An Analysis of Psychoanalytic Interpretation in Modern Art

By Martin DeVita
Historically, scholars and artists attempting to bridge the gap between psychology and art have looked towards psychoanalysis as a way of both interpreting and generating modern art. While some feel that the criticism and interpretation of pre-Freudian modern art based on psychoanalytic theory may pose a threat to the academic integrity of said evaluations, modern art that makes use of imagery inspired by psychoanalysis isn’t necessarily invalidated by the scientific shortcomings of psychoanalytic theory. Since its development, psychoanalysis has been integrated into several artistic theories and interpretations. Psychoanalysis represented a modern way of looking at human behavior during a time when various art movements were celebrating modernity. In the current time, psychoanalysis has lost favor in the realm of psychology. Intense debates still occur between those who have been trained in psychoanalysis and those who feel psychology should be a science rooted in biological and empirical knowledge. In order for readers to place artistic interpretation within an academic context, the matter of Freudian-psychoanalysis’ scientific validity must be discussed. The topic of how psychoanalysts interpret various works of art as well as how artists of the 20th century interpret psychoanalytic theory and use it in their work is worthy of discussion. While it is a multi-faceted subject, the academic implications of these practices shall be kept in mind.

In order to understand why critics, historians and artists make use of psychoanalytic theory, one must understand what ideas the theory encompasses. The contribution and importance of an individual’s unconscious mental processes in the motivation of human behavior is a central tenet of psychoanalysis. Freud argued that the mind operates on two levels. On one hand, he describes the conscious level, in which people are aware of what they think, feel and do. On the other hand, there is the unconscious level, where an individual does not have conscious
access to the mind’s processes. As Freud explained, most human behavior is driven by unconscious instincts. One of Freud’s main notions was that unconscious mental processes are often an important causal element in what we feel, think and how we act (Flanagan 66). This notion comes from the observation that mental states have semantic content or intentionality. According to Freud, other natural sciences lacked the language to describe this specific quality (Flanagan 65). He felt that psychoanalysis was the best method for studying this content. More specifically, he tried to look for semantic meaning in dreams, parapraxes, free associations and hypnosis (Flanagan 67). Within the unconscious realm, Freud divided the personality into three categories. The first category, or the id, was responsible for all mentality associated with pleasure. The second category, the ego, is more realistic and works to restrain the id. The third category, the superego, is responsible for a heightened degree of social consciousness. Sexual motivation and aggressive motivation were termed libido and thanatos respectively. Within Freud’s overarching theory of unconsciousness were his sub-theories of psychosexual development. One of the most prominent, and controversial, aspects of this sub-theory was the Oedipus complex. According to Freud, the Oedipus complex derived from a boy’s lust for his mother, which put him at odds with his father. The boy then suffers castration anxiety; a fear of getting their penis cut off by their father in retaliation of their son’s lust. Only when the child denounces his sexual desire for his mother can the Oedipus complex be resolved. In classical psychoanalysis, this all happened at the unconscious level of personality described earlier. Freud argued that many psychological problems and issues derived from unresolved Oedipus complexes (Carroll, 32-33).

When looking for a way of interpreting modern art, many critics and historians have turned to psychology as a way of explaining human artistic behaviors. For some reason, theories
that focus on psychoanalysis dominate the psychological interpretation of art. There are two aspects to the interpretation of modern art using psychoanalysis. In the first aspect, critics attempt to actually psychoanalyze pieces of art in order to understand what the artist was actually doing at an unconscious psychological level. An example of this would be Holly Paradis’ examination of Edouard Manet’s painting *Le Suicide* (Figure 1). In her article entitled, ““Le Suicide:” Edouard Manet’s Modern Crucifixion” the author argues that Manet’s painting doesn’t just depict an event, but instead acts as an emotionally charged self-portrait that illustrates the artist’s narcissistic desire to be crucified. In the article, the author makes several connections between events that she considers evidence for “Le Suicide” being a self-portrait. She begins by citing an earlier work of art historian Beth Archer Brombert (Paradis 7, 8). Brombert is cited as arguing that an earlier work by Manet, called “Jesus Mocked by Soldiers” (Figure 2) could be interpreted as a self-portrait where the artist identifies with the suffering Jesus Christ. In her argument, Brombert says that there is a similarity between Christ’s beard and that of Manet’s own (Paradis 7, 8). Furthermore, she argues that the reed being given to Christ could represent a paintbrush. Could Manet’s “Jesus Mocked by Soldiers” be a type of self-portrait that represents the artist’s suffering? There is hardly enough evidence to say conclusively. However, one could entertain this notion with a reasonable amount of belief based on Brombert’s evidence. Paradis does just this. She establishes that Manet may have been the type to depict himself as a suffering Christ. To support this argument she quotes Manet as describing the symbolic power that images of suffering often convey (Paradis 7). Using these lines of evidence to support the author’s thesis that “Le Suicide” is a self-portrait of Manet is problematic however. For one, the character in “Le Suicide” is not represented in the same way as the suffering Jesus. He also bears no resemblance to a bearded Manet or to Jesus Christ. While these facts may weaken
Paradis’ argument that the figure in “Le Suicide” is a Christ-like representation of Manet, it is still reasonable to consider that the painting represented the suffering that Manet was going through. She goes on to describe the suffering that Manet was enduring at the time when he started painting “Le Suicide.” Manet had been receiving harsh criticism from the Salons for his recent work and had also contracted syphilis in the 1870’s (Farwell 3). He had also been part of a dramatic love triangle between his father, a live-in piano teacher and himself. Paradis describes a situation in which his father impregnates the teacher and Manet is cuckolded into marrying the teacher and adopting his father’s son (7). This is precisely where Paradis begins to interject her Freudian interpretation. According to her, this situation is indicative of an unsolved Oedipal complex in which Manet still suffers castration anxiety deriving from the tension between him and his father (Paradis 7-9). However, her attribution of a psychoanalytical complex is misinformed. In Freudian psychology, an Oedipal complex arises from a boy’s sexual desire for his mother. Seeing a father as his competition, he unconsciously encounters tension from castration anxiety. However, Manet’s mother isn’t in the scenario at all. There could have most certainly been tension between father and son given the circumstances of their relationship with the piano teacher. Nonetheless, there is no reason to implicate an Oedipal complex. Given that there is little to no scientific evidence to support this notion, as well as its incompatibility with the author’s given scenario, there is really no reason to attribute Manet’s supposed suffering to a psychoanalytical diagnosis. Paradis goes on to argue that on top of this unresolved Oedipal complex, Manet’s painting is indicative of a narcissistic tendency to want to control all the aspects of his suffering. The author says, “Driven by narcissistic grandiosity—fantasies of fame and public accolades—Manet’s identity is bound to an agonizing, masochistic cycle of narcissistic joy and injury that mirrors the state of purgatory that his victim inhabits”
Her description of Manet as a masochistic narcissist is hardly vindicated by the evidence that she cites. She says that, “Manet’s staging of death in *Le Suicide* endows the artist with the god-like power to witness and control his own hour of death” (Paradis 9). This notion relies on the assumption that the figure in the painting is actually Manet, something she has yet to conclusively establish. The author’s idea that “Le Suicide” could be a depiction of Manet’s suffering isn’t completely unwarranted. It was painted during a time where the artist was suffering agonizing debilitation as well as artistic criticism. Nevertheless, the use of psychoanalytic theory doesn’t provide much support for this idea. In fact, psychoanalytic theory weakens the author’s case by positing highly speculative and incompatible notions based on unsupported lines of Freudian belief.

In the second aspect of psychoanalytic interpretation, artwork made to specifically address ideas in psychoanalytic theory is explained in terms of how its imagery is representative of ideas in Freudian-psychology. For instance, the surrealist Max Ernst used techniques associated with psychoanalytic ideas and would therefore need to be discussed in the context of the methods in which he was attempting to utilize. Ernst utilized several techniques associated with automatism. These techniques were used to bring unconscious ideas into fruition. Regardless of the validity of this notion, the use of automatism is certainly a creative way of generating imagery. Ernst used it in several of his artworks. He invented a technique in which he hung paint buckets from a rope and let the drips create compositions (Gee iv.). Furthermore, he was known to have used a technique advocated by one of his Renaissance idols, Leonardo Da Vinci. The technique entailed searching stains for imagery as a means for starting a work of art (Gee 3). It is evident that Ernst used psychoanalytic theory to help understand his artistic motivation. He concluded that most of the imagery he used derived from a few particular
childhood events (Gee 3). Ernst was deeply fascinated with birds and included them in his work. Loplop, what he referred to as his alter ego in paintings was portrayed as a bird in his several of his works including, “The Robing of the Bride” (Figure 3). He hinted that perhaps Loplop was an extension of himself that he derived from a previous confusion between birds and humans (Gee 3). Ernst’s sister was born shortly after his own pet bird passed away. Ernst’s description of events like these gave us clues as to how he tried to find meaning in what he created. In, “The Robing of the Bride” Ernst paints figures reminiscent of those depicted in Renaissance artworks morphed with several features of birds. The painting is loaded with symbolic imagery that was perhaps unique to Ernst’s own interpretation. Nevertheless, there are clear allusions to sexuality, birds and femininity in the artwork. While the first aspect of psychoanalytic interpretation discussed earlier is problematic, the second aspect is almost necessary in order to understand why artists used particular imagery.

Undoubtedly, Freudian psychoanalysis can be described as creative and wildly imaginative. This particular characteristic may appeal to artists and historians who have spent a great amount of time dealing specifically with a creative subject. Furthermore, Freud needed some way of interpreting dreams, parapraxes, free association and hypnosis. Usually, Freud translated described imagery into symbols with specific semantic content. One could speculate that this is why Freudian psychology is a popular choice when interpreting and generating art. What better way is there to decipher art that is by its very nature laden with symbolic imagery? However, one must be wary of attributing all imagery to psychoanalytic symbology. The origin of these symbols and the validity of their related semantic content are widely disputed. There is little empirical evidence to support the notion that dreams other unconscious occurrences can be described in terms of Freudian symbols with semantic content. Nevertheless, if artists
consciously make use of psychoanalytical symbols in their art, then these symbols have been transformed from a way of interpreting pre-made imagery to a conscious effort to represent an idea via symbolism. This doesn’t invalidate the meaning of these symbols because they are chosen specifically to represent ideas. The issue of validity only comes up when one uses these symbols to interpret imagery that wasn’t originally created to represent ideas in psychoanalysis. In fact, the wonderful illustration of Freud’s fantastic concepts is what makes movements like surrealism so interesting. Imagine how the vapid illustration of neurons and action potential would look in comparison to the theatrical imagery associated with Oedipal conflicts! It is for this reason that one should not look upon psychoanalysis’ influence on modern art with total contempt but with admiration for its creative qualities.

Modern scholars view Freudian psychoanalysis in a variety of ways. Historically, there have been several concerns regarding the scientific validity of psychoanalysis (Holland 2). On one hand, scholars argue that there’s very little scientific data to provide enough support for specific psychoanalytic sub-hypotheses like the Oedipus complex (Flanagan 81). On the other hand, several hypotheses haven’t been tested and therefore there is a lack of empirical evidence that could potentially falsify these hypotheses (Flanagan 81). In his book, The Science of the Mind Owen Flanagan describes two major precepts of scientific thinking. According to him, in order for a hypothesis to be scientific it must satisfy a falsifiability condition and a corroboration condition (75). Under the falsifiability condition, a scientist must be able to develop alternative hypotheses that may potentially falsify his or her own hypothesis. This does not mean that it has to falsify the hypothesis, just that there must be a way to eliminate alternatives. The corroboration condition simply states that scientists must be able to replicate the results of their studies. As a broad notion, Freud’s overall theory of unconsciousness has been supported by
empirical evidence in neuroscience (Holland 3). It has become increasingly evident that unconscious drives do play a pivotal role in human behavior (Flanagan 81). Norman Holland cites this as being a supportive fact in favor of psychoanalysis (Holland 3). Nonetheless, it is important to distinguish the types of unconsciousness described by neurology and psychoanalysis. Neurological unconsciousness describes the neural activity occurring within particular structures of the brain. Freudian unconsciousness is the manifestation of energies and desires that have been suppressed because of the societal implications. Holland is right when he argues that neurology provides support for the idea that unconscious conditions influence behavior (2). Despite this, this is a different type of unconsciousness than that of Freud’s theory. There is little to no quantitative evidence supporting Freud’s ideas on the specific nature of the unconscious processes he describes (ex. dream hypothesis, psychosexual stages of development, etc.) (Flanagan 81). To study the science of the mind, he relies on psychoanalysis, which in turn relies on the Freudian interpretation of dreams, parapraxes, free associations and hypnosis. While most psychoanalysts would argue that the success of their methods in therapy is indicative of the scientific validity of psychoanalysis, they fail to provide evidence for a direct causal relationship between a patient’s success and the therapy. Also, a psychoanalyst’s argument that since each person trained in psychoanalysis can provide the same analysis for a patient, and that this is evidence for the scientific validation of psychoanalysis is also problematic. In this argument, reliability is confused for validity and is therefore indicative of no such justification (Flanagan 79). Nonetheless, as a science of psychology, psychoanalysis has yet to provide an extensive amount of empirical support for most of its sub theories. Holland argues that there are several studies that support the scientific bases of psychoanalysis (4). Yet, most of the research he cites is largely qualitative in character. The difficulty most Freudian psychologists have is
coming up with ways to test psychoanalytical hypotheses empirically. With this in mind, if
Freudian psychologists were able to come up with new ways of studying their hypotheses, the
scientific validity of the subject may be vindicated. As of yet though, this is a critical issue that
psychoanalysis must overcome. In all, psychoanalysis and its sub theories warrant further
scientific investigation.

There are alternative psychological approaches to the incorporation of psychology into
art theory. By using neuropsychology, one can begin to understand certain aspects of modern
expressionistic art using a science based on empirical knowledge. For instance, Bekker and
Bekker attempt to explain Vincent Van Gogh’s use of color in relationship to emotion by
describing a condition known as Synaesthesia. Synaesthetics (people with Synaesthesia)
experience certain sensory modalities as others (Bekker & Bekker 2). For instance, certain
Synaesthetics hear colors or taste sounds. There is evidence of this condition in neurology. It
has been shown that certain cognitive processes may elicit reactions in several parts of the brain
that can result in simultaneous stimulation of numerous sensory modalities (sensory cortices). It
could be hypothesized that Van Gogh had this particular trait and that it influenced his art, as
Bekker and Bekker have argued (7). More evidence would be needed to say conclusively
however. Studying art using scientific psychology may prove to be very difficult. Given the
immense diversity among artists across the world and the undeniable influence of society and
culture on artistic practices, finding a unified theory that accounts for all artistic behaviors may
be impossible. Nevertheless, if one should attempt to do so, they should utilize current empirical
research as a foundation for future research. After all, if scholars wish to create an accurate
depiction of artistic behavior using psychological notions, they should do so with psychological
ideas supported with empirical evidence. This isn’t to say that all interpretations of art need
some sort of quantitative evidence in order to substantiate or justify the artist’s actions. It simply means that if one is going to use a science to partially explain behaviors, they should use an updated body of evidence to support their notions.
Works Cited


Edouard Manet, *Le Suicide*, 1877-81 (figure 1)
Edouard Manet, *Jesus Mocked by Soldiers*, 1865 (figure 2)
Max Ernst, *The Robing of the Bride*, 1940 (figure 3)