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CRIMINOLOGY AND THE TRAJECTORIES OF DEVIANCE: AN INTEGRATED ANALYSIS OF THE SUBJECT-CORLEONE THROUGH SUTHERLAND'S DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION, THE LACANIAN NOTION OF JOUISSANCE, AND THE CONSTRUCT OF "CRIMINOGENIC PHANTASY"

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Abstract

This article presents an integrated analysis of the criminal trajectory of the character Michael Corleone, the central figure in The Godfather trilogy. The analysis employs three fundamental theoretical frameworks: **Edwin Sutherland's Differential Association Theory**, **Lacanian-oriented criminology** with specific reference to the notion of jouissance, and the construct of "**criminogenic phantasy**". The objective is to demonstrate that the genesis of Michael's criminal behavior is not merely a process of social learning, but rather the result of profound psychic dynamics that manifest in the act itself. It explores the etiology of "violent scripts" and the phenomenology of "crimes of jouissance", analyzing these manifestations within the broader context of the **Western devaluation of the phantasy** and the concept of "**hysteria**" as a mechanism of collective repression. It shows how Michael, initially an outsider to the criminal world, assimilates deviant values and techniques through privileged association with his family, internalizing an unconscious phantasy of transgression. The analysis of the jouissance implicated in his actions reveals an evolution from an initial repulsion to a form of absolute mastery and control that transcends the pleasure principle, configuring itself as a plus-de-jouir linked to the preservation of a symbolic order and a will to power. The convergence of these perspectives offers a complex reading of the genesis and maintenance of criminal conduct, enriching the understanding of individual trajectories in deviance. Finally, therapeutic implications aimed at "deprogramming" the criminogenic unconscious are discussed, positing the **rehabilitation of the phantasy's function** as a crucial element for the construction of a more integrated subject.

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Introduction

The understanding of the genesis and development of criminal behavior has always constituted a complex challenge for criminological and psychological disciplines. The deviant act, far from being an isolated anomaly, is embedded in an intricate web of social, psychological, and subjective dynamics. This article aims to explore the criminal

trajectory of Michael Corleone, an emblematic figure in literature and cinema. The analysis of fictitious characters with high psychological complexity, such as Michael Corleone, offers a unique heuristic opportunity to dissect the profound psychic dynamics underlying deviant behavior. The case of Michael Corleone represents a paradigmatic meeting point between the social determinism of Differential Association Theory and the psychic dynamics of the subject, providing a model for understanding criminal trajectories that are not exhausted in simple imitation or rigid psychopathology.

The Use of Fictional Characters in Criminological and Psychoanalytic Analysis

The use of literary and cinematic figures like Michael Corleone for clinical and criminological analysis represents a research and teaching methodology of considerable value. Far from being a mere speculative exercise, this approach offers a unique opportunity to investigate the complex psychic dynamics underlying deviant behavior, overcoming the ethical and practical limitations of direct study of real subjects. This methodology is based on the premise that high-quality psychological narratives, while not actual clinical cases, function as **heuristic models**, that is, tools for the discovery and understanding of complex phenomena.

Complex narratives, such as *The Godfather* trilogy, provide a **controlled psychic laboratory**. Unlike a real clinical case, where the analyst only has access to fragments of a story and a subjective, often partial account, a fictional character offers a complete and structured life trajectory. The creator, be they an author or a director, has already performed a deep psychological and social synthesis, providing the researcher with rich and coherent study material. This heuristic function manifests in several dimensions:

- a) **dissection of unconscious dynamics:** characters like Michael Corleone allow for the dissection of unconscious dynamics that usually remain hidden. The evolution of his character, the split between the desire for a “normal” life and the unconscious attraction to power and violence, and the transformation of his morality, are all elements that lend themselves to a detailed psychodynamic analysis. The scholar can trace the genesis of intrapsychic conflicts, the impact of parental figures (in this case, the father’s shadow), and the interaction between drives and defenses in a nearly didactic manner.
- b) **modeling of criminogenesis and criminodynamics:** the use of a fictional character makes it possible to visualize the processes of **criminogenesis** (the genesis of criminal behavior) and **criminodynamics** (the mechanisms that maintain it). One can observe how an individual progressively assimilates deviant “definitions”, how a “criminogenic phantasy” is structured, and how a particular economy of jouissance manifests. The analysis of Michael Corleone shows, for example, how the criminal trajectory is not an isolated event, but the result of a complex interplay of social, familial, and individual factors over time. This approach has also been successfully applied to other complex figures, such as Tony Soprano, to explore obsessive neurosis and its violent manifestations (Mariani, 2023).
- c) **advanced pedagogy and training:** in clinical and criminological training, the use of narratives is widely recognized as an effective pedagogical tool. It allows students and professionals to confront complex cases without the risk of premature diagnostic labels or an emotional involvement that could compromise the clarity of the analysis. Through the detachment that fiction offers, it is possible to openly discuss sensitive topics such as murder, perversion, or psychopathy, fostering a deeper understanding and the ability to formulate diagnostic and theoretical hypotheses (Gabbard, 2001; Roskos & Vohs, 2012).

In conclusion, the use of fictional characters like Michael Corleone does not diminish the scientific rigor of the analysis but rather enriches it. It provides a bridge between abstract theory and human complexity, offering fertile ground for the development of new hypotheses, the verification of old models, and the training of a new generation of scholars of the psyche and deviance.

Theoretical Frameworks

1. Criminal Learning According to Sutherland

Sutherland’s Differential Association Theory (1939) revolutionized criminological thought by positing that criminal behavior is not innate but learned through interaction with other individuals. This theory is based on nine fundamental propositions that outline the process of learning deviant conduct. In the case of Michael Corleone, this process is manifested in an exemplary way:

- a) **association with favorable definitions of law violation:** Michael grows up in an environment where family loyalty, honor, vengeance, and extra-legal justice are primary values, contrasted with the norms of civil society. Initially, he rejects these “definitions” (“My family is not like them”), but constant, though initially passive, exposure to the conversations, strategies, and justifications of his father and brothers creates fertile ground for learning (Paoli & Pezzotti, 2020). Prolonged immersion in this context gradually transforms his Superego, making it permeable to deviant definitions.

- b) **learning of techniques:** Michael observes how problems are solved, how power is exercised, and how violence is a legitimate tool for maintaining family order. The attempted assassination of his father spurs him to direct action, leading him to commit his first premeditated violent act — the murder of Sollozzo and McCluskey. This event demonstrates a rapid assimilation of “techniques” and a profound subjective reorganization that enables his homicidal acting out.
- c) **selective identification with significant role models:** the influence of figures like Vito Corleone, Sonny, and Tom Hagen is not limited to simple imitation. Michael assimilates and reworks these models, developing his own more calculated and ruthless criminal methodology. His leadership emerges precisely from his ability to overcome unfavorable definitions of the law, fully embracing those favorable to the family's power and survival.

2. Lacanian Criminology

Lacanian-oriented criminology offers a complementary perspective, grounding the foundation of crime not primarily in observable behavior, but in the notion of *jouissance* (Lull Casado, 2022). Michael's transition to crime is not motivated by a primary economic interest or perversion in the conventional sense but can be read as the search for a specific *jouissance* in absolute mastery and totalizing control.

- a) **Jouissance as plus-de-jouir:** Michael's *jouissance* manifests as a *plus-de-jouir* — a gain of enjoyment that stems from transcending his initial moral limits and assuming the role of *maître* (master). It is not a hedonistic *jouissance*, but a more “mystical” and ruthless satisfaction, tied to the exercise of power and the sacrificial logic necessary to maintain the family structure. The murders he orders, particularly that of his brother Fredo, are not merely functional strategies but acts that crystallize his position of undisputed control, excluding any remaining trace of affectivity.
- b) **Jouissance of sovereignty:** in these acts, Michael extracts a *jouissance* linked to his identification with the Big Other (the Law of the Family) and his ability to embody it without hesitation. This *jouissance* of sovereignty is situated outside the pleasure principle and demonstrates how crime can be a unique way of dealing with lack, finding in the criminal act an expression for an enjoyment that cannot be inscribed in language and the law. Its impersonal and structural nature distinguishes this enjoyment from perverse enjoyment, positioning it as an attempt to maintain the symbolic order at the cost of his own humanity (Lacan, 1991).

The Construct of “Criminogenic Phantasy” and the Western Devaluation of Phantasy

1. The Unconscious Matrix of “Violent Scripts”

The “**criminogenic phantasy**”, conceptualized here, is an unconscious psychic structure that operates like an implicit program. It represents a specific articulation of the **fundamental Lacanian phantasy** ($S \circ a$) —, the unconscious, structuring scene through which the subject relates to their desire and *jouissance* (Lacan, 1964). In this configuration, the subject's desire finds expression and enjoyment manifests through a “script” that supports and organizes criminal action. Unlike a hypertrophic Superego or an Ego Ideal, the criminogenic phantasy is an unconscious phantasmatic scene that provides the drive and the internal logic that fuels and makes “violent scripts” meaningful for the subject.

In clinical criminology, a script refers to an acquired behavioral model that is activated in specific situations (Ponti & Merzagora Betsos, 2011). The criminogenic phantasy operates as the unconscious matrix of these scripts, providing the pulsional drive and internal logic that fuels them and makes them significant for the subject. For example, the murder of Sonny Corleone, although motivated by revenge, is intertwined with a distorted sense of duty that transforms a seemingly pro-social motivation into a violent expression.

2. The Legacy of Psychic Repression

The emergence of this criminogenic phantasy can be read as a consequence of the **historical devaluation of the phantasy in Western civilization**. As argued by Santiago (2025), instrumental reason has progressively suppressed the imaginary and affective dimension of phantasy, relegating it to a pathology. This phenomenon, which Santiago (2025) identifies as “**hyster**”, denotes a series of collective traumas that push enjoyment to manifest in “outlaw” modes. The criminogenic phantasy thus becomes a symptom of this repression, a “**return of the repressed**” that is acted out through the subject's body, finding in crime an expression for an enjoyment that cannot be inscribed in language and the law.

The famous baptism scene in *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972) poignantly represents this psychic split, where the sacred ritual is juxtaposed with brutal murders, highlighting Michael's emotional detachment and his pragmatic rationalization (“It's not personal, it's strictly business”). This split allows the criminogenic phantasy to operate with increasing impunity, as the subject detaches from the emotional resonance of their own actions.

Differential Diagnostic Hypotheses

The diagnosis of Michael Corleone's underlying psychic structure is complex, but through a Lacanian lens, it is possible to consider three differential hypotheses, recognizing that the character's complexity can defy rigid categorization, but that structural analysis reveals the underlying tensions:

- a) **psychotic hypothesis:** although he does not manifest classical delusions or hallucinations, Michael's emotional coldness, his strategic paranoia, and his dogmatic adherence to the mafia code may suggest a potential **foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father** (Lacan, 1966a). This hyper-rigidity could function as a supplement to attempt to re-establish a fragile symbolic order in the absence of a structuring paternal anchoring point.
- b) **obsessive neurotic hypothesis:** this hypothesis is supported by the **absolute need for control** over himself and others, his moral rigidity (even if applied to a deviant code), and his cynical rationalization. A **hypertrophic Superego** (Bugacoff et al., 2005) could represent an archaic defense against anxiety and guilt, where jouissance is linked to the compulsion to repeat and the maintenance of an impossible mastery. In this perspective, his "emotional coldness" is an extreme defense against the anxiety of castration and unconscious guilt.
- c) **perverse hypothesis:** this structure is manifested in the **deliberate and systematic transgression** of moral and legal norms, in his enjoyment of violating the law, and in manipulating others for his own ends (Seguí, 2016). His apparent lack of remorse and the ability to instrumentalize family ties indicate a perversion of the Superego, where the Law is used as a tool for his own jouissance (Lacan, 1950).

Given the prominence of control, moral rigidity, and rationalization, the obsessive-neurotic hypothesis with strong antisocial traits seems the most compelling. His progression toward an increasingly ruthless aggression can be understood as the failure of neurosis to contain jouissance, leading to a compulsive acting out that brushes the limits of perversion.

"Deprogramming" the Criminogenic Unconscious

The theoretical possibility of "deprogramming" the criminogenic unconscious, while a significant therapeutic challenge, offers an important path for intervention. Psychoanalysis, through a process of deep exploration and elaboration of unconscious psychic material, awareness of the phantasies underlying violent acting out, and the gradual construction of new, healthier, and more functional relational models, can offer a powerful tool for the transformation of the subject's psyche (Fonagy, 2001).

The process of verbalizing and understanding unconscious phantasies can allow individuals to construct alternative narratives that break the cycle of violence. In this sense, the **rehabilitation of the phantasy**, understood no longer as a mere discard or pathology but as an essential structure of desire, becomes a therapeutic imperative. The therapeutic work consists of enabling the subject to question their phantasy, to deconstruct it, and to reconstruct a more symbolized and less acted-out relationship with their own jouissance. The treatment aims to re-establish a dialectic between desire and enjoyment, where enjoyment can be somewhat "civilized" and inscribed in the social bond, instead of manifesting as destructive transgression.

Conclusions

The analysis of Michael Corleone, through the combined lenses of Lacanian psychoanalysis and criminology, highlights the intricate interplay between unconscious heritage, family dynamics, and socio-cultural context in the genesis and perpetuation of violence. The construct of "**criminogenic phantasy**" and the concept of "**hystery**" underscore how deeply rooted the patterns of transgression passed down through generations can be. Michael's tragic trajectory demonstrates that the descent into crime is not merely a matter of individual choice but is rooted in a complex interaction of psychic ties and environmental influences.

Recognizing the deep psychic roots of violence is essential for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies aimed at interrupting the intergenerational transmission of criminal patterns. Interventions, from a psychocriminological and Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, should aim for a "**traversal of the phantasy**" that allows the subject to renegotiate their relationship with their fundamental phantasy ($S\circ a$) and the jouissance that results from it.

Specific interventions, integrating **criminogenesis** and **criminodynamics** could include:

- a) **talk therapy:** aim to symbolize the act and give voice to the unconscious signifiers that structure the criminogenic phantasy.
- b) **analysis of jouissance:** facilitate the exploration of how jouissance manifests in the subject's life, helping them to unmoor it from destructive behaviors.
- c) **interventions on subjective responsibility:** elicit the subject's subjective responsibility in the criminal act not in moral terms of guilt, but as the subject's assumption of their implication in the enjoyment that moves them.

These interventions could allow the phantasy to be recognized not merely as a symptom to be repressed, but as a constitutive dimension of the subject, capable of generating creativity and new modes of social bonding, instead of leading to the criminal repetition compulsion.

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