, and the censorship of sensational images. Indeed, in the context of psychoanalytic theory, the term censor evokes additional connotations, which could not have been lost on Bisch. In Freud’s early writings, censorship refers to the mechanism of repression or inhibition, of separating the unconscious from the conscious—a function that later Freud would associate with the superego. If Freud speaks of a censor to refer to a psychic operation, Bisch reverses the metaphor. In the personification of the neurotic censor, Bisch draws parallels between the cultural institution of censorship and the psychic mechanism of repression, suggesting that the policing of films is analogous to inhibiting the pursuit of wish fulfillment.

This formulation exemplifies once more the extent to which Bisch’s ideas are radically different from later applications of psychoanalysis in film theory. In the work of the 1970s theorists who incorporated Lacanian and neo-Marxist ideas, cinema was primarily seen as a disciplinary cultural institution and its illusory pleasure as something that had to be combated. Bisch, however, makes a metapsychological case for embracing these very illusions, seeing narrative cinema as liberating and psychologically healthy. It is important to note, however, that Bisch’s argument also modifies part of the original Freudian concept on which it is based. In Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud considers art to be one of the “substitutive satisfactions” that enable coping with the unhappiness of civilization, since it answers to the need of “making oneself independent of the external world.” Yet Bisch is concerned with a very specific understanding of what such art would be. He excludes the highbrow examples of opera, Ibsen, and Strindberg, locating the substitutive satisfactions rather in the popular, lowbrow art of the movies. For him, it is precisely the affinity of popular cinema with our instinctive desires and primitive emotions that allows motion pictures to fulfill the psychological purpose of art.

PREFIGURING THE APPARATUS THEORY

Perhaps the most extraordinary installment of Bisch’s Photoplay series is the 1928 article “How the Screen Hypnotizes You!,” in which he addresses the psychological significance of the cinematic apparatus. Anticipating the core ideas of Jean-Louis Baudry’s influential apparatus theory from 1970, Bisch

originally published in German in 1930, shortly after Bisch wrote his Photoplay article. However, Freud started developing these ideas in earlier writings, including the aforementioned Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious and “The Poet and Day-Dreaming.”

89 See, for example, Sigmund Freud, “The Unconscious,” in Collected Papers, vol. 4, 105.


91 Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, 30.
sets out to examine the physical and spatial characteristics that define our encounter with the motion picture, arriving at the conclusion that while we are all suggestible, “when we sit in a darkened moving picture house, we are one hundred per cent more so.”

The initial inquiry Bisch lays out in this case leads him once more to consider the experience of a female viewer, something that has been notoriously missing from Baudry’s account. Yet, like other 1920s American fan magazine writers, Bisch understood the female spectator to be primarily a consumer. His main interest, therefore, lies not in political or ideological functions of film but rather in why film spectators are compelled to desire the setting, furnishing, and clothing they see onscreen and to imitate the mannerisms of their favorite stars. To answer this question, Bisch turns to the conditions of film viewing. He provides a description of a visit to a decorated movie palace, where a host of extra-filmic elements work in conjunction to create a powerful effect. In doing so, Bisch’s text recalls Siegfried Kracauer’s essay “Cult of Distraction,” published two years earlier. Unlike the German critic’s insistence that the extra-filmic elements intend “to rivet the viewers’ attention to the peripheral,” Bisch sees their importance in how they disappear in the background in order to amplify the impact of the projected image. In his view, the darkness in the theater, combined with the melodic musical accompaniment, give the viewer a soothing feeling of isolation. The absence of the human voice in the film and in the hall, together with the thick carpet that mutes the sound of one’s steps, further contribute to the state of calm and quiet. The soft comfortable seats allow the viewers to relax, tilt their heads back, and pay undivided attention to the large illuminating moving image on the screen. Taken together, Bisch asserts, this experience is identical to the condition of being hypnotized: “The gaze is fixed. There descends upon the mind a spell of fascination. The mind drinks in everything the ears hear and the eyes see without question. The mind becomes uncritical. Reasoning, logic, and judgment are submerged and practically cease functioning. In a corresponding way, emotional responses become more alert. Primitive, instinctive reactions gain control. The mind is now open to suggestion!”

Analogies between film viewing and hypnotic trance appear in a long tradition of critical writings, including those of thinkers such as Münsterberg, Epstein, and Raymond Bellour. Bisch’s passage indeed bears significant similarities to the prior observations Münsterberg made about cinema’s power of suggestion and the inability of the immersed spectator to resist the influence of the film (it is indeed highly probable that Bisch was aware of the

94 Orgeron, “Making It in Hollywood.”
eminent psychologist’s writings). Yet Bisch’s version of the hypnosis analogy is also informed by a particular Freudian insight. Building upon Freud’s ideas about the “herd instinct” or “group mind,” he maintains that in addition to the theater’s architecture and decor, the illusory qualities of the image, and the spatial arrangement of the screen, the collective experience of viewing film within a crowd also augments cinema’s hypnotic power.

Bisch describes “a mysterious composite effect” that, in a collective viewing experience, causes “the minds of a few hundred persons . . . to blend into one.” The formation of this collective mind erases the individual traits—as well as the individual inhibitions—of the subjects in the crowd and instead, much like in Freud’s account, exposes their shared unconscious foundations. “When you are in a crowd,” suggests Bisch, “[y]our cultural taste and standards are lowered. You become more primitive and animal-like.” The affinities between crowds and primitivism are notoriously central in Freud’s psychology (and in the writings of Gustave Le Bon from which it draws), though read in the context of the Photoplay articles, they might appear to be at odds with Bisch’s overall intent to provide an authoritative endorsement of cinema’s artistic merit and moral respectability. Nevertheless, in Bisch’s view, the awakening of shared unconscious drives in a crowd signifies a liberation from civilization’s constraints on desires and wishes as well as an openness to experience and express repressed strong emotions. According to Freud, individuals in a group are likely to do or approve of things that they “would have avoided in the normal conditions of life.” Bisch likewise notes that in the cinema, spectators are “emotionally stirred” in ways they would not be if they were alone, and “refined men and women laugh at the most vulgar kind of slapstick comedy,” even if afterward they feel “positively ashamed of having exhibited their feelings in this way.” This leads Bisch to conclude that precisely because of their strong effect on the viewer’s psyche, films have a “tremendous educational value” and that “[t]he lessons learned through a picture stick in the mind and last longer than lessons learned through any other medium.” Once more highlighting his distinction from later psychoanalytic theorists of film, Bisch does not seek to combat cinema’s suggestive powers but rather to locate its promises and potentials.

CONCLUSION

Bisch never offers a synthesis of his various observations about the psychology of cinema. Had he offered one, it might go something like this: Cinema has a uniquely effective influence on our unconscious instincts; it offers strong emotional experiences that allow us to release tensions caused by the repressions of our wishes and desires; and these experiences, in turn, are amplified by collective viewing situations in theatrical spaces that make us

98 Freud, Group Psychology, 3.
100 Freud, Group Psychology, 9.
102 Freud, Group Psychology, 29.
103 Bisch, “How the Screen Hypnotizes You!,” 100.
104 Bisch, 100 (emphasis added).
more suggestible. By virtue of being an art form, cinema reflects our reality in its narratives. At the same time, as products of an industry, films are made in order to appeal to audiences and satisfy their emotional needs. Thus, popular commercial cinema has by default a healthy psychological and uplifting cultural effect.

Yet, beyond the particular conclusions that Bisch arrives at, his series of popular articles on cinema and psychoanalysis also holds a unique historical significance. In other words, Bisch’s engagement with psychoanalysis in the pages of *Photoplay* does more than communicate Freudian concepts in an accessible and morally acceptable manner to middle-class audiences. Bisch’s discussion of psychoanalysis in these magazine articles (as reductive as his interpretation of it may be) calls attention to aspects of the cinema that remain hidden and unspoken of in other debates on the cinema of his day. By doing so, Bisch invited the readers to adopt a self-reflexive, demystified spectatorial position—not only with respect to the reception of star images, as noted above, but also with respect to the illusory nature of Hollywood films and to laughter, sentimentalism, and even the engagement with the apparatus. Then again, while Bisch offered the predominantly female readers of *Photoplay* a thoughtful consideration of the meaning of taking pleasure in viewing, his gender politics was deeply reactionary. In this respect, Bisch utilized a modern theory to observe a modern cultural phenomenon, though he ultimately held to conservative values. As cultural histories of Hollywood have shown, the fan magazine discourse thrived on such cultural ambivalences and contradiction.

By offering an all-encompassing consideration of film stardom, spectatorship, genre, and the social impact of film, Bisch was extraordinarily early to conceive of psychoanalysis as “the key to an understanding of [cinema’s] basis and its functioning”—a view that became vital half a century later in institutionalized film studies. To be sure, I do not wish to regard him as a pioneer of what became psychoanalytic film theory; rather, Bisch was a thinker who took an alternative route. The conclusions resulting from his investigations are often antithetical to the concepts that drove the psychoanalytic theories of the 1970s, and not only with respect to gender. His is a theory that embraces cinephilia rather than seeks ways to destroy cinema’s illusionist effects. Furthermore, whereas in 1970s film studies psychoanalysis became crucial in informing the critical and aesthetic project of political modernism, Bisch’s commentary on aesthetics is decisively anti-modernist. Not only does he celebrate Hollywood’s mainstream productions, but he explicitly finds value in them *due to* their lowbrow aspirations and appeal.

Ultimately, the fact that Bisch’s cycle of writings on film have remained largely forgotten until now is significant in and of itself. Whether he has been largely overlooked because his work falls between classical and so-called contemporary theory, or because of the popular context in which he published, Bisch’s project exemplifies an intriguing road not taken in debates about

106 See Rodowick, *Crisis of Political Modernism*. 
cinema. A theoretical overview like his could only come into being at the intersection of academic discourse and the entertainment industry itself (and even if *Photoplay* was not an official organ of Hollywood, fan magazines, as Marsha Gordon has shown, “were always imbued with Hollywood’s corporate ideology”). In recent years, we have seen the re-publication of a wealth of newly unearthed early film-theoretical texts from various national contexts, which significantly enrich our concept of the corpus of classical film theory and specifically draw renewed attention to early psychoanalytic theorization of film. It is crucial to likewise remember that silent-era Hollywood was not only the center of the film industry but also a locus of heated debates about the cultural impact of films. These debates fostered theoretical engagement with the medium’s functions and possibilities and responded creatively to the nationwide popular interest in psychoanalysis.

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107 Orgeron, “‘You Are Invited to Participate,’” 8.

108 See, for example, Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan, eds., *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); and Francesco Casetti with Silvio Alovisio and Luca Mazzei, eds., *Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896–1922* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).