

# What is erotomania, in print, on screen, in life?

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The Greek term «erotomania» first appeared in the West in the 17th Century<sup>1</sup> and became more prevalent in the vocabulary of psychiatry than of psychoanalysis. As Paul-Laurent Assoun points out, Freud «mentions it all in all three times<sup>2</sup> in his published works, whereas information on the subject proves overabundant in psychiatric literature»<sup>3</sup>. It was the French psychiatrist Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault (1872-1934), considered by Jacques Lacan as his «one and only master in psychiatry»<sup>4</sup>, who gave the word its now well-established meaning. In 1921, Clérambault wrote:

A complete picture of erotomania is nowhere to be found. The various treatise offer no more than disorganized descriptions that neither draw out its permanent characteristics, nor provide any kind of plan or criteria, as guidelines for a cross-examination. Those characteristics, those criteria and that plan, have yet to be formulated. We have attempted to do so, because the cases of erotomania referred to our department are legion (Cl.:79, see note 5).

His texts on the subject, written between 1913 and 1923, were published posthumously in the volume *L'Erotomanie* (Erotomania)<sup>5</sup> in 1993. Lacan, still under Clérambault's influence, was the first to combine the latter's theories on erotomania with a psychoanalytic approach, in his thesis [*De la Psychose dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* (1932)<sup>6</sup>] on the case of Marguerite Anzieu.

The Robert dictionary inscribes the double meaning of the term «erotomania»:

- 1 Obsessions characterized by preoccupations of a sexual nature.
- 2 In Psychoanalysis: Delirious illusion of being loved (My translation).

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<sup>1</sup> The word appears in the 1647 edition of Willis's *De melancholia*.

<sup>2</sup> Freud applies the term in 1907 to the case of Norbert Hanold in Jensen's *Gradiva*, to Schreber's case in 1911 and includes it in one of his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, in 1917.

<sup>3</sup> Paul-Laurent Assoun, «Glossaire», *penser/rêver 5: Des Erotomanes*: 25. My translation.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits I*, Paris: Seuil, Collection Points, 1966: 79. My translation.

<sup>5</sup> Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault, *L'Erotomanie*, Le Plessis-Robinson: Synthélabo, Collection *Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond*, 1993. Ref.: Cl. All translations in this paper are mine.

<sup>6</sup> See Elisabeth Roudinesco, *JacquesLacan*, Paris: Fayard, 1993: 46, 55-70.

I'll be mainly discussing the second meaning here, the one brought to light by Clérambault. As early as 1895, Freud, who exposed a blatant example of erotomania with the Schreber case<sup>7</sup>, preferred to use the word «projection»:

([...] to designate a primal mode of defense, common to psychoses, neuroses and perversions, through which the subject projects onto another subject or object desires which originate from him, without his being aware of it and which he attributes to another external cause [...])<sup>8</sup>,

and from 1946, Melanie Klein refers to «projective identification»:

([...] to designate a specific mode of projection and identification consisting in incorporating one's own persona into the object, in order to harm the latter (ibid.:482).)

In both cases, this description can be applied to erotomaniac delirium.

The 2004 special issue of the psychoanalytic journal *penser/rêver* on erotomaniacs<sup>9</sup>, assesses all the studies of erotomania from Esquirol's *Des Maladies mentales* (1838) until today, including both psychoanalytic and psychiatric points of view and without entirely omitting the primary meaning of sexual obsession. The present paper is based both on such recent texts and on Clérambault's still relevant work. I will illustrate my point by analysing two works of fiction: first a British novel by Ian McEwan (born 1948), *Enduring Love* (1997)<sup>10</sup> and second, a recent French film, *Anna M.* (2007), directed by Michel Spinosa (born 1963).

Here are a few essential notions and patterns from Clérambault's still pertinent writings: «The word erotomania mainly applies to a syndrome» (Cl.:64) and «Erotomaniac delirium is a syndrome of morbid passion. It is not an interpretative delirium» (Ibid.:65). The delirium is that of the Subject, as projected onto the Object of his/her passion. It all begins with a basic delirious Postulate: «The Object started it all, it is he/she who loves the most or loves one-sidedly» (Ibid.:67) and «the components of the feelings generating a Postulate are: Pride, Desire and Hope» (Ibid.). The Object can sometimes be an important or famous personality. The best-known case analyzed by Clérambault is Léa-Anna, 53, who, convinced that the king of England was in love with her, kept travelling to London, where she would wait for him outside Buckingham Palace. She would also imagine any English or American officers seen in Paris to be emissaries from the British sovereign. Furthermore, the Subject, certain that he/she is passionately loved by the Object, remains equally convinced that the latter is free and refuses to accept the validity of that person's marriage. Clérambault insists that the main source of Erotomania is Pride, usually sexual Pride as opposed to Love (Cl.:62). He adds that erotomaniacs often love platonically, while claiming the primacy of Passion, frequently combined with a strong religious faith, as in the case of the Mystics. The Subject, who expects the utmost from the Object, pursues that person relentlessly. The quest begins in an optimistic mode, leading the Subject to read positive signs into the unsuspecting Object's behavior. Later the Subject's unrequited love turns to hatred and violence. The Subject lies to the Object, manipulates and harrasses him/her, making his/her life unbearable. Such antisocial behavior may go as far as murder and the Subject often ends up in a psychiatric institution. Pure Erotomania, including no other kinds of deliria, can last up to 37 years according to Clérambault and usually remains incurable. Although Clérambault quotes more cases of Women erotomaniacs, he also mentions various male Subjects. He never underestimates the danger presented by such patients, which the police, for example, tends to ignore, as both McEwan and Spinosa show.

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, «Psychoanalytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoïa (Dementia Paranoïdes-1911), in *Cinq Psychanalyses* (Freud's Case Histories), translated by Marie Bonaparte and Rudolph M. Loewenstein, Paris: PUF, 1954, 1993: 263-324.

<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth Roudinesco & Michel Plon, *Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse*, Paris: Fayard, 1997: 821.

<sup>9</sup> *Penser/rêver* No.5, Spring 2004: *Des Erotomanes*, Michel Gribinski, Ed., Ref. PR.

<sup>10</sup> Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1998, 2004, Ref.: EL.

The issue of *penser/rêver* on *Les Erotomanes*, consisting of texts written almost a century after Clérambault's, indicates new scientific discoveries and social changes, from the point of view of sixteen psychoanalysts and academics. A collective introduction provides a short history of erotomania, a glossary of terms referring to the disease, and a tribute to Clérambault, with precisions and updates re-the latter's thesis. The religious question is broached: «erotomania feeds into religious beliefs: faith is erotomaniac, in that its avowed aim is to guarantee the father's love» (PR.: 14-15), the most extreme case being Schreber's. Philippe Comar differentiates feminine from masculine erotomania, according to the two meanings of the term: «'insane illusions of being loved' [...] only affect women and pertain to psychosis [...] obsessions characterized by preoccupations of a sexual nature' [...] are more typically masculine and pertain to neurosis» (ibid.:83). Jackie Pingaud underscores the imaginary side of erotomania by referring to Antiquity (Ovid, Lucretius, Virgil, Terence). Other authors establish affinities between erotomania and psychoanalytic transference as an illusion of love. Finally, Miguel de Arambuja develops the idea of love as representing a hallucinatory, parallel life for erotomaniacs:

For the lover, there is a dream state and there is life. Life enables him to explore the dream of love [...] For the erotomaniac, dream takes the place of life: he can no longer dream since life itself has become a space in which to unfold his oneiric fabric. From that point on, the term 'delirium' will be applied («L'Amour des certitudes», PR: 15).

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In his ambiguously titled novel *Enduring Love*, Ian McEwan overtly refers to Clérambault's writings on erotomania and its «syndrome». The narrator and focalizer Joe Rose, a successful journalist, c.45, becomes the Object of the homosexual passion of Jed Parry, a jobless young man of about 28. The point of view is the Object/Victim's, a narrator too disturbed by harassment from the Subject to be entirely reliable. Readers of both sexes will tend to identify with him. The Subject's point of view, on the other hand, emerges in Jed's letters to Joe, the last of which constitutes the extradiegetic second Appendix.

The story begins in the country, near London, where Joe and his partner Clarissa happen to witness a balloon accident. Joe rushes to assist the pilot and his young son, soon to be joined by four other men, including Jed Parry. The balloon then rises into the air, with the child in the basket and the five volunteers hanging onto the sides. They soon all let go, except for a doctor who finally falls onto the ground to an instantaneous death. On his way to help, Joe meets Jed Parry who immediately falls in love with him and interprets his every word and gesture as an expression of reciprocal love. As Jed tries to force Joe, an atheist, to pray with him, a case of erotomania is born. Soon the latter follows Joe everywhere, prowls around his house and bombards him with love letters and phone calls. This behavior causes Joe's happy relationship with Clarissa to deteriorate. Jed becomes increasingly aggressive and Joe is unable to convince the police or even Clarissa of the danger involved. Jed's violence escalates in a restaurant, where hired killers erroneously wound a stranger instead of murdering Joe, and finally the latter, having acquired a gun, returns home just in time to save Clarissa from Jed's knife. Jed is then confined to a psychiatric institution and the Joe/Clarissa couple splits up. Nevertheless, the final chapter announces a reconciliation, as is confirmed in Appendix I.

The novel consciously illustrates Clérambault's theories, modernised by McEwan, who chooses to confront two men, entangled in a fake homosexual relationship. The situation makes all three protagonists unhappy, but the focalization magnifies the Object/Victim's torments. Towards the middle of the story, Joe remembers Clérambault's syndrome and recalls the Lea Anna in love with George V case (EL: 123-124). This rational diagnosis enables the protagonist to regain some self-confidence. Two more references to Clérambault occur and Joe comes to think of Jed as «a de Clérambault, my de Clérambault» (EL: 207), meaning the syndrome. Appendix I constitutes a metatext, merging reality with the imaginary as in an erotomaniac's mind; McEwan reproduces an article from the *British*

*Review of Psychiatry*, presenting a case of Pure Erotomania, with an introduction to Clérambault's syndrome, including a reference to the Léa-Anna case and followed by more recent theories, such as analyses of homosexual cases by Mullen and Pathe and a report of legal changes effected to protect the victims of erotomaniacs. The case in point coincides with the plot of the novel and the persons involved are designated by the characters' initials. A bibliography situates Appendix I in a real context and seems to posit the novel as a fictional version of an authentic case.

Appendix II produces a «Letter from Mr J.Parry, written towards the end of his third year after admittance [...] forwarded to Dr.R.Wenn at his request» (EL:244-5). This love letter introduces the theory that an erotomaniac, when placed in a good institution and properly cared for, can settle down with his delirious love (whether religious, profane or both) and live quite happily. The psychotic protagonists of Patrick McGrath's *Spider* (1990) and Sebastian Faulks' *Engleby* (2008) meet with destinies similar to Jed's.

Michel Spinoza's film *Anna M.* reads as quite clinical. In an interview<sup>11</sup>, the director and the actress Isabelle Carré recount their initial scientific research on romantic jealousy and erotomania. Unlike McEwan, they never refer to their sources in the film. For Spinoza, the pathology unfolds theatrically, in three acts: Hope, Vexation and Hatred. Anna, the Subject, is the focalizer. The initial M. is a homophone of «aime», meaning 'loves' in French. She is about 30 and works at the National Library. The Object of her obsession is André Zanewsky, a married doctor working at the Hôtel Dieu, fortyish, acted by Gilbert Melki.

The plot unfolds as follows: one evening, after helping her young colleague Ellénore, Anna works late at the library before going home to her neurotic mother and little dog. That night, she throws herself under a car. Cut to a hospital. Anna has a long scar on her leg and is being examined by Dr.Zanewsky, a typical good physician, kind but professional. Until now Anna has been seen taking care of others, while noone looks after her. Her lack of affection creates a perfect basis for the erotomaniac postulate that the doctor loves her. Accordingly, she interprets a banal exchange as a love declaration:

Anna: Will we be seeing each other again?

Dr: Of course we will.

Anna: When?

Dr: Let's make an appointment, alright?

The mechanics of erotomania are then set in motion and Anna's delirium becomes sexual. She follows Zanewsky everywhere, gives him unwanted presents and invades his privacy. At home Anna writes him love letters, phones him and masturbates to her fantasies. Just as Jed refuses to acknowledge Clarissa, Anna denies the existence of André's wife Marie in his life, yet she follows Marie and rudely confronts her at the antique shop where she works. Anna makes the couple's life miserable and when they jointly resist her, her delirious love turns into anger, then hatred. At the peak of her madness, the young woman interprets a message on the radio for a rendez-vous at a hotel, as being for her from Zanewsky. When he fails to show up, she picks up a railway employee named Albert and takes him to the hotel. In the morning she uses Albert's car to crash into André's, bangs her head against a wall, has the doctor arrested for assault, then withdraws her complaint to be forgiven. Anna's behavior culminates into her breaking into and trashing the Zanewskys' apartment.

We next see an angry, rebellious Anna in a psychiatric hospital. A visit from Ellénore calms her a little. When a fainting fit reveals her pregnancy, by Albert, she begins a campaign of good conduct and is soon released, after expressing remorse for her odious behavior and agreeing to live with an aunt in the country till the baby's birth. Once outside, she retraces her steps in a desperate attempt to track down Zanewsky who has left town and noone helps her. When Albert rejects her, she collapses at the

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<sup>11</sup> Interview of Michel Spinoza and Isabelle Carré by Olivier Bombarda, on the DVD of the film, Diaphana, 2007.

hotel in a violent anxiety fit, reminiscent of Polanski's 1965 film *Repulsion*. Finally Ellénore, who seems to love her, rescues and takes charge of her.

The last episode shows the two young women on a hike in the mountains, with Anna's now two-year-old daughter. They seem quite happy. Ellénore is then seen visiting a chapel alone, to the sound of Anna's voice, reading a text about the Sacred Heart.

In the final sequence, Anna wanders away from her sleeping child to a spot overlooking a footpath; unseen, she watches passing hikers and among them appear André and Marie Zanewsky. The film ends with Anna's Mona Lisa smile<sup>12</sup>. Normally the infernal cycle of erotomania should resume, but to Spinosa this is a scene of acceptance, Anna having attained a new spiritual dimension. The words heard in the chapel can now be understood as proclaiming Anna's new state of renunciation. The open conclusion suggests that erotomania can evolve into a harmless, neo-mystical delirium.

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The novel and film in point both reconstitute Clérambault's erotomaniac patterns, but they develop the characters differently. Both plots evolve around the Subject-Object-Object's Partner triangle and function according to Roger Foster's Round and Flat character dichotomy. However, while McEwan presents three Round characters, Spinosa only grants Anna that status, as his subjective, compassionate camera maintains her at the center of the image and the spectator sees André and Marie Zanewsky through her eyes. Melki's muted acting enhances his stereotypical character: the reassuring doctor, the good husband and protector of his fragile wife. Anna's delirious vision of André Z. as a prince charming is reinforced by a sartorial code, such as Jane Campion used for Sam Neil in *The Piano* (1993) – uncomfortable too small clothes made him look virginal and insecure<sup>13</sup>; here the dark, handsome doctor, often seen from a high angle, wearing a romantic black coat and white scarf, is distanced from Anna at the end of the film, by an unprincely tracksuit.

A filmmaker visually fuses a character's body with an actor's. Spectators enjoy identifying an actor and connecting him with a specific type of role: here a French audience will recognize Isabelle Carré, who played a young woman afflicted with Alzheimer's in Zabou Breitman's *Se souvenir des belles choses* (2001), and Gilbert Melki who recently acted a fireman, Object and Victim of an adolescent girl's erotomania cum pyromania in Claire Simon's *Ca Brûle* (2006). The reader of a novel, however, can only imagine a character's physique. Thus, when in his screen adaptation of *Enduring Love*<sup>14</sup>, Roger Michell presents Jed (Rhys Ifans) as a hippie, he is interpreting the character hypothetically.

Since McEwan makes Joe the focalizer, the reader becomes the spectator of Jed, who is simultaneously the Subject within the structure of erotomania and the Object in the narrative apparatus. McEwan also deliberately pluralizes the internal focalization by occasionally giving Jed's or Clarissa's point of view, using dialogues, letters and phone calls, so that Joe's dominant focalization never becomes exclusive. The narrator's credibility fluctuates between his own emotional reponse to Jed's behaviour and Clérambault's scientific explanation.

However individualistic the erotomaniac Subjects in both fictions may appear, their behavior will be at least partly stereotypical from the moment they meet their Object. Those characters were constructed according to the scientific pattern of the erotomaniac, as defined by Clérambault and others. In spite of the literary or cinematic story woven around the protagonists, Anna and Jed remain paradigmatic cases of a specific psychic mechanism. Seen from that angle, Anna's character can no

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<sup>12</sup> Isabelle Carré uses this expression in the afore-mentioned DVD interview.

<sup>13</sup> See Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, London: Routledge, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> *Enduring Love*, directed by Roger Michell, Pathé, Film Four, 2004.

longer be read as completely round, since she is the main Actant in the model of erotomania, according to Propp and Greimas. Indeed, all the characters are Actants rather than Actors in Spinoza's psychodrama.

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How does erotomania concern us today? The word has become unpopular. A reference to the illness can provoke reactions of mockery, due to the primary meaning of sexual obsession, or the ridiculous case of Lea-Anna... yet something familiar or déjà-vu disturbs and puzzles us. As in Freud's *Unheimliche/Uncanny*<sup>15</sup>, the erotomaniac is both familiar and unfamiliar to us. The familiarity comes from our experience of being «in love», which always includes a degree of overexcitement and loss of contact with reality. Strangeness and fear set in when the liminal, transitory state of amorous passion degenerates into a delirious obsession, which can drive the Subject to crime. Personally, I reacted with such disgust to the characters of Jed and Anna, that I felt the need to write this analysis of their cases.

The founder of surrealism, André Breton, coined the expression «l'amour fou»/mad love<sup>16</sup>, to describe a desire so strong that it seemed to originate from those surreal states, including madness, which fascinated the surrealists. Surrealist love was preceded by medieval Courtly Love, Romantic Love and Mystical Love, so many quests for the Absolute. The phrase «being in love» seems more appropriate here than the verb «to love». It is usually an ephemeral feeling, in which delirium plays a varying part. The Subject reinvents the Object according to a preconceived idea. Marguerite Duras declares, in her film *Destroy, she said* (1969), where all the characters are in love and psychotic: «One says 'I love you' to Love, not to a person». Truffaut's *The Story of Adèle H.* (1975), ends with the young Adèle Hugo drifting about Barbados, insane and homeless; she comes face to face with the Object of her erotomania without recognizing him, being trapped in the mechanical pursuit of her obsession!

Erotomania is never far from the ordinary «in love» state. Clérambault wrote in 1921: «Normal people under the spell of Passion often go through delirious moments, during which they should be locked up» (Cl.:118). A collective text from *penser/rêver*, expresses the same idea:

What amorous passion can claim to be devoid of erotomania? Love at first sight, at first glance – a glance so active in the delirium of passion – that's erotomania. (PR.:14).

An erotomaniac's delirium, like a normal amorous state, includes a strong dose of Narcissism. Flaubert's Emma Bovary, returning from her first adulterous tryst, looks in the mirror and exclaims: «I've got a lover!». Since no such situation materializes for Anna M., she invents it. McEwan and Spinoza emphasize the narcissistic effect by giving their protagonists similar first names: Joe and Jed, Anna and André. The Subject so passionately desires to be loved by the Object, that s/he decides and finally believes that this is the case, by projecting his/her desire onto the Other. The Subject then universalises the Object's non-existent love and finds proofs of it everywhere. Elisabeth Roudinesco thus describes Lacan's patient Marguerite Anzieu: «her delirium would suddenly start up at random, when she was reading. All M. had to do was open a newspaper, in order to discover references to her private life in it»<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, Anna M. imagines two strangers in a restaurant to be discussing her and Zanewsky and becomes aggressive.

Naturally, not everyone lapses into erotomania. The ideal breeding ground for the disease is a person with an underprivileged family background, marred by poverty, drunkenness, violence etc.

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, «The Uncanny», in *Creativity and the Unconscious*, New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1958: 122-161.

<sup>16</sup> André Breton, *L'Amour fou*, Paris: Gallimard, 1937, a novel celebrating the poet's meeting with his second wife Jacqueline Lamba, and its inspirational repercussions.

<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, Paris: Fayard, 1993: 66, my translation.

These negative elements all figure in Clérambault's case analyses. McEwan's Jed had lost his father when he was 8, was neglected by his mother and had no friends. There is no mention of Anna's father and her mother seems infantile and self-centered. The spectator imagines Anna to be anybody's daughter, what André Green calls «l'enfant de ça» (the child of that/of the id)<sup>18</sup>. The pattern repeats itself, when Anna becomes pregnant from a one-night-stand. Her daughter's future could well be as precarious as Madame Bovary's child's.

Erotomaniacs, like junkies, can become dangerous predators. They have remained infantile or regressed to infancy, cannot control their *id* and are capable of murder to obtain what they want. What's to be done with/for erotomaniacs? Clérambault, during the first two decades of the 20th century, had them institutionalized; we now know that living conditions in psychiatric institutions were then worse than in prisons. Contemporary British novelists McEwan, Faulks and McGrath also recommend internment for their erotomaniac protagonists, but in different institutions. Their protagonists happily accept benevolent supervision and a life without responsibilities, usually in the country; they appreciate the manual activities required of them, such as gardening and handicrafts and are especially grateful to be allowed to live in peace with their delirious fantasies. Jed is free to write love letters to Joe and these are regularly intercepted, so the Object can also live his life in peace. The descriptions of such places may be utopian or cynical, but they provide a solution.

Spinosa only has Anna institutionalized for 3 months. Unlike Jed, she won't tolerate being locked up, even surrounded by a beautiful park, takes no interest in art classes and feels like a caged animal. Consequently she is soon released, and undergoes a relapse. The difference lies in the implied author's focalization. McEwan distances himself from Jed by writing from Joe's point of view, and Jed's internment seems to be the best course of action. Conversely, from the beginning of the film, Spinosa's subjective camera eye empathizes with his pathetic young protagonist, splendidly interpreted by the lovely Isabelle Carré. His film has an open ending, in natural surroundings, and Anna's fate seems as uncertain as Freud's interpretations of female sexuality...

Concerning the reader/spectator's reaction, if we reject the idea of erotomania, then we must like Love. Consciously or not, most people aspire to a quest for knowledge of the self and the other in harmony, as the supposed outcome of a shared amorous state; however utopian, believing in and aspiring to it keeps people alive and enhances their development. On the other hand, erotomania remains one of the most negative and static consequences of a one-way amorous state. Erotomania is anti-love, a petrified, virtual image of love, as it appears in video games, where every form of violence is permitted. In short, erotomania clearly constitutes a form of Death Drive or «Thanatomania».

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<sup>18</sup> Title of a book by André Green, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1973 and my suggested translation.

