

# Barbra Streisand's *The Prince of Tides* and trauma theory

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My paper will take a look at Barbra Streisand's second directorial work, *The Prince of Tides* (USA 1991).<sup>1</sup> I will read Streisand's film, which is decidedly not an artifact of high culture, as a complex negotiation of the aporias of psychoanalytical trauma theory. Streisand's movie, as I will argue throughout my paper, deals with the aporias of the theorization of trauma in quite a sophisticated way and can be understood as a meta-commentary on the current psychoanalytical state of affairs.

My reading of *The Prince of Tides* is not trying to determine whether, say, post-traumatic stress syndromes are depicted in a medical-psychiatrically correct way or whether the film takes liberties here; I read the film – as already mentioned – as a discursive negotiation of the problems and aporias of current conceptualizations of trauma. I take as my starting point that the popular medium of film, especially Hollywood film, takes up academically and socially relevant discourses and – to say it with Stephen Greenblatt<sup>2</sup>: *negotiates* these discourses – as opposed to just reflecting them. My approach to mainstream films of the *Kulturindustrie* follows the doctrine of Cultural Studies which holds that students of popular culture are not necessarily ennobled by the choice of their objects. Proponents of Cultural Studies treat those cultural objects not regarded as part of the established culture – such as

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<sup>1</sup> *The Prince of Tides*, USA 1991; director: Barbra Streisand; screenplay: Pat Conroy, Becky Johnston, based on the novel by Pat Conroy; cast: Barbra Streisand, Nick Nolte, Blythe Danner, Kate Nelligan, Melinda Dillon, George Carlin, Jason Gould; cinematography: Stephen Goldblatt; editing: Don Zimmerman; music: James Newton Howard; production design: Paul Sylbert; costume: Ruth Morley; Barwood Films, Columbia Pictures Corporation, Longfellow Pictures.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, the leading figure of New Historicism (which could be called the most profiled variety of Cultural Studies), asks in his most important book *Shakespearean Negotiations*, «how cultural objects, expressions, and practises – here, principally, plays by Shakespeare and the stage on which they first appeared – acquired compelling force» (Stephen Greenblatt: *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1988, p. 5). Greenblatt argues that this appropriation is not «part of a single coherent, totalizing system. Rather it was partial, fragmentary, conflictual; elements were crossed, torn apart, recombined, set against each other; particular social practises were magnified by the stage, others diminished, exalted, evacuated» (p. 19). Greenblatt is thus interested not in creating an all-embracing whole, but in recounting the negotiations of circulation and exchange between texts and cultural practices.

mainstream movies – with the same meticulousness and scrupulousness that is taken for granted when dealing with canonized, so-called high culture, with manifests of high art. When dealing with products of the culture industry – in this case: with movies – the objective is not to subject them to the plain reading that – as Hollywood-mainstream productions – they seem to imply and, indeed, seem to call for. Instead, I would like to suggest a complex reading, a *lectio difficilior* which reconstructs the diversity and multiplicity of these cultural negotiations.

What kind of story does *The Prince of Tides*<sup>3</sup> tell us? If we believe the movie's tagline, it is «a story about the memories that haunt us, and the truth that sets us free». Tom Wingo (played by an excellent Nick Nolte<sup>4</sup>) is an unemployed football coach with marital problems who lives in South Carolina with his family. In the beginning of the movie, Tom moves to New York for a few weeks because his twin sister Savannah Wingo (Melinda Dillon), a talented writer who lives there, has once again tried to kill herself. Savannah's psychiatrist, Dr Susan Lowenstein (Barbra Streisand), has asked Tom to reconstruct the family history for her to enable her to help his suicidal sister, who has been her patient for some time. After several sessions Tom finally confides in Lowenstein and tells her a terrible family secret: his mother, his thirteen-year old sister and Tom himself were brutally raped by three convicts who had escaped from the nearby Callanwolde prison. Their older brother, who came home just in time, managed to shoot two of the three attackers, the mother stabbed the third one. After burying the three corpses and cleaning up the blood, the family dinner with the father takes place as if nothing had happened. Because of a motherly command of silence, the children never tell anyone, not even their father, about the violent events. Tom's «confession», after which he breaks down in tears, provides Lowenstein with the much needed information: she can now successfully treat Savannah. The strategic alliance between Savannah's psychiatrist and her twin brother could come to an end at this point, had Susan Lowenstein not by now hired Tom as a football coach for her son<sup>5</sup>, and had Tom and Susan, an unhappily married woman, not by now fallen for each other. After a bitter-sweet romance, Tom leaves Susan to return to his family, to his wife and his three daughters.

In the following, I will be interested in analyzing the discourses and fantasies about psychoanalysis dealt with in the movie, especially the attempt at solving the conflict between mimetic and antimimetic trauma theory. In her important book *Trauma. A Genealogy*, published in 2000, almost a decade after Streisand's *Prince of Tides*, Ruth Leys has pointed out the hiatus between mimetic and antimimetic theorizations of trauma inherent in any trauma theory (not just) since Freud.

In the context of this paper, I am not entering into the question whether Leys's categorization does justice to trauma theory as a whole.<sup>6</sup> I employ her distinction of mimetic and antimimetic trauma theory because this differentiation addresses reoccurring problems in the clinical treatment of trauma patients. Leys explains: «The first or *mimetic* theory holds that trauma, or the experience of the traumatized subject, can be understood as involving a kind of hypnotic imitation or identification in which, precisely because the victim cannot recall the original traumatogenic event, she is fated to act it out or in other ways imitate it. The idea is that the traumatic experience in its sheer extremity, its affront to common norms and expectations, shatters or disables the victim's cognitive and perceptual capacities so that the experience never becomes part of the ordinary memory system. [...] [This] mimetic theory cannot escape worrying about the question of hypnotic suggestion and the <fabrication> of more or less

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<sup>3</sup> My reading of *The Prince of Tides* will not look at the film, which is based on Pat Conroy's novel by the same name, as a literary adaptation, I will not refer to the novel as a pre-text to the movie.

<sup>4</sup> Nolte was nominated for an Oscar as «Best Actor in a Leading Role» in 1991 and he won the Golden Globe for «Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture-Drama».

<sup>5</sup> Lowenstein's son – as basically all of the movies protagonists – seems affected, if not traumatized by his family history.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Murray Schwartz's article «Locating Trauma: A Critique of Ruth Leys's *Trauma: A Genealogy*», in: *PsyArt. An Online Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts* (2004), [http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipasa/journal/2004\\_schwartz01.shtml](http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipasa/journal/2004_schwartz01.shtml); July, 10, 2006.

false memories.»<sup>7</sup> This conception of trauma can be contrasted with a second, antimimetic theory: «The second, or *antimimetic*, theory also tends to make imitation basic to the traumatic experience, but it understands imitation differently. The mimetic notion that the victim is hypnotically immersed in the scene of trauma is repudiated in favor of the antithetical idea that in hypnotic imitation the subject is essentially aloof from the traumatic experience, in the sense that she remains a spectator of the traumatic scene, which she can therefore see and represent to herself and others. The antimimetic theory is compatible with, and often gives way to, the idea that trauma is a purely external event that befalls a fully constituted subject; whatever the damage to the latter's psychical autonomy and integrity, there is in principle no problem of eventually remembering or otherwise recovering the event, though in practice the process of bringing this about may be long and tortuous.»<sup>8</sup>

As you will remember, my argument was that *The Prince of Tides* tries to resolve the tension between the mimetic and antimimetic models inherent in psychoanalytic trauma theory. The film's strategy in doing this is of brilliant simplicity: it provides *two* persons, twins [!] with the «same» trauma. Tom and Savannah are *both* brutally raped – with the escaped convicts sheer horror enters the family home. Savannah reacts in the way anticipated by mimetic trauma theory. The incident marks a gap which cannot be closed up; she cannot *remember* the events, they are only present as a literal trace: when she wakes up after her suicide attempt, Savannah murmurs – without knowing what the signifying chain means, without being able to make sense of it – «Callanwolde. Callanwolde». The traumatic experience, which cannot be integrated into memory, however, turns out to be a motor force for creative production (the movie thus brings in the topic of psychological agitation promoting artistic production). By iteration and imitation, Savannah, the talented writer, translates what has happened to her into literature. Using her own name as well as a pseudonym, Savannah writes texts that time and again repeat, re-enact distorted versions of the events she cannot integrate into her psyche. To her Jewish psychiatrist Lowenstein, Savannah has introduced herself as Jewish, the daughter of Holocaust survivors; this performance, too, the recourse to the collective Jewish trauma of genocide,<sup>9</sup> serves as a re-enactment, an allegory, an imitation of her own trauma – it can be read as a screen fiction of her own traumatization. Because Savannah can only perform her trauma in a mimetic way, because she can only iterate and postfigure it, she is unable to «process» it, to integrate it; time and again she tries to kill herself.

Tom, on the other hand, can be seen as a representative of antimimetic trauma theory: with respect to the rape, he is able to assume the position of an observer, which eventually enables him to talk about and describe the events to a therapist. And while Tom has «decided» early on not to have a memory, he is well able to remember the past – he just chooses *not* to for a long time («I've spent my life trying to forget these missing details», he tells Lowenstein). His psychic apparatus has been affected by the traumatic experience, his troubled relationships (for instance his marital problems) can be traced back to it. The trauma, however, is more external to his psyche than in his sister's case. He is not compelled to constantly imitate and iterate the experience. The psychiatrist Lowenstein now cleverly solves the problem of treating the «untreatable» patient Savannah, who, like many other trauma victims, poses a challenge to psychoanalysis. How is one to treat a patient who is unable to provide what psychoanalysis aims to accomplish during successful therapy: the reconstruction of a coherent, narratively organized life story? With Tom Lowenstein has a trump card up her sleeve which helps her to resolve the dilemma Savannah and psychoanalysis pose for her. Tom, who – somewhat mysteriously – acts as an extension of his sister (in a way, the twin duplicates her soul) produces the very memories she is

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<sup>7</sup> Ruth Leys: *Trauma. A Genealogy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 298f.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 299.

<sup>9</sup> The Holocaust is the central subject of historically oriented trauma studies, e.g. Cathy Caruth: *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; Dominick LaCapra: *Representing the Holocaust. History, Theory, Trauma*, Ithaca/NY: Cornell University Press, 1994; Dominick LaCapra: *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, Ithaca/NY: Cornell University Press, 1998.

unable to supply: Lowenstein substitutes his memory for hers. The third-party contract all this is based on, however, seems to be an equation with too many unknowns. Is Lowenstein trying to undertake family therapy? Or is Tom's function just that of an informant, helping Lowenstein with the anamnesis? Is this a movie about double therapy – the treatment of not only Savannah, but Tom, too? If one reads *The Prince of Tides* from its ending, one could say that both, Savannah and Tom are cured of their trauma. Lowenstein manages to melt, to thaw Tom's frozen, petrified emotions, she enables him – strictly in accordance with Freud's well-known dictum of successful therapy – to love and to work. And Savannah, too, seems on the road to recovery at the end of the movie; she is able to leave the hospital, and she, too, seems to have dealt with the events of her childhood and to have «defused» the destructive traumatic potential – that, at least, is what the movie suggests, we haven't actually seen any of her therapeutic sessions. The film thus establishes a configuration that allows the *very* trauma patient who had initially been *unable* to remember the trauma-generating incident, who had been forced to re-enact it over and over again, to reconstruct her biography. The movie's sleight of hand (among other things, the twin configuration employed by the film serves to conceal this precarious trickery) lies in suggesting that Tom's and Savannah's trauma are one and the same. The twins' different patterns of posttraumatic behavior suggest, of course, that this is in fact not the case. And since memories are subjective reconstructions, the memories Savannah is supplied with are not actually her own, but someone else's. However, by suspending the difference between someone else's and one's own therapeutic memory work, *The Prince of Tides* manages to solve the Gordic knot of mimetic and antimimetic trauma theories: the patient who cannot remember is provided with a memory. At the very least, she is offered a plausible explanation for her psychological problems – a story about horrible rapes, committed by escaped criminals. If we question the film's plausibility with respect to the possibility of taking someone else's memory for one's own, we should also ask whether the memories Tom presents Lowenstein with are, in fact, *true memories* and not false ones. If they were indeed false memories, then the harmonization of mimetic and antimimetic trauma theory, which *The Prince of Tides* purportedly achieves, would have to be categorized as a screen fiction. With regard to Tom, we would also be dealing with a protagonist who does not *remember* his traumatic experience, but – like Savannah – makes up stories, a story which imitates and iterates the trauma. While we cannot know for sure that Tom employs his Callanwolde story as a screen memory for other traumatic events (and while the other family members, except the father, seem to share the knowledge of an actual prison escape), this notion nevertheless bears some logic. The story of the three escaped convicts roaming the countryside, raping people and inflicting severe emotional and physical pain, translates disempowerment and abuse into forceful images. Violence and diverse forms of emotional and physical abuse, however, are already part of the very family system the criminals allegedly invade. The children perceive themselves as prisoners and victims of their parents' war. As Tom says in a voice-over: «I don't know when my parents began their war against each other. But I do know the only prisoners they took were their children.» The mother manipulates her children, the father resorts to violence (about his father, Tom remarks: «I suppose Henry Wingo would have made a pretty good father – if he hadn't been such a violent man»). At the end of the movie, after his therapeutic talks with Lowenstein, Tom sums up, again in a voice-over: «In New York I learned that I needed to love my mother and father in all their flawed, outrageous humanity – and in families there are no crimes beyond forgiveness.» Tom's Callanwolde story employs the image of a home threatened and invaded by violence and abuse. However, Tom's and Savannah's home, their family, is – in Freud's words – a decidedly *unheimliches Heim*, not a place of safety, but of danger – a home inhabited not by love and care, but by violence, in which manipulations and abuse (maybe even rape by the father) are the order of the day. Tom's story, possibly a protective fiction, relocates – and thereby covers up the family disaster – the terror outside the family; re-imagines it and replaces it with a story that exculpates the original family. Tom's trauma narrative (and this could be read as a sign of its precarious status) provides an explanation for something that – after looking at the family's constitution – no longer needs an explanation.

If one reads Tom's «confession» not as a presentation of facts, but as a narration, as a phantasmagorical reaction to the domestic situation that the child Tom was faced with, then the story can be

understood as a revenge fantasy, in which the invaders (possibly representing the father) are killed by the mother and the older brother (serving as a stand-in for Tom). In this reading the rapes committed by the escaped convicts overwrite the father's violent (and possibly sexual) abuses of the mother, the sister and Tom. Moreover, if one maintains the perspective of a phantasmagorical reaction to traumatizing family circumstances, Tom's trauma narrative negotiates a fantasy of escape. The intruders are introduced as escaped convicts, as men who have been able to escape their prison, something that the children, who have also been described as prisoners, prisoners of their family, have not been able to do.<sup>10</sup> In this reading of Tom's story, Savannah adopts the trauma narrative provided by her brother (as a protective fiction) because it spares her from dealing with her catastrophic family history, because it enables her to perceive «evil» as something threatening the family from the outside.

A view as critical as the one prompted by Tom's trauma narrative (which *The Prince of Tides* shows in flashbacks – in a way the film stages the psycho-traumatological concepts of trauma film and flashback) can also be taken in respect to Tom's being cured by Dr Lowenstein's sessions. It is true that Tom returns to his family as a loving father and husband. The film ends with another voice-over: «At the end of every day I drive through the city of Charleston. And as I cross the bridge that'll take me home, I feel the words building inside me. I can't stop them or tell you why I say them. But as I reach the top of the bridge, these words come to me in a whisper. I say them as prayer, as regret, as praise, I say: «Lowenstein, Lowenstein.»» This is probably supposed to pay tribute to the psychoanalyst who helped him overcome his trauma. However, Tom's ritual is problematic. Apart from the embarrassing fact that the movie's director Streisand – using her protagonist's name – has her own praises sung in this scene,<sup>11</sup> Tom's daily ritual is problematic for the following reason: it conveys the impression that Tom has not actually worked through and overcome his trauma at all. You will remember: when Tom's traumatized sister woke from the coma after her suicide attempt, all she was able to utter was the chain of signifiers: «Callanwolde, Callanwolde» – a literal trauma trace, if you will. At the end of the movie, it appears that Tom has been traumatized, re-traumatized in a way, by the love affair with Lowenstein: it is he now who seems compelled to follow the patterns of imitation and iteration which make it impossible to deal with the past in a constructive way. Savannah's «Callanwolde, Callanwolde» is now Tom's «Lowenstein, Lowenstein».

Let me sum this up: just as it did by introducing Savannah's and Tom's trauma as a twin trauma, the movie employs a clever strategy with respect to Tom's and Lowenstein's love story. We are faced with a constellation typical of Hollywood movies involving a patient-doctor relation (for instance, Hitchcock's *Spellbound* [USA 1945], to mention just one classic example of this configuration). A psychoanalyst violates the rule of abstinence and begins a love affair with a patient. Just as in *Spellbound* the affair works as therapy for the analyst as much as the patient (the affair helps Lowenstein to cope with her marital dramas and traumas). Different than Hitchcock's film, *The Prince of Tides* conveys the impression that the patient, Tom, is not really a patient, but the patient's twin brother. Whether Dr Lowenstein breaks the rules of her trade by letting Tom comfort her, is thus subject to interpretation. Be that as it may: the melodrama *The Prince of Tides* opts not for a happy ending, but for a bittersweet ending; *boy meets girl* is transferred into the melancholic *boy has to leave girl*. Melodrama theory holds that the emotional energies suppressed in scenes such as these are not lost,

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<sup>10</sup> Apart from fantasies of revenge and escape, Tom's trauma narrative, in which escaped convicts are killed, includes fantasies of deadly punishment of people who take revenge or escape.

<sup>11</sup> The movie's casting, too, promotes a blending of film and extra-diegetic reality: Streisand cast her own son Jason Gould in the role of Lowenstein's son. Apart from the gossip factor, this casting is of interest in the context discussed because the speculations as to whether – and if: in which way – the disturbed mother-son relationship in *The Prince of Tides* refers to the «real» relationship between Streisand and her son, invoke the *Berührungstheorem* (theory of contact) between the Real and the Symbolic: the «real» seems to «infiltrate» what is depicted in the movie. Streisand's casting choice thus calls up and negotiates this aspect of the trauma subject.

but are exhibited as symptoms in the filmic text – in its *mise en scène* and, above all, in its music, which expresses the repressed emotional energies.<sup>12</sup> The score accompanying Susan's and Tom's impossible romance assures the audience of the intensity of this love story, a love story, which, toward the end of *The Prince of Tides*, tries to overwrite the trauma story and – if we remember Tom's «Lowenstein, Lowenstein» – clearly fails to do so.

(Translated by **KATRIN OLTMANN**)

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Palm: «Was das Melos mit dem Drama macht: Ein musikalisches Kino», in: Christian Cargnelli & Michael Palm (Ed.): *Und immer wieder geht die Sonne auf: Texte zum Melodramatischen im Film*, Wien: PVS, 1994, pp. 211-234, here p. 212.