



Introduction: “Aesthetic Subjects”

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When Sigmund Freud read Daniel Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, he found not so much an accomplished work of literature or a narrative of great aesthetic merit as a text that developed his thoughts on the psychology of paranoid delusions. Freud never met with Schreber, never saw him in clinical consultation, and had little knowledge of the particularities of his family life, aside from what Schreber himself recorded. Nevertheless, Freud treated the memoir—what we might describe as Schreber’s literary “self-portrait”—as a self-narration of the same order as those free associations furnished by Freud’s clinical patients on the couch. In writing the story of his life, Schreber provided the material Freud needed to theorize the formation of paranoid delusions. In other words, through Freud’s psychoanalytic optic Schreber’s literary memoir became a scientific case-study like in kind to other case studies, which provisionally promise to ground “speculative” hypotheses in empirical data. The story Schreber tells about his self, about his “nervous illness,” became the bedrock of the story Freud was in the process of telling about the Oedipus complex, repressed homosexuality, and the genesis of paranoia.

Since Freud’s initial analysis of Schreber’s case, psychoanalytic critics have challenged Freud’s account on many fronts, indexing further details about Schreber’s family history (Niederland, 1984), elaborating the backdrop of his treatment with Dr. Flechsig (Israels, 1989), and shifting the root cause of Schreber’s symptoms from homosexuality to the deprived relational context of his childhood (Kohut, 1978). Yet, as much as these critiques are in line with important expansions and developments of psychoanalytic theory (clinically and conceptually conceived), what they elide is the methodological importance of Freud’s engagement, in this case, with aesthetics. Within the annals of psychoanalytic theory, Freud’s reading of Schreber’s memoirs is not known as a famous instance of psychoanalytic aesthetics.

And yet, as with Freud’s more renowned engagements with art and aesthetics—say, for example, his psycho-biographical analysis of Leonardo da Vinci’s paintings or his optical-Oedipal reading of the uncanny in ETA Hoffman’s “The Sandman”—his Schreber case-study is, significantly, based on a memoir—that is, it is an analysis of *a literary, aesthetic object*. Far from a formless, free associative, stream-of-consciousness verbal monologue, a memoir is a carefully curated narrative organized and made legible *as narrative* through its adherence to specific formal, aesthetic genres and conventions. This is as true of Schreber’s memoir as of any other piece of literature. What Schreber was permitted to say about himself or to not say—which experiences were rendered representable in the first place—was governed as much by aesthetic norms and forms as by more purely psychological ones.

The tension that Freud entertains throughout his reading of Schreber’s case—wherein he enlists an aesthetic object to help elaborate an aspect of the unconscious, all the while (unconsciously) disavowing its specifically aesthetic qualities—is a common

one throughout his work. More often than not Freud's engagement with aesthetic objects, from novels, to paintings, to folklore and myth, focuses on the *content* of the work, not on its aesthetic form. Within this methodological orientation, art functions "symptomatically" as an index of human psychology. Freud himself remarked on this, noting how his own interest was inevitably drawn to art's content, to its narrative or symbolic register, even as he acknowledged that art's formal elements are the most significant concern for the artist. "I have often observed," reflects Freud in "The Moses of Michelangelo,"

that the subject-matter of works of art has a stronger attraction for me than their formal and technical qualities, though to the artist their value lies first and foremost in this latter. I am unable rightly to appreciate many of the methods used and the effects obtained in art. (1914, Standard Edition, Vol XIII, p. 211)

Such a reading of the work of art at the level of its content has become one of psychoanalysis's most distinctive methods. However, as the articles collected within this special issue implicitly (and often explicitly) maintain, it is also one of the most limited approaches to thinking the relationship between psychoanalysis and aesthetics. While such symptomatic readings mine cultural objects for psychological insights, literally using art to name some of psychoanalysis's most cherished idioms (like the Oedipus complex, narcissism, sadism, and masochism), it ultimately reduces aesthetic complexity to the normative psychological topographies of (post)modern subjectivity. Critics of this heuristic justly point out that psychoanalytic interpretation at the level of plot, character, or symbol all too often remains insensible to the constitutive role that history, politics, or form plays in the creation and recognition of *any* aesthetic object. In this reading, art is reduced to symptom, to a secondary, derivative, or even pathological expression of human psychology; and psychology, in this turn, becomes tantamount to truth.

Apiece with this, and equally at play in Freud's reading of Schreber, is a slightly different but no less standard psychoanalytic methodology: the "psycho-biography." Likewise favored by Freud, the psycho-biography reads the work of art in concert with the (hypothesized) life story of the artist, speculating on the artist's individual biography and psychology from the detected manifestations of the unconscious in the aesthetic object. Taking Schreber's case as a representative example, it is easy to see how these methodologies often overlap, as conjectural theories about an individual subjectivity—past or present, historical or fictional—let out onto novel configurations of psychic life. In both, there is an organic continuity assumed between art and psychology. Art is the medium through which human psychic life reveals itself; human psychology, in turn, is the essential grammar through which to narrate the (re)production of art.

Yet, importantly, these were not Freud's only procedures for thinking the relationship between psychoanalysis and art. Nor have they been the main hermeneutics that post-Freudian psychoanalysts have engaged when (re)considering aesthetics. Within Freud's own work, he was often just as interested in the finished art object and the psycho-biography of the artist as he was in the psychological impulses motoring aesthetic production, that elusive internal germ called 'creativity.' Freud explains in "On Creative Writers and Daydreaming" that,

We laymen have always been intensely curious to know... from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it, and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable. Our interest is only heightened the more by the fact that, if we ask him, the writer himself gives us no explanation, or none that is satisfactory... (Standard Edition, IX, p. 143)

In work ranging from his long study of da Vinci to this shorter essay on creative writers, Freud frequently shifts the frame of his analysis from the finished work of art to the artistic psyche in process. In tracing the baffling emergence of creativity back to the renunciation of a principally sexual aim, Freud proposes a direct link between the libidinal and the creative, coining the term “sublimation” to capture the translation of sex to art. In his more conservative moments, Freud was liable to narrate this translation as the evidence of a pathology, positioning art as that which materializes only when some more primal or vital form of life has been stymied. On this reading, creativity is only ever a mark of sexuality’s failures.

But, as with much of Freud’s writing which only unconsciously makes overtures to the truly seismic nature of the shifts in thought it inaugurates, there is a more radical thread that runs throughout Freud’s writings on creativity and aesthetics. We might say that what Freud suggests through his theory of sublimation—even if he does not announce it outright—is less a diagnosis of individual pathology characteristic of specific artistic “types” than a theory of the way subjectivity emerges *alongside* of creativity and is thus necessarily and continually bound up with it. Indeed, by the 1930s, Freud was apt to insist that, far from being pathological, libidinal redirection and sublimation is the only means through which incestuous desires are abandoned, “civilization” founded, and culture reproduced. From this perspective, the child’s first “creative” act—its first aesthetic production—is the selection of a new love object outside the family form. Creativity, in other words, can be understood as the matrix through which subjectivity itself is produced in relation to that “wider social stage.” By sublimating an originally incestuous desire, the child creates her self and her sexuality anew. Through sublimation of the libido, creativity is born.

For many analysts following Freud—and for the authors collected in this special issue—an understanding of creativity and aesthetics as foundational to and formative of psychic life has been psychoanalysis most fertile contribution to aesthetic theory. For instance, while Freud never plumbed the aesthetic implications of the uniquely visual register of dreams, this is precisely what Hanna Segal (1952) takes up in one of her most original contributions to psychoanalytic theory by highlighting the aesthetic aspects of the dreamwork. Segal points out that even though Freud never articulated the unconscious in principally aesthetic or symbolic terms, the extent to which he theorizes dreams and fantasies as distinctly *visual* productions of the unconscious testifies to the fact that even the Freudian unconscious is an aesthetic producer. An emphasis on the symbolic and non-verbal aspects of the unconscious has likewise been the basis of many other revisions of Freud’s work. This shift can be seen early on in Melanie Klein’s object relational theorization of phantasy or in Winnicott’s clinical use of “squiggle games,” just

as it manifests in more contemporary understandings of psychoanalysis as a kind of poetics, such as that forwarded by analysts like Thomas Ogden or Adam Phillips. Indeed, some of the most innovative transformations of clinical technique—that is, of psychoanalysis’s own clinical methodology—like play analysis, art analysis, reverie, or different forms of relational psychoanalysis have come about only because of the importance accorded to the aesthetic life of the unconscious. As Adam Phillips (troping on Ella Sharpe) has suggested in his recent “literary” re-translations of the Standard Edition with Penguin Books, psychoanalysis itself might best be understood as an art rather than a science.

This insight has been the cornerstone of the large body of non-clinical scholarship on psychoanalysis and aesthetics, which looks to psychoanalytic theory as one of the most intricate, innovative, and impacting fictions about subjectivity to emerge in the twentieth century. Bounded by no single discipline or institution, psychoanalysis’s theories and methodologies have been notably mobile, moving into and across academic disciplines over the last 75 years. Within the critical humanities, for instance, Leo Bersani (1986; 2006) deconstructively reads Freud against himself to show how psychoanalysis germinates sufficient evidence for recognizing the human subject’s aptitude for exceeding its own subjectivity, for theorizing aesthetics beyond the anthropocentric bounds of humanistic representation and recognition. The aesthetic subject, as Bersani thinks it, not only produces but is produced by the work of art. In this same vein, Tim Dean (2000) mobilizes a Lacanian-Foucauldian reading of Freud in order to imagine a horizon “beyond sexuality”—that is, beyond the machinery of “sex/desire” that Foucault famously assigns to the identitarian and epistemological work of psychoanalysis. Having reconfigured the (hetero)sexual psychoanalytic parable of primary loss as castration through a queerer rubric, Dean’s lingering suggestion in this text is that the “beyond” of sexuality opens out onto the field of aesthetics, that, in his final words, “Beyond sexuality lie the myriad possibilities of aesthetics” (2000, p. 279).

What both Dean and Bersani implicitly respond to in their calls for new aesthetic modalities of selfhood and subjectivity is the specifically modernist aesthetic project that psychoanalysis engages, one that Freud certainly began but that post-Freudians like Melanie Klein, Hanna Segal, Marion Milner, and Donald Meltzer more fully extended. Literary critics like Lyndsey Stonebridge (1998), Esther Sanchez-Pardo (2003), Mary Jacobus (2005), and Mignon Nixon (2008), have, with different agendas and objects, read especially British Object Relations psychoanalysis as a kind of proto-modernist discourse. These critics rightly show how, with its thematics of loss, conflict, fragmentation, sexuality, and interiority and its experimentations in form and non-linear narrative, Object Relations psychoanalysis is made possible by then-emergent modernist aesthetics. Put differently, this scholarship proposes that modernist aesthetics might best be considered as the form through which psychoanalysis comes to speak its truth.

Combining academic critical theoretical approaches like these with contemporary clinical psychoanalysts like Christopher Bollas (1987), Meg Harris Williams (1988; 2010; 2018), and Nikki Glover (2009), all of the articles in this special issue pursue a dynamic historicity of subjectivity through psychoanalytic aesthetics. Although each article grapples with the often-complex entanglement of psychoanalysis with different forms of modern aesthetic representation, each moves beyond this to innovatively use

psychoanalysis to envision a subjectivity that engages with a future not yet decided, with a historicity which is not yet. For each author, aesthetic representation *produces* a generative opening toward new horizons of possibility—individually, culturally, or politically conceived. In this way, the articles collected in “Aesthetic Subjects” undertake a larger theoretical agenda by implicitly rethinking the anachronistic bifurcation of “art/politics” that has characterized much Frankfurt School work and, consequently, much critical theory.

As each author differently explores, the question of “representation” is key to this enterprise since representation is importantly both a political *and* an aesthetic concept; it names both how art mediates life *and* how governments stand in for people. Put differently, representation is both substitution and extension, both a degree of remove and a point of connection. Therefore, throughout the articles in this issue, “aesthetics” is understood not just as a symptomatic consequence of subjectivity, but rather as the very social, political, and historical grounding necessary for the emergence of subjectivity and political sociality itself.

Each essay in “Aesthetic Subjects” formulates an alternative approach to the aesthetic life of psychoanalysis, proposing not simply that different psychologies of mind are represented in aesthetic form, but more radically that psychologies of mind are produced and often exceeded by the aesthetic form. Gyenge’s article, “Between the Toy and the Theatre: Reading Aesthetics in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,” begins this special issue by challenging traditional Freudian approaches to aesthetics, finding in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) a theory of the theatrical grounds of subjectivity. For Gyenge, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*’s literal “staging” of Ernst’s “Ford-da” game and its implicit exploration of mimesis through references to Greek theater propose that aesthetics—that theater—is the condition of possibility for Freud’s theory of subjectivity. If Freud looks to Ernst for a speculative theory of the origins of the death drive, then Gyenge looks to Freud for a unique genealogy of a fundamentally aesthetic subjectivity. Following this, Laubender extends Gyenge’s re-reading of key figures in psycho-aesthetics by taking up Melanie Klein’s theory of reparative creativity, arguing that Klein’s conceptualization of “reparation” needs to be understood not just aesthetically, but politically as well. As past psychoanalysts like Hanna Segal have well established, Klein’s theory of psychic reparation is crucial for her thinking on the genesis of human creativity. But by charting how Klein implicitly articulates reparative creativity through femininity, binding processes of reparation to a war-torn landscape of feminine aggression, paranoia, and destruction, Laubender boldly politicizes Klein’s psycho-aesthetics. Situating reparation within transnational political claims for reparative justice throughout the twentieth century, Laubender ultimately contends that Klein’s psychoanalytic theory constitutes an unexpected theory of global justice, one that locates justice in the space of the impossible, in the dominion of the feminine. Similarly focused on the British School, Halton-Hernandez examines the role that visual art plays in the work of both Louis Bourgeois and Marion Milner. Interested primarily in how both women incorporate the formal element of the spiral in their psychoanalytically informed art practices, Halton-Hernandez explores the function of art *in the clinic*, interpreting the form of the spiral as specifically evocative of early, pre-verbal “body-ego” states. In this way, Halton-Hernandez continues psychoanalysis’s long-standing interest in the image as particularly pre-verbal and thus foundational to psychic life.

Bainbridge continues to use British Object Relations psychoanalysis to understand the widely acclaimed television shows *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* as cultural objects, reflecting on the way they both compliment—and complicate—psychoanalytic accounts of greed and envy. Putting the popularity of these shows in conversation with a post-2008 political climate that has witnessed the increasing destabilization of white hetero-patriarchy, Bainbridge considers how these programs tune into repressed forms of social malaise for the viewer. According to Bainbridge, their broad public success is tied to their gendered representation of psychological malady and speaks to fraught viewer identifications with contemporary reorganizations of masculinity and capital. Shifting from the British school to intersubjective psychoanalysis, Giovanini interrogates the way that sexual trauma is visualized and formalized in another contemporary cultural object: the US television show *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-present). Through a theory of trauma and psychic repair in empathic relations developed by Donna Orange, Giovanini explores the psycho-dynamics at work in *The Handmaid's Tale's* depiction of trauma, subjection, and resistance.

Ultimately, Giovanini contends that the show's formal representation of psychic trauma and political resistance produces, in viewers, an experiential and experimental opening that allows for the mobilization of its visuals in broader political protests and rejuvenates attempts at destabilizing the hetero-patriarchal value of self-sufficiency and individualism. Finally, Chi concludes the issue by directly tackling the relationship between aesthetics and politics by elaborating the political promise of surrealist poetry in and for decolonial psychoanalysis. Chi examines the political and poetic writings of anti-colonial writer Aimé Césaire, explicating how his work levels an important attack on psychoanalysis as an imperial project. However, by adopting a “psychopoetic” reading of Aimé Césaire's surrealist poetry that moves away from the traditional focus on Césaire's political legacy, Chi rethinks Césaire's critique of psychoanalysis by emphasizing his celebration of poetic madness. Ultimately, Chi argues that it is precisely through surrealist poetics—through aesthetics—that Césaire articulates a politically radical anti-colonial psychoanalysis that transforms both psychoanalysis and the politics of liberation in postcolonial studies.

Taken together, these articles engage with aesthetics—from theatrical performativity, to poetic language, to visual art, and cinematic media—not as a form of psychological mastery designed to bring the otherness of these worlds to heel through mechanisms of projection, introjection, identification, or splitting. Rather, each article considers how the productive horizons within art and aesthetics act back upon subjectivity, with the potential for germinating new configurations of relationality, sociality, and politicality. The generative act of “Aesthetic Subjects” forces an encounter with eidetic limits that breach ready-made significations, opening onto an infinite potentiality, where through the unconscious each reaches toward what is otherwise from within an abyss of in-sanity, madness, or non-containment. Seen in Gyenge's theorization of infinitude, Laubender's configuration of justice as the necessarily impossible, Halton-Hernandez's exploration of the aesthetic form of chaos, Bainbridge's cinematographic engagement with spellbound experience, Giovanini's relational positioning of an other, and Chi's reclamation of the poetic politicality of madness, “Aesthetic Subjects” gestures to a future which is not yet expressed, to an aesthetic vista of beyond either psychoanalysis or subjectivity.

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