

# INNER DIALECTIC CONFLICT IN CHARACTERS AND NARRATIVES

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## ABSTRACT

Based on Vittorio F. Guidano's analysis of personal meaning organizations, we propose that each type of psychological structure is underpinned by certain inner dialectic conflict. This psychological approach seems useful as a theoretical guideline to analyze and create characters and narratives. The psychological structure (an obsessive-compulsive one) can be expressed through the main character (and his backstory) as in the movie *Kinsey* (Condon). It can also be depicted in the narrative, which becomes an arena of projected inner dialectic conflicts on the realm of that same psychological structure (as in David Fincher's *The Game*). *"But it is the same with man as with the tree. The more he seeketh to rise into the height and light, the more vigorously do his roots struggle earthward, downward, into the dark and deep – into the evil."* (Nietzsche 48). The villain emerges when we glorify ourselves.

## INTRODUCTION

Cinema has elicited much commentary from psychology, mostly psychoanalytic (e.g., see several psychoanalytic essays edited by Gabbard). However, other psychological perspectives, not so often explored in this artistic field, seem very prolific: this paper aims to emphasize the approach of the constructivist author Vittorio Guidano with the assumption that it has great relevance to the analysis and creation of characters and narratives. Since conflict is a major motor force of the narrative and human personality, we also intend to go further on this issue: we propose that each psychological structure of personality is rooted in specific inner dialectic conflicts, in which processes such as splitting, denial and projection play important role. Thus,

understanding these conflicts seems a valuable contribution to analyzing and creating the characters' personalities and the story. Given its dialectic nature, the tension that arises within a conflict has a potential energy that can be transformed in action: the narrative can be seen as a form of dialogue between those forces. Different narrative elements, such as characters, often function as incarnations of the different poles of the conflict in a projective process of a protagonist's (and author's) mind. This paper analyzes *Kinsey* (Condon) and *The Game* (Fincher) as movies representative of these ideas.

### PERSONAL MEANING ORGANIZATIONS

Victorio F. Guidano, creator of post-rationalist cognitive therapy, bases his propositions on theoretical and empirical research, with other influences from attachment theory and a systemic perspective. In congruence with his cognitive-constructivist orientation, the author conceives emotional structures as *personal meaning organizations* (Guidano *The Self in Process* 33), also called *cognitive organizations* (Guidano *The Complexity of the Self* 124). Initially with Liotti and then with further developments on his own, Guidano proposes specific patterns of attachment in childhood and adolescence associated with each of four types of personal meaning organizations (depressive, obsessive-compulsive, phobic and eating disorders). Each attachment pattern influences the developmental pathway and sense of identity in particular manners, so each relates to what we call "personality".

In this paper, we adopt the perspective that there is a *continuum* between normality and psychopathology: falling on one or another point of the *continuum* depends on how and how much it is used to adapt to the environment. Thus, those four personal meaning organizations described by Guidano are not restricted to psychopathological situations, and each one has adaptive advantages and disadvantages. A so-called "normal" person can have one (or more) of these structures. Movie characters provide us good examples of both cases. The obsessive-compulsive structure, for instance, is described as pathological (and labeled this way) in the main characters of *As Good as it Gets* (Brooks) or

of *The Aviator* (Scorsese). Obsessive-compulsive features can be found in the protagonists of *Kinsey* (Condon) or *Everything is Illuminated* (Schreiber), depicted as “normal” people, in the sense that possible pathologic symptoms are not described as such, but as personality characteristics.

## INNER DIALECTIC CONFLICT

Starting from Guidano’s analysis, this paper proposes that each structure scaffolds different inner dialectic conflicts. These conflicts appear in the realm of many psychological characteristics that turn out to be more peripheral manifestations: in this sense, pathological symptoms such as obsessive-compulsive rituals are often labeled by Guidano as “diversionary activities” (Guidano. *The Self in Process* 53).

From both dialectic and personal construct approaches, conceiving something is conceiving its opposite – it is the contrast that allows us to create a construct (or a sign). As Baxter and Montgomery argue “Any number of phenomena can constitute a contradictory knot so long as they function to negate one another” (Baxter and Montgomery<sup>4</sup>). In a dialectical world, every aspect lives only in the presence of its opposite: we perceive a reality only when contrasting it with something. According to Kelly’s personal construct theory (95, 310), construct poles don’t have the same weight: one of them is emergent, and the other is implicit (or submerged). However, as Kelly says, sometimes we cannot identify the opposite word (the submerged pole), frequently because we don’t want to apply it to ourselves. It seems that, while for some constructs we accept both poles (relating them by processes such as segmentation, spiraling inversion, balance, and reframing, among others posed by Montgomery and Baxter 163), for others we do not. For example, we can integrate them by considering that sometimes we are shy and other times extroverted (spiraling inversion), or in some aspects we are independent, and in others we are dependent (segmentation). In other cases we conceive poles as mutually exclusive in a human being, for example, thinking that someone is either a leader or not, is either creative or not.

In parallel with psychoanalytic concepts, this paper proposes that we split some constructs in an absolute manner, displaying black-and-white thinking. This splitting leads us to identify with one of the poles, generally (but not always) a pole considered positive, and to deny the other. Sometimes we need to exaggerate the pole of identification, as a reaction of the activation of the denied pole, in a reactive formation. Other times we project the denied pole on someone outside ourselves. Splitting, denial, projection and reactive formation may be central processes in the inner dialectic conflict here described. As each construct grid is different from person to person (Kelly 38), the specific construct that is not fully accepted also varies, thus giving rise to this dialectic conflict. In this sense, if each personal meaning organization tends to be associated with certain attachment and developmental patterns, as Guidano proposes, perhaps it is also linked with specific inner dialectic conflicts.

#### 'KINSEY': CHARACTER AND BACKSTORY

In his movie, Bill Condon presents us with a look at the life of Alfred Kinsey (Liam Neeson). We see a biographical pathway of this pioneer researcher in the area of human sexuality, covering his childhood, his attachment relationships and a whole range of contexts in Kinsey's life. While the narrative centers on Kinsey's professional goals and personal life in his fight for sexual liberation, the character presents characteristics of an obsessive-compulsive structure. It is the story of a perfectionist man, extremely dedicated to work, very determined (almost obstinate) in his sexual study and liberation. On the other hand, Kinsey somehow neglects social skills and common sense, being sometimes cold, inconvenient, insensible or even rude. Highly capable in abstraction, he drives himself by rational thought, and he rationalizes what happens in his life, prioritizing rules and values over feelings. With a great concern for detail, the protagonist is extremely controlling of work and relationships, as well as a very self-controlled person. This excellent depiction of an obsessive-compulsive psychological structure is enriched by Kinsey's propensity for collection research: as referred to

in the film by his father, he started “collecting bugs” (and then collected people).

An emotionally warm relation with an accepting mother contrasts with a conflictive relationship with his father, who is hypercritical, extremely moralizing, demanding and uncomprehending of Kinsey’s needs (*e.g.*, vocational and sexual). The movie shows Kinsey attachment relationships, allowing us to watch how similar they are to what Guidano (*The Complexity of the Self* 172; *The Self in Process* 50) proposes as characteristic of an obsessive-compulsive’s early environment: ambivalent attachment to a significant other (in a protection/rejection relationship) leads to a double bind, where preoccupation and caregiving comes precisely at the same time as criticism. For example, Kinsey’s father is worried about Alfred’s future but still aggressive, controlling and critical while doing it: he insists on an engineering major for his son, without considering Alfred’s preference for biology. Guidano says that in the familiar context of the obsessive-compulsive, there is a predominance of binary and analytic, with absolute thinking (“black or white”) being common. Consequently there is a dominance of areas in which those ways of functioning are prevalent: a hyper-valorization of verbal language, abstract thinking, rules and values over analogous and immediate forms of communication and a de-valorization (even avoidance) of emotions, affective display, physical activity and contact, and ludic games. It becomes an extremely demanding environment, requiring a great deal of self-control. According to Bowlby’s attachment theory (Bowlby 354), relational patterns will be internalized in working models structuring the attitude toward oneself and toward reality (and thus repeating that working model in future relationships). In fact, Kinsey turns out to be also unaccepting of the vocational and social needs of his son, the same way his father was to him: he criticizes his son’s preference for physical activities and stresses that the son should choose intellectual ones.

1. Other psychoanalytic concepts can be applied to this movie, namely the oedipal relationship, but that is not the focus of this paper, which aims precisely to transport knowledge from other perspectives less used in artistic analysis.

## OBSESSION-COMPULSION INNER DIALECTIC CONFLICTS

According to Guidano, those antithetical parental attitudes lead to opposite but mixed feelings. At the same time, the child experiences acceptance and rejection, in an implicit unsolvable dilemma: “He/she loves me; I am lovable” or “He/she loves me not; I am unlovable”. This pervasive permanent questioning of self-image (positive *versus* negative) will pursue him thorough his life. The unconscious exacerbated search for an absolute answer (a certainty) will be a constant: the individual permanently needs to prove to himself that he has done the right thing. An affective and context-specific doubt (related to those familiar relationships) is directed to an abstract one: “am I good or am I bad”? We must note that, due to the tendency toward absoluteness, “good” means “perfect”. The tacit, original, ambivalent feeling will be associated with its opposite procedure: the obsessive-compulsive will use the black-and-white thinking in order to gain a sense of full control, since any errant feeling is perceived as total lack of control. Following this deepest and primal duplicity, another comes: control *versus* lack of control. Additionally, the over-demanding childhood environment (in what concerns strict rules) is characterized by an “all-or-nothing” thinking. This environment may strongly contribute to the idea that “there are absolute certainties in the world, and that it is absolutely necessary to seek them out and behave according to them” (Guidano *The Complexity of the Self* 178). The need to exclude mixed feelings and to gain absolute control and certainty is gathered through domains more prone to binary functioning (e.g., objects, quantifications, collections, verbal language, rules, duty and work). This need will lead towards the tangible and controllable rather than toward people (unpredictable!), to avoid the ambiguity present in emotion, fantasy and impulses (that could activate ambivalence) and control activities. As a way of gaining control, mental and motoric patterns can emerge, such as ruminative thoughts and compulsive acts, which, according to Guidano ( *The Self in Process* 53), are diversionary activities that distract conscience from deep inner feelings. This analysis already outlines another antithetical opposition, besides controllability and uncontrollability: thinking *versus* feeling. In fact,

a means to gain certainty about having the right reaction can be the adhesion to the security of abstract guidelines and the avoidance of the immediacy of emotions. It is not surprising, on the contrary, that, besides these inner oppositions Guidano identifies, we propose that others seem to occur, such as duty *versus* pleasure. The polarization starts to be a more complex process as oppositions are no longer isolated but associate and organize themselves in a network (Van Lear 120).

In the present text the antithetical oppositions are interpreted as leading to internal dialectic conflicts: starting from a splitting of each pair of polarities (associated with the all-or-nothing functioning), the person feels the need to fully identify with one pole, while denying the other. In this case, the obsessive-compulsive identifies himself with the thinking, control and duty poles, which at the same time are seen as desirable goals and positive characteristics. His life contexts will reflect exactly this overemphasis of some domains where those characteristics are projected. In the Kinsey character, that seems to happen in whatever concerns work, the domain that receives his almost total dedication (functioning as a signifier of abstract thought, duty and control). He is depicted as an over-controller of every linguistic detail of his research (from written report to collaborators' lives) and very self-controlled, for example keeping himself inexpressive while interviewing a man who violated several children (in contrast to his collaborator Pomeroy, who abandons the interview). Conversely, the denial of characteristics seen as negative, in this case, emotion and lack of control, extends to domains of life on which they are projected, such as relational and social: Kinsey shows some neglect of social subtleties (common sense) and other people's needs. His work and sexual morality are what matters: even when meeting a representative of the Rockefeller Foundation (for funding he is trying to gain), Kinsey ignores his social needs, putting work in first place. It is possible to observe, for example, his neglect of his son's feeling of social exclusion (other parents don't allow children go to the Kinseys' house due to their differences concerning sexuality).

### THE GAME: THESIS, ANTITHESIS AND SYNTHESIS

How to overcome the conflicts? In the film *Kinsey*, inner conflicts help us to understand a remarkable complex character and his relationship with his backstory. However, the emphasis is not placed on the character's inner transformation concerning those polarities. The biographical movie focuses on the course of Kinsey's life and his fight to improve a narrowed sexuality existence in the society of that time, through education and, mainly, scientific research. It describes a struggle for a sexual liberation with mostly external obstacles (repressive high school education, social values and beliefs concerning sexuality, lack of funding, etc.).

On the contrary, *The Game* depicts the transformation of the protagonist, with an integration of his inner conflict. The world perhaps stays the same, but not the hero. The IMDb describes David Fincher's movie as a story in which the "wealthy financier Nicholas Van Orton gets a strange birthday present from wayward brother Conrad: a live-action game that consumes his life." The main character's traits are consistent with the obsessive-compulsive organization, as are the conflicts he deals with. Nicholas (Michael Douglas) lived a life of work, loneliness, greed and control. As a consequence of his brother's birthday's present, in the course of the narrative, he loses everything: possessions, power, work and almost his life. As Nicholas is striving to survive and to understand what is happening, the events come to transform him. That is, after all, the goal of the gift: to shake the way he's living his life.

Besides strongly dramatically driven conflicts such as "survive" *versus* "die", there are psychological inner conflicts such as "control" *versus* "lack of control" and "reason" *versus* "emotion". As already outlined in respect to *Kinsey*, the projection of those feelings in life domains give rise to other antithetical forces such as "work" *versus* "people" and now "property" *versus* "deprivation".

This could be the story of an obsessive-compulsive who, due to several life events, starts a process of psychological change. This means the character's inner conflict can be used as a powerful device to create a narrative and even other characters. Vogler,



author of *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters*, a very well known book among scriptwriters, refers to characters as extensions of the hero or the writer's personality (35). In this sense, characters are projections of different unconscious facets of the writer (and even the public), since the protagonist is usually the metaphoric eye by which he tells (and public enters) the story. Inspired by Jungian concepts and Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Vogler (40) faces the process of transformation of the hero as one of learning and incorporating features of other characters, even the villain, in the direction of becoming a more complete human (a *higher self*). The narrative conflict can be a projection of an inner dialectic conflict: the hero totally identifies with one pole of the conflict and denies one part of himself (the other pole of the conflict), which because of that gains the obscurity and the power of an unknown and unpredictable force which threatens normal life – a villain. According to Vogler (83), the villain represents the Jungian archetype of the *shadow*. The transformational process of a character is one of facing, knowing and building new forms of relating with the obstacle, the villain, the shadow, a progressive process in which hero and villains interact and influence each other mutually, in a growing dialogue: disputing, segmenting, negotiating, concealing, accepting... until integration – a synthesis.

Within the narrative crisis of *The Game*, the need for absolute control gives place to a life of emotion and surprise. From the destruction of a materialistic lonely and workaholic life, rises a relational and romantic one. As Nicholas dies, he is reborn as a more complete being with inner heroes and villains, wishes and fears, loves and hates... they all live together now. Who were the enemies after all? Those he feared during the narrative? Loss of property, loss of control, intense emotions? Or those flags which he stood for? Denial obscures and exacerbates the villain – who for that reason became a villain. As a reaction, the opposite pole can also be exacerbated in a reactive formation. The exaggeration poses a thesis, thus leading to an antithetical reaction. In order to avoid any little loss of control, Nicholas abused under the flag of power and control: as a result, his dull and empty life incited his brother to offer him the gift.

Now in the dark, the villain becomes the hero. When he loses, he gains: the fruition of the unknown, unpredicted pleasure, relationship, emotion... In the end, the hero and the villain are both harmonized. They form a unique three. Let me invoke Nietzsche, who says, "*But it is the same with man as with the tree. The more he seeketh to rise into the height and light, the more vigorously do his roots struggle earthward, downward, into the dark and deep – into the evil.*" (Nietzsche 48). The villain emerges when we glorify ourselves. Let us live on earth.

## CONCLUSION

Nietzsche's expression concerns the realm of the inner dialectic conflict. Any excess reveals the presence of its opposite (reactive formation). The denial of one feature makes it bigger. Splitting, denial, projection and reactive formation can be explosive in the emergence of an internal dialectic conflict central to a movie narrative.

This paper uses the movies *Kinsey* and *The Game* to understand how different features of the obsessive-compulsive can be used in the analysis and creation of a character, his or her backstory and his or her relationship with life contexts. *Kinsey* provides us with a complex depiction of the obsessive-compulsive personality and a great example of its relationship with the attachment relationships pattern proposed by Guidano. This movie also offers a means to identify inner dialectic conflicts and the way they can be projected onto life contexts (such as work and personal relationships). Nevertheless, in contrast to other films, *Kinsey* do not project the obsessive-compulsive inner conflicts on narrative conflicts (that mainly follow other lines of conflict). Psychological transformation concerning those inner conflicts is not so visible (eventually because it didn't happen in Alfred Kinsey's real life). It is important, then, to complement this analysis with *The Game*, in which the inner dialectic conflict is projected onto narrative conflict and leads to the character's change.

We opt to use the obsessive-compulsive personality to express Guidano's perspective concerning developmental background. This personality is also the target for proposing specific psychoanalytic processes as a basis for the inner dialectic conflict. The identified oppositions are based on – but not restricted to – Guidano's texts. Other types of personality would correspond to different attachment patterns (as Guidano proposes) and will have different split constructs that can be described in future publications.

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