

Editorial

Since Sigmund Freud's 1915 paper on the unconscious the idea of a repository of repressed thoughts and desires has remained a key topic in discussions in and about psychoanalysis. In this issue of *Inscriptions* we give voice to positions that encompass the tradition after Freud and more mystical approaches. The crucial distinction between them is how they appropriate the term unconscious.

To Freud the issue was quite clear: psychoanalysis was a science and the existence of the unconscious could be demonstrated as necessary (non-contingent) and legitimate, since – in his view – there were several proofs of its

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presence. While the scientific status of his approach is still very much debated our concern here is more directed towards clarifying an important line of demarcation between Freudian approaches and appropriations of the term unconscious that for various reasons challenge key assumptions in Freud's first formulation.¹ Therefore, the question of the scientific validity, while important, should be regarded as *the next step* in our ongoing conversation: first we seek to clarify our concepts, and only then will it be possible to distinguish the extent to which any or all of these approaches can at some point achieve scientific status.

What is clear is that for Freud one chief consideration in his essay on the unconscious was to distinguish between psychic and unconscious content. This distinction returns to haunt us in this issue: surely, some of our authors will argue, there are psychic experiences that pass us by, without us properly noticing, and which only receive their meaning when we study them more closely, thus becoming part of our consciousness? Freud would answer that surely this is so; however, in his view this is something different than what we find in our unconscious repository.

One way of understanding Freud's notion is to begin with the idea that what we find in the unconscious is thoughts and desires that *once was* conscious thoughts. For some reason or other – or, more generally, when our desires are socially unacceptable – we are forced to repress

these thoughts, and the resulting content can most appropriately be described as unconscious, returning as wishful impulses in our everyday lives. However, through analysis such repressed content can be made conscious through careful attention to dreams, slips of the tongue and psychic symptoms.

What this means is that Freud's unconscious is essentially a dynamic domain with shifting and sometimes volatile content. One of the reasons Freud claimed scientific status to his approach was that he perceived the unconscious as a complex and organised system that operated in a law-like manner. It is through our analytic labour that we can uncover these laws and allow the repressed to properly return to our lives.

Freud's student Carl Gustav Jung developed his own understanding of the term unconscious that in important respects differed from Freud's original formulation. In Jung's view there is a more profound, collective layer of the unconscious, where we find stored archetypes and other inherited structures. The unconscious, in Jung's view, could therefore be said to contain material from the species as an entirety. Freud rejected such a notion of a "second consciousness," regarding it as mystical and static.

When Simon Orpana in this issue asks whether we have eclipsed "Oedipal forms of subjectivity," he seeks to interrogate whether the symbolic castration of Freudian psychology works to pre-empt a certain blurring and inflation of our sense of self that has become central to the petroleum culture of our era: ours is a time when "we ostensibly use cars to get somewhere else, in a world that has been so thoroughly reshaped to foster automotive and

¹ See, e.g. Mark Vernon's illustrative "100 years old and making a comeback – Freud's theories of the unconscious" in *The Guardian* at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/30/sigmund-freud-unconscious-theories>.

consumer desire, all somewheres tend to blur into an icy sameness while the pleasure of driving becomes an end in itself.” Orpana’s essay on petroleum culture takes Fredric Jameson’s approach to the political unconscious as its point of departure before it launches into an engaged reading of Anna Kavan’s 1967 novel *Iæ*. His central concern is to investigate how “psychoanalytic modes of understanding” can work to reveal and untangle blockages and fantasies that stand in the way of a necessary shift away from an economy driven by fossil fuels.

To Freud our repressed desires return as “representatives” of physiological drives, manifested as wishful impulses. Freud’s later student Jacques Lacan made explicit the extent to which the Oedipal myth undergirds Freud’s understanding of subjectivity. In Lacan our entry into language and the symbolic order is in a sense guarded by a father figure who demands our assent to the symbolic law. It is because of his claim to sexual monopoly that the child’s infantile urges are necessarily repressed so as to enable its entry into the law and language.

This ability of the castrating father to intervene in repetitive, drive-governed behaviour is a key component in Tomoaki Morikawa’s analysis of *Reflecting Absence*, the memorial erected on Ground Zero in New York, the location of the horrendous 9/11 terror attacks in 2001. Morikawa convincingly reveals the way the memorial should properly be situated within a structure of compulsive repetition: instead of enabling the viewer to work through and, in time, put the trauma into the past, *Reflecting Absence* participates in a self-destructive obsession with the traumatic moment, compelling audiences to endlessly repeat the trauma. In so far as the global war on terror is fought against a feeling of vulnerability, this memorial furthers the trauma that undergirds the U.S. doctrine behind this war.

The notion of symbolic castration is crucial in our analysis of Bjarne Melgaard’s recent project “A house to die in.” As an artist who has violated every social and sexual norm Melgaard’s attempt to relocate and implant himself on iconic Norwegian painter Edvard Munch’s homestead was finally rejected last year by municipal authorities. Was this the symbolic intervention Melgaard was actually seeking: a potential point of resistance that would again enable him to break out of the repetitive, endlessly transgressive deadlock of the modern artist?

Against these Freudian analyses, relying as they are on notions of repression and symbolic castration, Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter suggest a different view of the unconscious. When they note that today’s internet-related revolts emerge from a “collective unconscious of accumulated discontent,” such an unconscious is neither strictly dependent on the drives, nor reliant on castration for its functioning. Instead, we are in the proximity of a notion of the unconscious as a “second consciousness:” here the return of the repressed isn’t any longer the Freudian “wishful thinking,” but an actual repressed social force that, when unleashed, holds the capacity to usher the subject into new forms of freedom and empowerment.

In their analysis of our current technological moment Sharif Abdunnur and Krystle Houiess make explicit the connection between their approach to the unconscious and the work of Carl Gustav Jung. An unconscious “second consciousness” has now become “a conscious reality of creation.” To Abdunnur and Houiess “we now, accidentally or intentionally, take part in creating a collective unconscious that more than ever has a visible presence and massive direct and indirect effect” on our lives. In their view it is the Internet and social media that embodies Jung’s collective unconscious.

Finally, the artwork of Stefan Chazbijewicz seeks to establish a “mystic space” beyond trauma and experiences of disempowerment. To him it is possible to create a new iconography that can represent “what we are after salvation:” what he seeks to show is Platonic forms, and what he refers to as the “essence of Being.”

It is perhaps here we find the connection between the thrust of Orpana’s argument, the key to Morikawa’s rejection of the endless repetition of the traumatic wound, and Abdunnur and Houiess’ celebration of a global unconscious in the making: through these approaches we can begin to find a site and a way to live that provide us with shelter from the self-inflicted destructive character of our culture and the incessant reminders of our vulnerability, and instead face the perilous freedom of a future as it is unfolding.

Happy reading!