

## **Erin Brokovich**

**By Paul Palvan and Bertram Rosen**

Psychoanalytic understanding of film is more familiar to us than other understandings. I want to briefly acquaint you with another analytic understanding, first expressed in Weimar, Germany in the 1920's and categorized as the Frankfurt School. I am only going to deal with one of the personalities from that 'school' and only one of his papers, Erwin Panofsky, later Professor and Chairman of the Department of Art History at Princeton University. This paper was first translated into English in 1937 and has subsequently been revised many times. I will be referring to the 1947 version.

Professor Palvan and I were interested in understanding many aspects of this film; its use of fantasy, iconography, iconology (that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art). We were both attracted to its wide spread popularity, feeling this was an opening to understand what the popular mind wants from a film. Erin Brokovich won Oscars and made a great deal of money.

Professor Panofsky had a different perspective. He approached film as a folk art through the perspective of art history and aesthetics. In his essay he isolated the common elements of popular film:

A primitive sense of justice and decorum. Virtue and industry was rewarded while vice and laziness were punished. Success or retribution. Sentimentality, "When a thin trickle of a fictive love interest" took its course through somewhat serpentine channel." Sentiment.

A primordial instinct for bloodshed and cruelty. Aggression. Mild pornography. Sexuality and eroticism. A crude sense of humor which feeds upon the sadistic and (pornographic) erotic instinct, either singly or in combination. Crude humor.

He noted that these values could be, "Transfigured" used to portray history, tragedy, romance, crime and adventure. ERIN BROKOVICH was aimed at a mass audience. It contains all these elements. We are going to illustrate just how these elements are conveyed to the

audience, often through their unconscious. Even before the initial film credits appear, Erin (Julia Roberts), in a job interview with a doctor, appears as an unselfish mother, dedicated to working for her children. After being hired by Ed Masry (Albert Finney), her former lawyer, she develops and expands this role of dedicated mother to include caring for poor victims of a rich, rapacious, greedy, and criminally unethical corporation. She sees herself in these poor victims, who are represented as injured mothers who also need help in caring for their chemically damaged and deformed children. One of them, Mandy, has had her motherhood interrupted by five miscarriages. Another woman loses her breasts and uterus to cancer. This gets the audience to identify with the victims but also soon reduces their anxiety over their passivity, both as an audience sitting there whose rage at this injustices has been stirred up and by their identification with the helpless victims but then reduces their anxiety over their passivity by identifying with Erin, the aggressor. These are victims of the machinery (Bad Oedipal father) of the establishment as Erin was a victim when she was hit by the doctor's carelessly driven red car. The car crash is a prophecy of the future and solidifies the audiences identification with both Erin and the victims. The audience feels enraged when a slippery lawyer gets the doctor exonerated. This scene also introduces class consciousness into the film. It is a them' versus "us" situation. Also, beneath their afflicted exteriors, they are, like Erin, shown to be virtuous, to posses and give good milk, one good husband even wearing a T-shirt with "DAIRY" on it. Dedicated and determined mother of both her own and others' children, Erin is an idealized fantasy figure. This blunt, tough-talking, nonconforming individualist is still capable of being, in private, a good mother of sick and healthy children, and in public, a tireless worker of perfect integrity. She is heroically crusading for the poor powerless underclass class, who are being robbed of their most important possessions, their children and their bodies, as well as crusading for the common good. Erin makes a powerful point when she offers the same contaminated water that these victims have been drinking to the frightened educated upper class lawyer. Her dedication to mastery of the skills of her career eventually produces a conflict between these two unselfish roles, mother and crusader, and an inner conflict between her private life and public career. This conflict is shown

in many films about working women, (A WORLD APART). The conflict is portrayed on screen as Erin, listening to her cell phone as she drives through the night, hears that she has missed hearing her younger daughter's first words, so dedicated has Erin been to photocopying the words convicting Pacific Gas and Electric Corporation. This is the kind of conflict which intensely reverberates with the audience because many families have two working parents.

Her inner conflicts never becomes debilitating because she seeks out and works with a series of kind men, who unconsciously represent good fathers and who accept and make allowances for her needs. In one scene Ed Masry, giving Erin a salary advance, is exactly like an understanding father giving his daughter her allowance.

Erin has learned to chose healthy men because of her experiences with unhealthy men. Kind men feel Erin's aggression is basically healthy self-assertion, become paternal in their nurture and protection of her interests. These men include UCLA Professor Frankel, the toxicologist who first diagnoses the poison that has caused all these illnesses, Scott, the timid, immature, sexually inhibited, slippery keeper of L.A. Water Board records (a sick frog, carefully caught); he has found his small nitch in life and won't be dislodged. Erin dominates Scott as a beautiful woman intimidates and rules men. She knows when to crack the whip and he obeys. The kindly old Barstow judge whose decision allows the righteous to continue their lawsuit (and who thus undoes the injustice of the other judge who denied compensation) after the car accident, good lawyers of a major firm also join the cause and two longhaired men, one old, one young, whose actions seal Erin's success in her public and private life respectively. Charles Embry, whose long white hair flows out from under a Sundance Roofing cap (as the Sundance Film Festival awards help the small film makers instead of the big studios), supplies the evidence that clinches her case against the big and very bad corporation. Embry seems sexually attracted to her, as is George (Aaron Eckhart), her longhaired lover. The audience identifies with Embry because he represents virtue and retribution. But her appeal to the roofer, like her appeal to her boss, has a broader base in her youthful energy, exciting the old men's wishes to renew themselves through participation in her crusade and unconsciously unite with a fantasied daughter/wife in

mutual altruism. They identify with Erin's big hearted idealism and unwillingness to yield to evil.

The two longhaired men, biker and roofer, especially suggest that all these men are themselves motherly, wanting to mother Erin and her enterprises. Even Erin's young son fits this pattern, mothering his mother when he offers to serve her eggs for breakfast. His eggs are hers.

The adult men are crucial in feeding her the information that she needs to restore the fame and power that she tasted as a beauty queen. The lawyer, Ed Masry, opens his door for her to enter the world of work and money. He, a father figure, needs a daughter for his rejuvenation, to recapture the youthful idealism that he has guiltily relinquished for comfort and security. Charles Emry, like Diogenes, has been looking for an honest person to whom he can entrust his precious truth. His action of not destroying the incriminating documents is strikingly similar to the Swiss Bank Guard who, in 1999, saved incriminating Holocaust related bank documents that the bank was in the process of destroying because he made a moral decision, he should not, by an act of omission, help in the commission of an immoral and criminal act. Erin is Charles and Ed's surrogate, living out what they and the audience repress in themselves, taking the risks that they would like to take and honestly carrying out the actions that old men's anxious prudence checks. Erin expresses the audiences' moral outrage and hostility toward the bad corporation, (bad father) taking the risks they would like to take and constructively venting the anger at injustices that cover up murder. Under her influence Ed becomes less uptight which is shown through

icons, says, "Fuck you," and unbuttons his collar. His shirts and ties become looser and brighter, more like her costumes, as her dress tones down to be more business-like, like his. Near the end she wears Joan Crawford shoulders, a sign of the successful businesswoman. She can dress more appropriately even though it is the uniform of the corporate lawyers without fearing that she will convey to, "Her," people that she has sold out to, "Them."

Yet, intensely competitive, Erin refuses ever to give up flaunting her sex appeal. This is the mild pornography that Panofsky writes about. Does her insistence on it point to fear of rejection without it? She perceives herself as uneducated, unrefined and stigmatized as a trampy looking single mother. Her relationship to upper class men, like her boss, is reminiscent of (Shaw's) Eliza Doolittle's daughter-father

relationship to Professor Henry Higgins. Her vulgar talk establishes her as one of the boys because in the unconscious to the degree that a woman expresses masculine traits they are considered men and this reduces male anxiety about the (unconscious) threat of castration and allows a woman to fantasize that she has a penis. Yet it is also (as in her claim to have given hundreds of blowjobs in exchange for signatures) an exhibition of her sexuality, compulsively displayed for the males' attention. She recognizes the uses of sexuality, "Their called tits," she tells Ed, recognizing that sex can be a phallic woman's weapon. Her assertiveness shows her behaving superiorly to other women who are less sexually stimulating than she is, the sense of entitlement that beautiful women have. It is a source of conflict with all the women in the film with the notable exception of all the female victims. We think that when Erin won the Miss Wichita beauty contest she unconsciously defeated rival daughters and mothers for the judging fathers approval. She became an Oedipal victor. All daughters want to be first in their fathers eyes. She strives to repeat this victory in most encounters she has with other women.

Erin's sexuality and her children appeal to George the biker. George satisfies her needs both for sexual excitement and for an intact family. With clean hair under a neat scarf, George is a steadier, more reliable babysitter than any of the women Erin hires. George is a drug-free refinement of Brando's WILD ONE and Fonda and Hopper's EASY RIDER. Easy indeed, George has matured into happy domesticity, but not so totally that he lacks the strength to leave Erin when her neglect of him becomes intolerable. He leaves and returns like an adolescent rebelling against home and mother, returning with a more mature appreciation of both. Erin's willingness (with tears, however, showing that she cares) to let him go seems intended as a sign of her own mature independence. George's motorcycle is an icon of masculine power. His appeal to Erin, however, rests equally on his care for her children and on his renewing her sense of being a beauty queen. In their sex scene, she wears her tiara, and then George takes it off her head and puts it on his. When she wears it, it excites her pride. Does her core ever develop beyond the little girl's wish to be a beauty queen? In this film something is added, an assertive adult woman's wish to crown herself (like Napoleon), not dependent on men to anoint her. A

compulsion to enhance her beauty-queen image seems never to leave her.

What unconscious meanings can we assume are invoked in the audience when George put on the tiara? The scene opens after they have had mutually satisfying sex. First, Erin puts in on, crowning herself for having had/having given good sex. She is telling the audience she feels like a queen. The audience feels empowered. She is telling George and the audience what a super lover she is, her image of herself as a beauty queen has been restored. He acknowledges her opinion of herself and mirrors it when he puts the tiara on his head, "If you are a queen of lovers I am a king of lovers, we are both royalty." This evokes romantic/sentimental feelings. The tiara is seen by the audience as a fetishistic object, enabling Erin to connect George with a mirror image of herself. Wearing a tiara enhances each partners beauty and desirability to the other partner. His wearing the tiara enables her to see in him her narcissistic and beautiful self with a penis. Playing with the tiara is playing with gender identities. George shows he is confident enough of his masculinity to be passive and overcome by Erin, gratifying the assertive woman's wish to play the active "masculine" role. His bisexual appearance reassures Erin and builds her confidence, relaxing the tension behind her assertiveness. George unconsciously intuits her hidden needs, their sex play being apparently spontaneous. George also parodies her fantasies which wakes the audience from their sentimental reveries. The tiara is a cheap imitation of what a queen wears, it is a toy. It is not real or to be taken seriously. It encompasses a title from a second rate beauty contest from one of the second string cities of the heartland that conveys a meaningless title every year. This is not to state that we underrate its value. It is a popular obeisance to a valued cultural attribute, beauty. Every culture worships it. Realistically it is an honor that a man or women must synthesize into their personality, to mature and fit into balance in the adult world. Its unconscious underpinnings are in the child's idealization of their parents, seeing them as a King and a Queen and themselves as Princes and Princesses. Although based on a real person, Steven Soderbergh's Erin is an entertaining fantasy in circumstances that assure her success without necessitating any limits on her self-assertion, indeed, without necessitating any inner changes whatsoever. As Dr. Herbert Stein noticed, all the causes of her trouble are outside

her. A rebel with a cause, she appeals to the idealism of youth and to the guilty consciences of old armchair defenders of the oppressed poor. Her street-talk, sexiness, and old partners perhaps appeal to Clint Eastwood's audience as well. Country music plays as she canvasses for signatures like a union organizer (NORMA RAE), a voter registrar (MURDER IN MISSISSIPPI), or a candidate for office, in a dreamy montage of democracy in action. She evokes the imagery of the dedicated anti-segregationists of the 1960's who went to Mississippi to, "Register," African-American who had long been denied their basic rights. Both women and men can identify with her strivings, for her character fulfills the general wish that there be no contradiction between altruism and narcissism. Erin's goal is to help, "Her," people. With help from admiring men, she succeeds, in seizing the machinery of masculine power, first represented by the doctor's car which knocked her into a spin, now it has passed into her hands. Literally so, Ed rewards her success with the gift of a new red car, an especially phallic symbol. Cumulatively, from the kind men and from, "Her," people, she acquires the power to fight the corporation, like a mother heroically fighting for her children.

To win, she earns the support of the victimized mothers and fathers of Hinkley with which the audience identifies, for whom she is fighting.. She fights as their representative like a good child of weak parents against bad adults, a beautiful female David against a ugly corporate Goliath. Class conflict is simplified in visual terms that are familiar from Sergei Eisenstein, Frank Capra and Norman Rockwell. The good mothers in little aprons and tiny-flowered shirts and the fathers in overalls, caps, and T-shirts, work outdoors or with their hands and with animals and are collectively generous in their help. The bad mothers and fathers, straitlaced, conservatively dressed, conventional-corporate-conformists, stiffly defend their greedy criminal master.

In the way that American, "Feel good," film endings create a happily departing audience, the monster is punished. This is a familiar theme in United States History, as interpreted in Hollywood films which expresses an American ethos (fantasy), the victory of justice over, "Monsters," like The United Colonies of North America over King George III. That victory is

seen as the beginning of our prosperity. as was the court levied damages that enrich the poor victims Erin represents, her children, and herself; ironically catapulting her into the posh skyscraper office and celebrity spotlight that spectacular success in the establishment brings. The film fulfills the common wish to believe that a steadfast commitment to a healthy narcissism turns rags to riches, "doing well by doing good." Erin's righteous assertiveness pays off. Clearly affirming the Calvinist roots of American society, the reward of virtue is money.

Panofsky, Erwin, Transition, 1937 Panofsky, Erwin. Style and Medium in the Motion Picture, Critique,1. No 3, 1947.

Greenacre, Phyllis. The Breast-Penis Equation