

Freud's Aesthetics: Matriarchy, Sublimation and the Surreal

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Sigmund Freud is only occasionally referenced as a theorist of art. Given his general theory however, its applicability can easily extend to art, and this was a significant part of his own writing. Aesthetics for Freud is a form of wish fulfilment. It is a way to deal with the struggle of the transition from the pleasure to the Reality Principle. This conversion lies at the root of much personal and social pathology. Art, in one respect, is a defence mechanism.

Ludwig Marcuse (1958) makes the argument that the essence of Freud's aesthetics is the creation of an alternative world. Put simply, the stress of reality is such that it demands a means of release; a way to relax the tension. In many ways, the most socially constructive means of this is through the creation of a new, different world. Marcuse remarks that “The artist's place is, however, a realm between what Freud called 'wish-denying reality' and the 'wish-fulfilling world of fantasy' in other words, between the bitterness of daily existence and the even more bitter realm of delusion (Marcuse, 1958, 5-6).

Like most other social phenomena in Freud, art is another product of the sublimation of libidinal desires. The issue is the transition between the pleasure Principle and its unfortunate requirement that it becomes real, that is, to become congruent with social life, warts and all. This sublimation can serve to expose neuroses so as to make their treatment easier. It can serve to provide the needed energy for the daily life of society, or the Reality Principle. It can serve to provide a “cushion” to the harsh aspects of Reality and provide a more or less harmless relief of these anxieties.

This paper will explicate Freud's aesthetic theory through three specific works: the first, well known to Freud, the ancient Egyptian statue, the *Head of Osiris*. The work of Leonardo DaVinci was so significant to Freud that he dedicated an entire book to his work, with the *Mona Lisa* used to understand how the “killing of the father” ritual takes the form of later neurosis. Finally, the postmodern Surrealist movement will also be connected to an aspect of Freudian dream theory. In this regard, the often ignored painting by Salvatore Dali, *The Elephants* (1945) will be used to explicate the idea of wish fulfilment and social dreaming as another mode of smoothing out neuroses.

In all of these, it will become clear that art serves as a social “cushion.” it is what makes the Id's bowing to the Superego tolerable. At the same time, it also permits a means by which the anxiety and pain of social injustice can be projected, manifest and worked out. Ultimately, this paper seeks to make a brief contribution to how art, in Freud's mind, can serve as a healthy means to smooth over the inevitable absurdity of the Reality Principle.

It is not unreasonable to argue that the artistic drive comes from the transition of the biological into the rational. As the libidinal drive is immediate, that is, it precedes thought and concepts, art is just one of many ways this can transition into the “reality Principle” of usable, practical, necessary life (Sulloway, 1992, 19-20).

Freud developed a dualist account of the relation between biological drives and their translation into usable forms. The two are related, of course, but they are not collapsible into one another. The real issue for his theory of beauty and art is to what extent the internal, mental universe can be related to instinctive drives of the Id (Smith, 1999, 121).

Famously, Freud treated the rational or irrational reactions to the demands of reality as a defence mechanism. Anxiety, for example, is a clear result of the pleasure Principle being forced to make itself real. “Real” is the reality Principle, or the Principle of “practical life.” A defence mechanism can then be seen as a means of making “reality” less threatening and menacing. From this, art can derive, since it's a way to re-create the real in such a way that both the reality and pleasure principles can co-exist. Art, in other words, is a defence mechanism because it is a deliberate distortion of reality (Smith, 1999, 120-124).

Making this clearer, art for Freud is the projection of a more pleasant and less threatening reality precisely at times when the real is excessively difficult to bear. Similarly, art that seems frightening or destructive might well be a means of releasing that tension. The anxiety of being forced to live in the “Real world,” one marked largely by injustice and arbitrary power, requires a form of release that is itself non-destructive and yet is able to channel the pain into this harmless direction.¹ Going further, the super-ego, the more theoretical of our psychic faculties, is the source of this kind of inspiration. It becomes, for some, the inspiration for art in that the super-ego permits the citizen to continue social activities in a world made slightly more tolerable (Baumeister et al 1998, 1092).

Given all this, one way to summarize the Freudian approach to art is as a form of self-realization. Using such “defence mechanisms” and sublimation is a way to project neurosis, pain and trauma onto a canvas or into music. This might even be seen as the “unfolding” of one's subconscious and even repressed memories or feelings in such a way that they can be harmlessly expressed outside of normal, daily prose. Art, in this sense, might not just be a harmless pastime, but the social means of coming to terms with trauma or the oppression of helplessness and injustice. Once this psychic conflict is expressed, it can begin the process of healing since its contents are now externalized rather than repressed (Baumeister, et al 1998, 1081-1083).

Ludwig Marcuse writes,

According to Freud, the great accomplishment of art-its ability to present a world free of danger or trouble and to cast a semblance of reality over 'that which never was on land or sea' points to its prehistoric origin. One of the most fruitful questions, he believed, that can be raised about myths, religion, philosophy, art, and science is: What human need brought them into being? For we can assume that the urgency which called these creations into existence for the first time, calls them forth again and again (Marcuse, 1958: 4)

In Freud's collection, an excellent example of all this is the Egyptian *Head of Osiris*, from roughly 1000BC. This is specifically significant because it sat on his desk. For Freud, the Egyptian mentality was marked by the desire to deny death (Monash, 2007, 14). Further, when killed by Seth, his sister Isis resurrected him through the reassembly of his pieces. The symbols here are beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that the gender roles here are remarkable.²

Freud's view of the ancient Egyptian system is that the male gods first appear beside their mothers. This suggests a matriarchal order overthrown by its opposite. The two brothers, Horus and Seth, fight for the attention of their mother. Killing Osiris is the same killing of the “patriarch” idea from his *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud, 1929, 33). The father is murdered because he has full access to all women due to his absolute power. However, the

1 This is part of the purpose of the Surrealists. The Real is precisely that which must be transcended.

2 Osiris, like Ptah and Ra, are primal. They are foundational and are manifest only in symbolic form. They are, in a sense, an iconic representation of the drives Freud claims exist as a part of our humanity.

authority that comes from the dead father also comes with guilt. Ultimately, the super-ego is the product of that guilt and makes up the content of the Reality Principle (Freud, 1929, 34).

Freud's analysis of the *Mona Lisa* focuses on DaVinci's own problematic relation to his mother. Freud uses the same argument used for the murder of Osiris. This is transferred to DaVinci's own view towards his mother. Specifically, that the famed smile in the painting cannot be seen as positive or negative. It might be seen as a smirk: an expression of dominance and lack of responsibility. It is also (just as easily) seen as a smile of love, one held in humility. Another dichotomy is that the *Mona Lisa* is both an expression of loathing, seduction and contempt, or an icon of devotion. Freud considers this the essence of woman regardless: she is both loving and loathing; humble servant and merciless temptress (Freud, 1916, 78-80). Freud writes in his *Civilization and its Discontents*:

Whoever was the first to deny himself this pleasure [of sexual love] and spare the fire was able to take it with him and break it in to his own service. By curbing the fire of his own sexual passion, he was able to tame fire as a force of nature. This great cultural victory was thus a reward for re framing from gratification of an instinct. Further, it is as if man had placed woman by the hearth as the guardian of the fire he had taken captive, because her anatomy makes it impossible for her to yield to such a temptation. It is remarkable how regularly analytic findings testify to the close connection between the ideas of ambition, fire, and urethral eroticism (Freud, 1929, 15)

The *Mona Lisa*, using this approach, can be an icon of female domesticity. This is the externalization of the suppression (or re-direction) of the primal libidinal drive. Taming lust, like taming fire, channelled this into the Reality Principle: the daily grind of a functional civilization. Her smile, in this interpretation, is a smirk reminding the viewer that the primal lust simmers just under the genteel surface.

Salvatore Dali's *The Elephants* (1945) is not identical to the erotic, sublimated origins of civilization and its neuroses. Instead, the Surrealists, rather than serving as an example of Freud, self-consciously sought to use his approach to dreams (and art more specifically) to create a quasi-Freudian school of painting. Of course, to consciously take such a view and make it a guide for artistic life misses the point. It is just that history was subconscious (in the sense of sexual sublimation manifesting in other ways) that it takes its explanatory power. The moment it becomes conscious, the point now is useless.³

In the case of the Surrealists, however, the question is one of the projection of anxiety specific to modernity being made explicit in art. In other words, despite Freud's dislike of the movement, they were directly bringing an element of Freud's idea to life. Like all else, when a desire exists, and there is no way to manifest it socially, it comes out in other (often unpredictable) ways. In the case of the frustrations with the Reality Principle, its inversion is the rejection of everything empirical (Budd, 1999, 134-137).

This desire is that of overcoming the brute given. This is the ultimate expression of Reality, and so it becomes an object to be "softened" for the sake of some mental peace, both socially and personally. However, the desire to transcend the empirical might, at a certain extreme, be taken for insanity. Given the unpleasant results of this, the desire to overcome the empirical might manifest itself in the total inversion of the empirical, that is, in art such as the Surreal.⁴ In *The Elephants*, Dali takes the reality of the animal's bulk and inverts it. The legs

3 Specifically, Freud offers a way to interpret human history. It is subconscious, but it reveals itself in important ways. It makes little sense to use these drives consciously, since they are no longer sublimated here. The addition of conscious will changes everything.

4 By empirical, we mean only that the brute given is oppressive in that it resists the will. The given is just that:

of the elephants are weak and almost appear to be breaking. These strange creatures seem to be carrying heavy obelisks, but they are floating above the animal. It makes no sense except as a protest against the brute given, the Real. The desire for the overcoming of the empirical takes bizarre form for Dali.

The problem was that the Surrealists were more concerned with using Freud to make sense out of the irrational and non-empirical. Freud sought to get to the root of man's myths and comforting images. Surrealism took the myth out of its context and made it into an icon of itself. This is a distortion of Freud's purpose. Susan Budd writes,

The surrealist artists and poets who enthusiastically adopted psychoanalytic ideas in the 1920s and 30s saw the dream as a means of access to the irrational layers of the mind. They tried to represent dreams by means of automatic writing and pictorially. They followed Freud in seeing the dream as reflecting a crazy, unpredictable world, in which reality is discontinuous. But unlike him, they thought this world a valuable counterweight to rational thought. Dali explicitly used Freudian dream symbols in pictures in which he tried to explore his mental difficulties, and in the recent exhibition of Dali's work at the Tate in Liverpool, his homage to Freud was represented at the beginning of the exhibition by Freud's analytic couch (Budd, 1999, 136).

The point is that, relative to *Osiris* and the *Mona Lisa*, these artworks can be understood as unconscious manifestations of primal drives being sublimated. The Surrealists, however, are not to be understood this way, at least because they are consciously using Freud as an excuse to manifest what is knowingly irrational. A neurosis is not really a pathology if it is deliberately called forth for the sake of aesthetic expression. It has no purpose when it is knowingly used. It is useful only when not explicitly felt.

On the other hand, it is clear that all three examples are means of making the Real less overtly "real." The question of Dali might better be what is so special about modernity such that the Surrealist would come into existence at all. What is it about the real, even in its basic, empirical form, that makes artists revolt to the extent that impossibilities become more aesthetically pleasing than what can be seen. The inner world for the Surrealist has the radical distinction of not being subject to natural laws. It cannot be matter, since material is determined by laws of biology or motion. Our internal life, however, can imagine anything. The reaction to a specific stimuli need not result in the same image each time, nor are there laws that govern which images result from which stimuli. Personality is irreducible.

The relation of *Osiris* and the *Mona Lisa* to Freud's approach to the origins of civilization are clear. That of Dali's *The Elephants* less so. Yet, Dali's insistence that he is faithful to Freud needs to be taken seriously. To paint this monstrous animal being held up by rickety legs that make no sense according to natural law is to protest the nature of the Real. Industrial society promised control over nature; man was no longer slaves to the natural order oppressing the human race. By dominating creation, the scientific establishment was to place reason over brute force. Unfortunately, it did not take long for many to realize that "nature" also included "human nature." As the promises of modernity crashed in a massive pile of corpses in 1918 and 1945, the idea of the dream state, the negation of the Real and its clear association with death, makes perfect sense.

In this sense, Freud is useful – the promises of scientific rationality existed perfectly parallel to a death instinct that, outside of these views, has no real rational reason to exist. Yet

material, lumbering, slow, heavy. What is empirical is what is material, that is, anything not conceptual or disembodied.

it did and does. If this is the case, then at least one view of the Surreal, that of the anti-empirical protest, can claim that the empirical has no claim over the mind. The Reality Principle is nothing but violence and death. Thus, what at one time was only imperfectly known through myth and taboo is now explicitly made clear in art. The true human mind, one that stays faithful to its vision, is to negate the Real. Whether this drive to negation is itself part of the death drive, or if industrial society rendered sublimation obsolete is not the question here, but it does serve to cast doubt on whether Freud can ever be used to justify a school of art. It might be able to understand it, but to explicitly be its justification is questionable.

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