

Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art

Shankar Tripathi^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Sigmund Freud's method of psychoanalysis has not only been fundamental for the discipline of psychology, but also for analysing works of art. Freud, beginning with his oft-cited psychobiography of Leonardo da Vinci, introduced the concept of studying an artist and its praxis from a psychic space; a concept that was revolutionary for its society that up until then experienced artworks through a romantic lens. The creation of a work of art was no longer simply the product of an intuitive 'genius,' but also the culmination of psychological factors like suppressed wishes and instinctual desires, familial relationships, childhood experiences, and dream sequences and fantasies, among others. Not only has such psychoanalysis inspired the Surrealist art movement, but also helped scholars in studying works of art, and their artists. In this paper, using Freudian principles, I psychoanalyse eight works of art produced in and beyond the ambit of Surrealism. With such an exercise, my aim here is to examine the creation of the self-portrait (and by extension, the image of an artist's self) as a site of multiplicities. It is a site that is the product of an unconscious that is being constantly shaped, right from the artist's childhood. For every artist, I have provided a small vignette that explains their oeuvre, its influences and aims, and how we can study the subtextual elements of their influential unconscious. With my examination, we can witness the projection of the self in a postmodern world where such sites are by their very nature, deconstructed, transient, and multiple.

Keywords: *Sigmund Freud, Freudian Analysis, Art, Bourgeois, Surrealism, Modernism, Magritte, Art and Psychology, Da Vinci*

One of the most heavily researched and fertile areas of social studies, the presence of the 'self' - whether predicated with self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-monitoring, self-deception - has been a fundamental element in the creation of fine art, and the lives of artists. Indispensable further is its study for researchers, students, critics, and historians of art, who posit self-portraits as sites of biographical study, not only attempting to understand the lives of the artists, but also their environment and society. It is no wonder then, that personality psychology, and more specifically, psychoanalysis, has been quickly taken to arms by those who engage in furthering psycho-biographies of artists today.

¹Graduate student of Art History and Art Appreciation at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

*Corresponding Author

Received: July 08, 2021; Revision Received: September 01, 2021; Accepted: September 11, 2021

Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art

When analysing self-portraits of artists, our studies take us much deeper than the formal aspects of a painting. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' *Self-Portrait Aged 24* from 1804 is not simply an example of a Neoclassical painting, but also the visible aspiration of the artist to compose himself in the manner of a Renaissance portrait, coming close in emulating, for example, Raphael's *Portrait of Bindo Altoviti*. In Ingres we see a man profoundly influenced by past artistic traditions, taking up the mantle of being a bastion of academic orthodoxy in the face of Romanticism and Eugene Delacroix's work. In Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, the chaotic elements allude perhaps not only to the ravages of the war Germany was experiencing, but also the instability felt by the artist, who was medically discharged in 1915 from the fighting. And yet, why did Kirchner choose to depict a lifeless self with a stump instead of a functioning right hand, which he had? Did it mean the loss of his artistic faculties, a by-product of not coming to terms with his discharge? Can we imagine Kirchner in a state of emasculation?

Of course, all this is not to say that every self-portrait made by an artist is a rabbit hole of conjecture; surely, there are countless images that are much more direct in their analysis. The point here, rather, is that in examining self-portraits we come across a site of multiplicities - it is a site that is consciously, and here is the clinch - unconsciously motivated, shaped, progressed, defined. It is the latter that we shall contend with here.

It was with Sigmund Freud and his text *Leonardo da Vinci and A Memory of His Childhood* (Freud, 1916) that formalised the notion of an unconscious influencing an artist's behaviour through dreams and fantasies. Freud attempted a psychobiography of the artist by examining instances from his life - the fantasy involving the attack of the vulture, which Freud understood as a nod to Leonardo's mother, and the work *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, which Freud understood depicted the Mother of God and her mother as a subconscious projection of the two maternal figures Leonardo grew up with - and inspired the method of interpreting art and artistic skill from a psychic space, and not from a necessarily Romantic one which posited the act of creating a painting to the domain of the 'genius' who was intuitively inspired. To that end, Freud (1923) charted the space of the id (the instinctual, unconscious desires which involve the most primitive and elemental drives), the ego (the reality principle), and the superego (the conscience agent or morality principle), observing the struggles between the desires of the id, the moral perfection of the superego, and the conflict of the ego in maintaining a balance. Psychoanalysis sought to understand the unconscious fantasy of the id by examining art as the wish-fulfilment, or as an expression of unresolved psychic conflict; furthermore, it saw artists working with symbolisms, which were objects that had more than one meaning and represented ideas and fantasies which consciously the artist was not aware of (Freud & Strachey, 2010).

Freud's ideas had an even greater impact on the Surrealist movement. His iconic text, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud & Strachey, 2010), found an echo with the artists who were particularly interested in decoding the meanings behind dreams and innermost desires. These, which were often erotic in nature, were explored through techniques like free association and automatism (as seen in Paul Klee and Joan Miro's work). Andre Breton had remarked that these ideas were "thought expressed in the absence of any control exerted by reason, and outside all moral and aesthetic considerations" (Dempsey, 2002). Another idea was of the 'uncanny' - that, which once familiar, was now translated into a haunting and disturbing element, bringing about a strangeness to its familiarity (Freud, 2021). Such ideas deeply moved Surrealists like Man Ray who were experimenting with photography.

Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art

It would thus be the endeavour of this paper here to employ these Freudian ideas and theories in analysing the several works of art. Modern and Postmodern constructions of the self have ranged from focusing on individuality to understanding the self as a fragmented, transient site of deconstruction. It is only natural to therefore imagine the fair share of criticism (from an objective reasoning, at least) psychoanalysis and its subjective (or irrational, depending upon how you see it) approach explains the image of the self. The method has been called unscientific, prompting one critic to argue that it has produced nothing more than “shallow pathobiographies” (Gedo, 1989). Critics are also wary of the over-analysis of an oedipal interpretation, and lament those who seek to explain the creation of a work of art through regressive or pathological urges. Despite such broadsides being fired, however, the theories of Freud were not only developed upon by others but sustained in such a positive manner that they continue to attract attention even today. It is in recognition to that resilience of Freud’s ideas that the author here has humbly attempted to psychoanalyse the subsequent works of art as expressions of the self.

Rene Magritte, The Lovers II, 1928



Magritte, R. (1928) The Lovers II [Painting]. Museum of Modern Art, NY.

The Lovers II depicts two individuals locked in a passionate embrace; they are seen kissing. The male figure on the right is clothed in a black suit, while the female figure on the left is in a sleeveless dress. Both figures are veiled with an opaque cloth, tightly wrapped around their face and neck. The female’s head is tilted slightly, allowing the viewer to observe the sharp details of the male figure’s nose. The male figure is composed in a dominant position against the woman. The background is ambiguous, and we are left to assume that the two figures are present in an unusual room with the background wall blue, the ceiling white, and the side wall brick red in colour, with a decorative trim visible in the upper right corner.

There are two ways to look at the painting. The first relates to what is apparent, i.e., the veil as an object that obstructs a romantic embrace, essentially becoming a wall. Surrealists were interested in the utilisation of masks and disguises, and the veil here draws our attention to the question of what lies below the surface of the embrace. Literally, the veil subverts our voyeuristic pleasure of witnessing the kiss; metaphorically, the suppressed desires of the id. By virtue of the veil providing a loss of identity, the metaphor here relates to all of us, and the feelings and desires we shroud behind what is apparent and visible. Moreover, in the conscious decision of portraying the submissiveness of the woman, we also see the typical

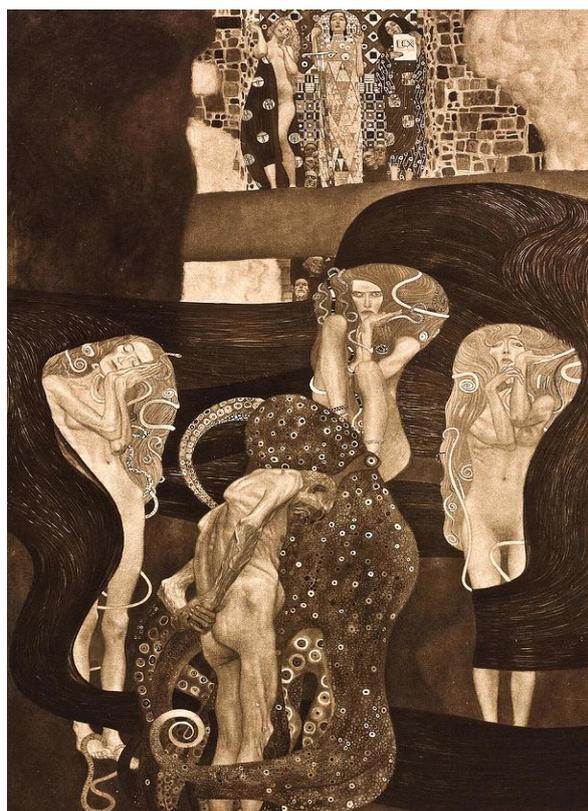
Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art

Surrealist reaction towards female sexuality being desirous and a source of anxiety at the same time (for example, Man Ray's 1929 work *Anatomies* not only focuses on the female neck but configures the frame in a manner that projects it as a phallic object).

The second way concerns Magritte's life. When Magritte was fourteen his mother committed suicide by drowning, and witnessing her body being fished out of the water would have been a traumatic moment to witness. It was recorded that her nightgown was wrapped around her face (*MoMA | René Magritte. The Lovers. Le Perreux-Sur-Marne, 1928, n.d.*), and it is perhaps this visual - a moment deeply lodged in his unconscious - that resulted in the creation of this painting. The kiss could then be seen as a kiss of death; the colour black, associated with death, would therefore explain the dominant position of the man against a submissive mother here, plagued by her own trepidations. The veil becomes an object of frustration for the mother to express her true self - perhaps, to Magritte himself.

It is interesting that Magritte expressly denied any relation between his paintings and his mother's death, famously saying, "My painting is visible images which conceal nothing" (*MoMA | René Magritte. The Lovers. Le Perreux-Sur-Marne, 1928, n.d.*). For Magritte, his paintings were to evoke a mystery which did not necessarily carry any meaning. However, a Freudian analysis would explain this defence mechanism through the concept of negation, which was the process whereby one continually defended oneself against a formerly repressed wish, thought, or feeling that had come to consciousness by disavowing or disowning it (Freud, 1971).

Gustav Klimt, Preparatory Study For Jurisprudence, 1897-98, and Jurisprudence, 1903-07



Klimt, G. (1903-07) *Jurisprudence* and (1897-98) *Preparatory Study For Jurisprudence* [Painting]. gustav-klimt.com and Flickr.

Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art

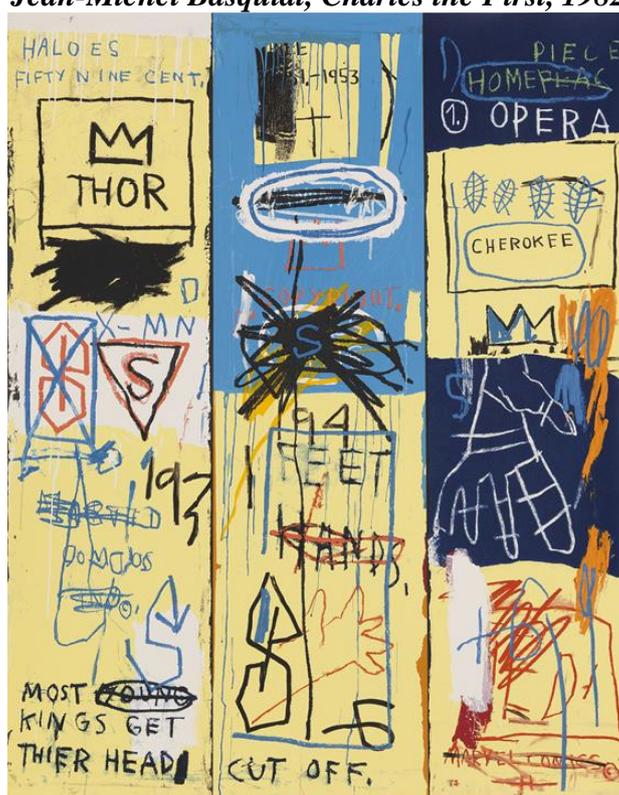
In assessing the psycho-sexual elements of *Jurisprudence*, it will be of aid to first examine the preparatory study that ultimately led to the final creation. In looking at the earlier work, the sole figure that stands out is of Justitia, or Justice, who is seen wielding a sword as the arbiter of what is right and what is wrong. As opposed to this airy and composed image, *Jurisprudence* carries an element of being busy, hazy, and chaotic. Three conventional allegorical figures of Nuda Veritas or the Naked Truth, Justitia or Justice, and Lex or Law, are drawn present among the clouds on the top. The scene below portrays three female furies, or the Eumenides, condemning a man to suffer his punishment at the hands of a sea monster, an octopus, which is seen embracing the man.

There is a certain Apollonian/Dionysian element in these two works. *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche et al., 1994) explained the dichotomy between what Apollonian is and what is Dionysian. Apollo, the god of the plastic arts and order very much typified in much of Western art, stood opposite to Dionysus, who was exemplified by a state of chaotic intoxication, by the abstract, especially through music. Scholars like Benjamin Flythe (2016) have taken a certain liking to this lens in explaining the societal reaction against Klimt's work. The Vienna of Klimt was the Bethlehem of the Habsburg Empire, and in asserting control over its far-flung territories, the Apollonian order of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer's thought appealed immensely. To usurp this reality through the erotic Dionysian imagery of Klimt's works meant going against the very fabric of society.

It is true that not every work of his was made in such a manner; the preparatory study very much proves that. In fact, Klimt's early works (his Athena decoration on the Kunsthistorisches Museum stairwell, for example) were ordered and clear in the Apollonian manner. It was only by the end of the nineteenth century, when the Vienna Secession came into its own, that Klimt's work undertook the abstract and erotic tones that were to become prominent later. The first and second University panels, *Philosophy* and *Medicine*, had received such critical remarks that scholars like Gottfried Fleidl (1998) and Carl E. Schorske (1980) posited psychoanalytically that the condemned man in the painting was Klimt himself.

How can we substantiate this assertion? In analysing Klimt's art, an important aspect to consider is his persistent eroticism. By assuming the self-portrait assertion, the erotic presentation of the furies becomes a metaphor for female sexuality in the society; specifically, its chained presence and negative reception, while Klimt's presence marks an association with such sexuality. Klimt being the condemned man therefore carries an oedipal notion (By oedipal I do not mean a mother-son relation but a male-female relation that nonetheless carries a similar aura of taboo) that can only be corrected in the manner of castration - which explains the positioning of the octopus, directly against where Klimt's genitals would be. For Schorske (1980), the implication of the condemned man being Klimt himself meant that the artist had indulged in internalising guilt; a guilt for failing to liberate the larger society from its traditional shackles and open up a more libertarian idea of sexuality.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, Charles the First, 1982



Basquiat, J. M. (1982) *Charles the First* [Painting]. Public Delivery.

Seeing for the first time, *Charles the First* is an unbelievably chaotic work of art. An example of Primitivism and Neo-Expressionism, the painting is made up of three panels over which various symbols are painted and phrases and expressions are written. The painting paid an homage to the Black jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker, who Basquiat looked up to as a sort of mentor and idol. In fact, Basquiat had created several paintings (like *Bird on Money*, *Horn Players*, *King Zulu*, etc.) which referenced jazz musicians. Basquiat, in 1985, was quoted saying, “Since I was seventeen I thought I might be a star. I’d think about all my heroes, Charlie Parker, Jimi Hendrix... I had a romantic feeling about how these people became famous” (McGuigan, 1985). Fred Braithwaite, and later Bell Hooks (1993) saw the emphasis on such jazz musicians as a manifestation of Basquiat’s own aspirations. By associating with such musicians, he was effectively providing a declaration of respect towards the avant-garde aspects of jazz.

To that end, the image of the crown, which features in the top left corner, directly connects itself to such aspirations. Jordana Moore Saggese’s (2014) famous monograph, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art* explored the visual image of the crown, and in doing so explained its twin association: that of being an image of the artist’s own power, where its positioning over the word ‘THOR’ must be seen through a godlike lens, and secondly, of referencing the hierarchies that existed within New York’s graffiti movement, where graffiti artists that admired another graffiti artist’s work would express their respect by painting the three pointed crown next to the work.

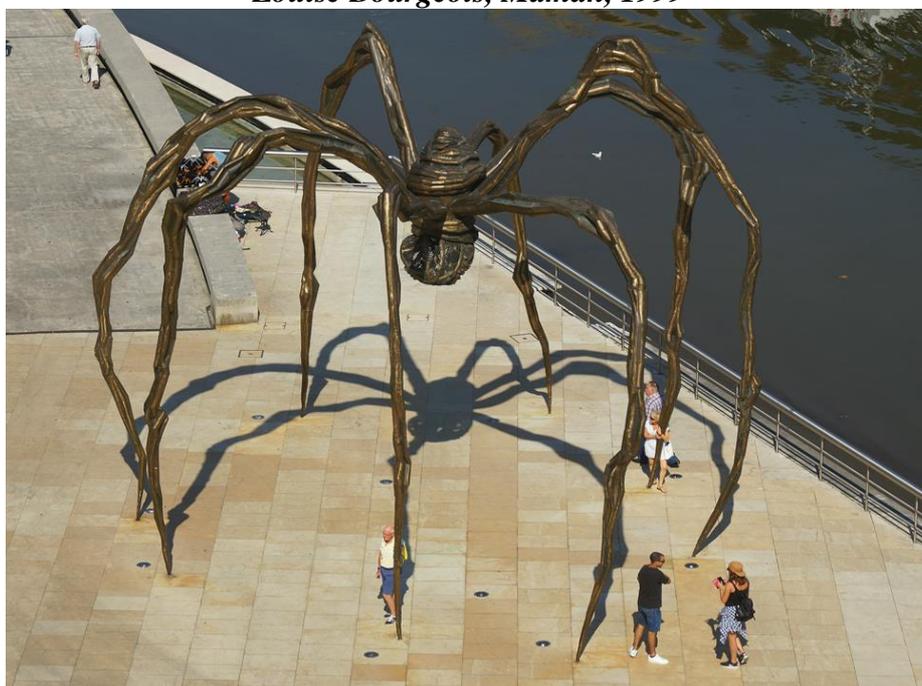
The crown, however, carries another meaning. In venerating the works of jazz musicians as being on top of their game, Basquiat’s work is also a racial comment. This is not only a simplistic conclusion based on his identity, but the fact that almost all of his works speak to

Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art

the racial dehumanization, violence, and exploitation of the Black community. Works like *Irony of a Negro Policeman*, 1981, and *Obnoxious Liberals*, 1982, present themselves as social commentaries first, artworks later. Therefore, the presence of Black jazz musicians points to a racialized cultural struggle of staying on the top - and keeping the crown. To that end, the phrase written at the bottom left corner, 'MOST YOUNG ['young' struck out] KINGS GET THIER (sic) HEAD CUT OFF' is seen as a fact of life; that after attaining a certain position, your presence is a site of hostility for those not there.

Yet this only scratches one surface. If we were to contextualise the absence of his mother (who spent most of her life separated from the family and interred in mental institutions) (Hooks, 1993), what we have is an abundant presence of a father and multiple male mentor figures. If the oedipal complex is about a mother-son relation, Basquiat's life became a literal anti-oedipal set up, where the feminine presence largely went repressed and unattended to. Seen in this manner, the overshadowing paternal presence would have naturally led to the erasure of any female configurations - which are absent in his artworks. This conflict in sexuality would then allow us to look at the racial power struggle through a sexual lens, of tying Black masculinity with White masculinity. Attaining the crown would not only be a political and cultural victory, but one intrinsically phallogocentric. The final manifestation of such an idea is visible in the phrase on the bottom left corner, which now is a reaction to a fear of castration.

Louise Bourgeois, Maman, 1999



Bourgeois, L. (1999), *Maman* [Sculpture]. Wikimedia Commons.

Louise Bourgeois understood art to be a parallel “form of psychoanalysis” (Turner, 2018), offering privileged and unique access to the unconscious, as well as a form of psychological release. Bourgeois herself was in analysis for more than thirty years, entering therapy under the care of Dr. Leonard Cammer and Dr. Henry Lowenfeld. After her death in 2010, several boxes of her psychoanalytic writings were found by her assistant, shedding more light onto her state of mind and the creation of her art (Turner, 2018). I posit here that *Maman*, a large-scale installation dedicated to her mother with a seemingly straightforward meaning, can be

viewed from a perspective through which we can find Bourgeois herself as part of the sculpture.

French for ‘mother,’ the sculpture is of a spider, carrying a sac of eggs. The structure is made of stainless steel, marble, and bronze, and is one of her most enduring and iconic motifs. As she remarks, My mother was my best friend. She was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat, and useful as a Spider... With the spider, I try to put across the power and the personality of a modest animal. Modest as it is, it is very definite and it is indestructible. It is not about the animal itself, but my relation to it. It establishes the fact that the spider is my mother, believe it or not... At some times of the day, the spider is at her best, raring to go and kind of aggressive. She relates to a whole house and she has tentacles that are quite real I connect her to my mother because the spider is a cornered animal, she finds security in the corner (Bourgeois et al., 1998).

We can further probe the meanings behind *Maman* by examining Bourgeois’ childhood. When she was twenty-one, she lost her mother to an unknown illness, following which, in her own grief she attempted suicide, being rescued later by her father (Weaver, 2020). It is her relation to her father that best satiates our Freudian inquisition. Her father’s philandering with Bourgeois’ live-in governess for ten years became a source of heightened trauma that led to the chaotic and confessional theme witnessed in her work (Turner, 2018). This familial dysfunctionality had been commented upon by the artist on several occasions. In an autobiographical text titled ‘Child Abuse,’ she wrote “I am a pawn. Sadie [her governess] is supposed to be there as my teacher and actually you, mother, are using me to keep track of your husband. This is child abuse” (Weaver, 2020). The nightmarish tableau *The Destruction of the Father* was the result of her troubled household, where her childhood fantasy of seeing her father dismembered and cannibalised came to fruition, in a setting of phallic arrangements.

The precarious positioning and balancing of *Maman*’s legs therefore is not only an allusion to her mother’s tenuous health but also Bourgeois’ own presence in her household. Given the rich textual source we now have that gives an insight into the troubled meanderings of the artist (in one writing she lists out her failures and a suicidal list of “seven easy ways to end it all”) (Turner, 2018), *Maman* is not protecting her children, but Bourgeois herself; the cocoon is a shelter that she can recede into. This is not new; *The Quartered One*, *Cells*, and *Maisons Fragiles* are a few of her works that carry the visual language of protection and home. Losing that shelter meant losing her emotional sanity, as seen in *Arch of Hysteria* (On a piece of pink paper she scratched the slogan “Art is a guarantee of sanity” (Turner, 2018)).

There is one final strand to examine. Bourgeois’ mother was part of the family workshop that worked in restoring tapestries, so she was no stranger to weaving, and given the arachnid property of working with silk threads, the connection is not far-fetched. Yet what does call for speculation is the extreme ends to which Freud explained the growth of the weaving profession by women, to penis envy (as the threads represented the hair covering genitalia) (Freud, 1953–1974). Can we associate such an assessment to Bourgeois, given that her relationship with her father drastically improved when she left the household (her father’s death left her in a devastated state of depression) (Turner, 2018)?

Franz West, Liege (Chaise), 1989



West, F. (1989) *Liege (Chaise)* [Sculptural furniture]. David Zwirner.

At the core of Franz West's art is an element of comical absurdity, one that invites banter and absurd confrontations. The 1970s sculptural work *Passstücke* - 'Fitting pieces' or *Adaptives* - began as pieces intended to be worn over the face, around the waist, or neck. The idea behind *Adaptives* was that they would *adapt* to each individual's handling. As curator Veit Loers mentions, West's focus from the outset "was not on autonomous artistic products, but rather on gentle interventions, surreal *mises-en-scene* within Austria's then still authoritarian cultural landscape where art was assigned a specific role, kept in check wherever possible" (Nedo, n.d.). *Adaptives*, therefore, subverted the traditional aesthetic idea of how we should approach sculptural works. A simplistic psychoanalytical viewing would take note of the sexual element *Adaptives* introduce in placing the body in direct relation to the work and utilising it as an outlet to channel the subjective mix of ids that can arise with every interaction. In fact, a viewer would not be far in imagining that in isolation, the *Adaptives* felt as if something out of a Rorschach test.

The element of interaction was furthered with a series of 'double seats,' of which *Liege* was a part of. Styled like a reclining diwan except made to be used by two people, West would place newspapers over this sort of furniture for people to find fodder for conversation (*Franz West Furniture*, n.d.). West often staged himself reclining or presenting himself as a daydreaming artist, embodying the idea of contemplation central to his works (Nedo, n.d.). Works like *Liege* allowed the viewer to experience the artwork in a more direct sense, invoking West's statement "The perception of art takes place through the pressure points that develop when you lie on it" (Nedo, n.d.). In injecting the body as part of the 'furniture,' we are made to subvert the idea of everyday interaction as a prospective art. In fact, reading into the image will allow the viewer to connect the *Liege* with the kind of diwans used by Freud and other therapists in their interaction with their patients. *Liege* therefore not only brings to the fore suppressed desires, but also becomes a site of intimate relational output - whether father/daughter, mother/son, or doctor/patient. The sofa further recalls the artist's lived experience: of the communal spaces of his native Vienna where conversations that

Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art

shaped his artistic practice took place and sitting in the waiting room at his mother's clinic and looking at the various art reproductions put on the walls (Tate, n.d.).

Claude Cahun, Self portrait (in cupboard), 1932



Cahun, C. (1932) *Self portrait (in cupboard)* [Photograph]. Jersey Heritage Collections.

A poet, essayist, critic, actor, political activist, and a prominent self-photographer, Claude Cahun's oeuvre was marked by a lifelong struggle (or obsession) to deal with her identity and sexuality and creating an almost androgynous space of expression. Her self-portraits were an early reflection of Judith Butler's theory about gender identity - as a performative and fluid construct than a biological condition (Butler, 2021). This is visible in her work *I am in training, don't kiss me*, where she is portraying herself in a feminized strongman's identity, and thereby conflating masculine and feminine stereotypes. The flat costume shirt carries pseudo-nipples, and the handlebar moustache is displaced as two curls of hair. Her coy gaze is inviting as well as contemptuous, ridiculing the fetishist gaze of seeing the feminine persona. Unlike Duchamp's alter ego Rose Selavy, Cahun's performance went beyond drag, and in her efforts, created a liminality for a third sex.

A simplistic reading of *Self portrait (in cupboard)* renders the idea of Cahun commenting on assigned roles. In dressing up as a pigtailed little girl catching a nap in an open cupboard, her calm expression carries a nod to the innocence of childhood that is lost as we grow up. In fact, one can also analyse the image as a social comment on the objectification of women, her dolled up appearance pandering to the male gaze, and being placed quite literally where objects are - in a cupboard.

Cahun's works have further been described as 'uncanny.' For Freud, the uncanny was most disconcertedly produced by what he called the 'double,' i.e., a visual that is interchangeable to the self, since it "harks back to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply

Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art

from the external world and from other people” (Freud, 2021). How does the double feature in Cahun’s works? There is a strange absence of her mother from her life, perhaps because when Cahun was four years old her mother suffered a nervous breakdown and was institutionalised indefinitely (Knafo, 2001). Her photomontage *Self Pride* is profusely oedipal in its content, and her relation to her father was largely idealised. Cahun effectively dismissed her mother and embarked on self-portraiture that allowed her to ‘replace’ her mother and proclaim herself for being responsible for her birth. Paradoxically, by virtue of obsessing over her separation from a maternal identity, it brought her closer to a liminal space where her double undoubtedly went back to her mother. The pigtailed girl is Cahun, but Cahun when she truly was a child; the space in the cupboard is a womb-like shelter, and the open doors are her mother’s arms. As Danielle Knafo (2001) writes, “One purpose of Cahun’s art, I suggest, was to come to terms with her early maternal loss. Fusing her image with that of her mother allowed her to restore the broken tie she had with her mother as well as create a new image of woman in art. Creation for Cahun was in essence a re-creation.”

Mona Hatoum, Corps Etranger, 1994



Hatoum, M. (1994) *Corps Etranger* [Video Installation]. Mike Smith Studio.

An element of dislocation and ruptured, lost identity forms the central tenet of Mona Hatoum’s praxis. Through her innovative multimedia and installation work, Hatoum explores the global conflicts and her own fractured identity of being a Palestinian born in Lebanon. It is when Hatoum injects the space of the body that her work takes an altogether powerful turn. One of her earliest works, *Measures of Distance*, is a fifteen-minute-long video which consists of intimate photographs of her mother showering. The video is overlaid with a narration of letters that Hatoum, in London, and her mother, in Beirut, wrote to each other during the civil war. What remains most poignant here is that through this familial interaction, the civil war is not directly depicted, and one almost goes away with an optimistic understanding of familial bonding. Yet it is precisely the fact that this bond is disjointed, separated over hundreds of kilometers that focuses the cost of conflict over ordinary lives and families.

Measures of Distance allows the viewer to step into an intimate liminal space, that, through a psychoanalytical lens, sheds light on the ego and on what we are being allowed to witness (the privacy of the shower opening up to naked viewership). This element takes an almost horrifying and to some extent, disgusting turn with Hatoum’s video installation *Corps*

Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art

Etranger. A tall cylindrical structure with a single gateway permits the viewer to come inside and see a TV screen on the floor that displays a film, exploring the artist's body. Through an endoscopic probe the viewer is allowed to explore Hatoum's body and see her digestive system. A sound bite of her heartbeat constantly plays in the background of the experience. There is an element of what is almost clinical; that we are witnessing an anatomy lesson, where this is not an intrusion so much as it is an instruction of a material reality of what our bodies are like. However, a psychoanalytical pursuit would introduce us to Hatoum's usage of abjection in the way Julia Kristeva (1982) explains, that the viewer's subjective horror is at the sight of breakdown of Hatoum's (and by extension, its own) corporeal reality, of a breakdown between the Self and the Other. In viewing Hatoum's innards in a claustrophobic space that the cylinder is, we are essentially invading a private, sexual space that is otherwise not for access. The id can be witnessed as exploring a desire of invasion, aggression, surveillance, voyeurism, while the ego questions what we should not be viewing, what essentially is our own body. Erogenous sites or intimacy and privacy are not only made public, but also unfamiliar through the element of strangeness and uncanny.

Gregory Crewdson, Untitled (Ophelia), from Twilight, 2001



Crewdson, G. (2001) *Untitled (Ophelia)* [Photograph]. Arthur Digital Museum.

What can best be described as eerie and unnerving, Gregory Crewdson's fine art photography is a performance of inexplicably disturbing visuals that are packaged and present in a seemingly nonchalant manner to the viewer. His work comprises elaborately staged, large-scale photographs that explore the psychological underside of the American vernacular. His realist aesthetic sensibility found its inspiration in the works of Edward Hopper, Ray Bradbury, *The Twilight Zone*, Stephen Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, David Lynch, and their likes. As Crewdson remarks

I have always been fascinated by the poetic condition of twilight. By its transformative quality. Its power of turning the ordinary into something magical and otherworldly. My wish is for the narrative in the pictures to work within that

Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art

circumstance. It is that sense of in-between-ness that interests me (*Photographs by Gregory Crewdson - Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.*).

Crewdson's 'frozen moments' can perhaps be traced back to his childhood, when he witnessed his father practice his psychoanalytic profession in the basement of their house. The photographer confesses that at times he would lie down to hear what his father and his patients were talking about and try to create pictures in his mind (Larocca, 2008). Anticlimactically, however, he could not hear anything, yet the air psychoanalysis seems to have certainly caught up to him, leading to his *Twilight* project years later. *Untitled (Ophelia)*.

Untitled (Ophelia) is the scene of a partially submerged suburban household's living room. In the forefront lies a woman, with an almost death-like aura and pale skin, gazing in the distance away from the viewer. Crewdson seems to have reworked the well known myth of Ophelia (and in a way replicating John Everett Millais' painting *Ophelia*), calmly floating on the mirror-like surface of the water. We are presented with states of death and desire simultaneously. While pale skin and a disinterested gaze is no certainty about being dead, the image invokes Susan Sontag's (2001) suggestion that "to photograph someone is a sublimated murder" by turning subjects into "objects that can be symbolically possessed." The intimacy shown in the woman's dressing is at once pandering to a voyeuristic gaze and at the same time limiting it: if initially the viewer's excitement is heightened at the sight of a flimsy nightgown, the eroticism is diminished by the fact that the water only reveals her undergarments. It is the trope of the femme fatale, and the unusual perkiness of the breasts, along with the lack of stockings are fetishist elements at play. In that sense, death and desire become part of the feminine, invoking what the Pre Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote for his work *Lady Lilith* from Goethe's Faust, "Beware... for she excels all women in the magic of her locks, and when she twines them round a young man's neck, she will not ever set him free again" (*Lady Lilith, n.d.*).

This tantalisation plays very well in creating a difficult relation between the desires of the id and the reality principle of the ego. In fact, what the supposedly-dead/alive woman does best is draw our attention to the "punctum" of the photograph; that for Barthes (2010) meant an unexpected detail which affects us on a personal level. The punctum here not only relates to our desires (manifesting in the woman), but also the outwardly calm and passivity this visual carries; of a certain social alienation from the outside world which is as dark as it is reminiscent of a twilight zone in which David Lynch and Ted Bundy lurk.

Concluding remarks

Self-portraits have always carried a certain sense of abstraction. This is most apparent with the near hundred self-portraits made by Rembrandt (and his school of artists). While Kenneth Clark (1978) remarked that Rembrandt is "with the possible exception of Van Gogh, the only artist who has made the self-portrait a major means of artistic self-expression, and he is absolutely the one who has turned self-portraiture into an autobiography," modern scholarship has had its difficulties in postulating what inspired the artist to make so many self-portraits. Surely it could not have been mere vanity (could it?); maybe they were created to satisfy a market which saw collectors enthusiastically buying self-portraits of prominent artists (de Wetering & Retèl, 2009). Some historians assert that the self-portraits were created to represent an introspective process of growth that allowed the artist to record moments of study to use later in his works (Manuth & Winkel, 2019).

In the eight works here, it is now clear that what goes into an artwork can have deeper meanings - meanings that artists themselves might not consciously be aware of. The psychoanalytic approach, therefore, is not one to be derided (in fact, most approaches to art carry such methods. Erwin Panofsky's iconographic approach is triple layered, the third of which probes meanings beyond what is apparent). The unconscious is not only affected by the socio-political considerations, but familial contexts that make for a rich study of an artist and its praxis. In being mindful about the limits of psychoanalysis, we can make great headwinds into understanding the artistic process of creation, the process of shaping the self, and ultimately incorporate what Freud called 'ideational mimetics' - the exchange of energies between the viewer and the work of art, invoking empathy, and replacing motor exchanges with intellectual stimulation that would be the foundation to the development of a higher level of civilisation (Spector, 1973).

REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (2010). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1st ed.). HILL & WANG.
- Bourgeois, L., Gorovoy, J., & Asbaghi, P. T. (1998). *Louise Bourgeois: Blue Days and Pink Days* (1st ed.). Fondazione Prada.
- Butler, J. (2021). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Clark, K. (1978). *An Introduction to Rembrandt* (1st ed.). HarperCollins Publishers.
- de Wetering, V. E., & Retèl, P. (2009). *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work* (First Edition, Revised ed.). University of California Press.
- Dempsey, A. (2002). *Art in the Modern Era: A Guide to Styles, Schools, Movements* (1st ed.). Harry N. Abrams.
- Fliedl, G. (1998). *Gustav Klimt (The World in Female Form)* (1st Paperback Edition). Borders Press.
- Flythe, B. R. (2016). Dreams and Sexuality: A Psychoanalytical Reading of Klimt's Beethoven Frieze. *Elements*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.6017/eurj.v12i2.9377>
- Franz West Furniture. (n.d.). David Zwirner. Retrieved July 7, 2021, from https://www.davidzwirner.com/viewing-room/2019/franz-west-furniture?authkey=20191102&utm_source=David%20Zwirner%20Newsletter&utm_medium=DZS&utm_term=franz%20west%20furniture&utm_content=110419-sales&utm_campaign=FWDZON2019
- Freud, S. (1916). *Leonardo da Vinci. A Psychosexual Study Of An Infantile Reminiscence*. Moffat, Yard & Company.
- Freud, S. (1923). *Das Ich und das Es*. Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag.
- Freud, S. (1953–1974). Femenity. In J. Strachey & A. Freud (Eds.), *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (p. 132). Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1971). *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923–1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Workss* [vol. Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (2021). *Uncanny (Penguin Modern Classics)*. Penguin Classic.
- Freud, S., & Strachey, J. (2010). *The Interpretation of Dreams: The Complete and Definitive Text* (1st ed.). Basic Books.
- Gedo, J. E. (1989). *Portraits of the Artist: Psychoanalysis of Creativity and its Vicissitudes* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Hooks, B. (1993, June 1). *FROM THE ARCHIVES: ALTARS OF SACRIFICE, REMEMBERING BASQUIAT*. Art News. <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/from-the-archives-altars-of-sacrifice-re-membering-basquiart-63242/>

Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art

- Knafo, D. (2001). Claude Cahun: The Third Sex. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 2(1), 29–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15240650209349169>
- Kristeva, J., & Roudiez, L. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (European Perspectives Series)* (Reprint ed.). Columbia University Press.
- Lady Lilith*. (n.d.). The Met Museum. Retrieved July 8, 2021, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/337500>
- Larocca, A. (2008, March 27). *Loneliness and Multitudes*. New York Magazine. <https://nymag.com/arts/all/process/45584/>
- Manuth, V., & Winkel, M. D. (2019). *Rembrandt. The Self-Portraits*. TASCHEN.
- McGuigan, C. (1985, February 10). *NEW ART, NEW MONEY*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/10/magazine/new-art-new-money.html>
- MoMA / René Magritte. *The Lovers. Le Perreux-sur-Marne, 1928*. (n.d.). MoMA. Retrieved July 7, 2021, from https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/rene-magritte-the-lovers-le-perreux-sur-marne-1928/
- Nedo, K. (n.d.). *Franz West: Worldly Pleasures – Etc*. Tate. Retrieved July 7, 2021, from <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-45-spring-2019/franz-west-worldly-pleasures-kito-nedo>
- Nietzsche, F., Tanner, M., & Whiteside, S. (1994). *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music (Penguin Classics)*. Penguin Classics.
- Photographs by Gregory Crewdson - Victoria and Albert Museum*. (n.d.). Victoria & Albert Museum. Retrieved July 8, 2021, from <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/p/gregory-crewson/>
- Saggese, J. M. (2014). *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art* (First ed.). University of California Press.
- Schorske, C. E. (1980). *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (1st Vintage Book ed). Vintage.
- Sontag, S. (2001). *On Photography* (1st ed.). Picador.
- Spector, J. J. (1973). *The Aesthetics of Freud: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Art* (1st ed.). Praeger.
- Tate. (n.d.). 'Viennoiserie', *Franz West, 1998*. Retrieved July 7, 2021, from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/west-viennoiserie-t07558>
- Turner, C. (2018, February 22). *Analysing Louise Bourgeois: art, therapy and Freud*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/apr/06/louise-bourgeois-freud>
- Weaver, B. (2020, April 15). *THE LONDON LIST — Destruction of the Father*. THE LONDON LIST. <https://www.thelondonlist.com/culture/louise-bourgeois>

Acknowledgement

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Tripathi S. (2021). Modern and Postmodern Expressions of the Self: Freudian Psychoanalysis of Art. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 9(3), 1362-1376. DIP:18.01.127.20210903, DOI:10.25215/0903.127