**Freud**

In the last lecture I mentioned how Wagner shows us another way of transcending the suffering and misery brought on by knowledge of the will - one that goes beyond mere aesthetic *experience* of a work of art, namely through creativity, the creative act.

In an opera like Tristan und Isolde Wagner is able to channel all the longing struggling and tumult of the will into a a beautiful and moving and lofty artform.

And just as I said how in Darwinian terms consciousness is basically a survival mechanism we could say that culture society, ethics and so on is a basically just a further extension of that. What art is what culture is - is a particularly interesting or pleasurable way of channeling that underlying primordial desire.

This idea of channeling desire into higher forms is also important element in the theories of Sigmund Freud

In many respects Freud represents a break from Schop and Wagner - for one, thing Freud didn’t really hold art in very high regard - in numerous, numerous documented cases - his own writing - he expresses a very dim view of art he seemed to regard art as merely a vehicle for reckless subjective expression, he was interested in more scientific means of inquiry and in elevating his approach to psychological therapy - namely psychoanalysis to the level of a science in the modern sense of the word. So it is perhaps ironic that today we encounter Freud’s work much more frequently in the fields of literary theory and art history than in psychology departments although he is still somewhat influential in the background for instance as a source for ideas about experimental research - you know examining whether certain ideas of his that have gone out of fashion might actually have some empirical support - and that sort of thing. Freud considered himself to be a scientist and this is perhaps one reason why he is less influential today than if he had considered himself more a philosopher of art.

But whatever we may think about the scientific value of his ideas, for instance about hysteria or infant sexuality, his theory of the unconscious was revolutionary and is still considered an important contribution to modern psychology. And perhaps even more importantly for our purposes, his theory of dreams is an extremely valuable and suggestive way to think about the experience of art and creative activity.

unlike Schopenhauer and Wagner who seem to think that rationality is somehow inferior to feeling, emotion, and so on

Freud was interested first and foremost with rationality - how rational consciousness can be in dialogue with the unconscious in ways that can prove therapeutic.

And its important to remember that Freud was a trained physician - a medical specialist -because many of his theories develop directly out of specific case studies involving people that seem to have strange physical ailments - where there seems to be some problem with the way their symptoms are manifesting - symptoms that lack a strict mechanical or physical cause.

And so he develops the theory of the unconscious directly out of these medical cases — one of the things he encounters for instance is a patient whose name is recorded as Anna O - who has this strange problem where she can’t move her hand

The patient is able to partially move her hand, and because Freud is a trained physician and knows about the structure of the nerves in the hand, he knows that that movement is inconsistent with the actual structure of the hand - and yet this patient really believes herself to be paralysed. And so from this encounter he develops the theory of the unconscious - the theory that there must be some dialogue between unconscious mental states and symptoms that arise in the body. And again what this indicates is that the mind is actually part of the body - not part of some separate world of spirit, rather the mind emerges out of the body.

Now we’re gonna talk about dreams in this class and there are a lot of reasons for this — for one thing I think the structure of dreams as Freud explains it is very descriptive of the experience of art and is in fact very applicable to some of the projects we’ll do in the class. Which we can discuss in more length soon.

But dreams seem to be another way in which the dialogue between the unconscious and the conscious mind manifests for us.

But even when we’re awake - the dialogue between the unconscious and the conscious mind manifests for us quite often

You know - when you’re trying to be creative, making an art project , writing a piece of music or even just trying to think of a good topic for a term paper, you might sit down and think - I could do this or this or that - maybe you even start a few sketches or drafts - and then you have a flash of an idea (call it inspiration or whatever) and you throw away all your inchoate sketches - and start over — there’s something very interesting about creative thinking - it seems basically to be spontaneous - you know its very hard to consciously command yourself into a good idea — I mean you can choose to put yourself in a situation that might make it easier to have a creative idea, maybe you need to be in a cafe or for me - my best ideas come when I hold a pillow over my head. But it’s very hard to force yourself to have a creative Idea — and so its sort of like the idea IT chooses you - IT chooses when IT will come out.

And there’s something very similar in the way that dreams function - You know we see all these strange things in our dreams, but it’s not that we consciously choose to think about them - they seem to arise spontaneously. For instance I recently had a dream where I was in the room I normally teach this class in and its a very stuffy room so the door is usually open - well anyway in the dream a shadow came in through the doos and it looked like a human form, with a top hat and a cape - but then the shadow grew to an enormous form so that it took up the whole auditorium and the it shut off the lights and everything was black - and I woke up with a start - now I didn’t choose to think that.

And so it seems that dreams are a form of involuntary thinking - which is a very interesting phenomenon - and if you take the typical view of the conscious mind to be the default form of the thinking mind - its really very strange that involuntary thinking should arise - that it should even be possible. It seems like there is something in you - beyond the you - that chooses to think a certain thing - and this thing that thinks for you is outside the *conscious* act of thinking and deliberating. And of course this is not just simple automatic behavior - like the fact that we know how to drive without consciously thinking about it - rather the unconscious seems to be actively thinking of specific content in a dream. This is what freud calls the *manifest content* of a dream all the things that come to the fore in a dream that seem not to be chosen by our conscious minds.

So if manifest content, the things we experience in a dream - they’re involuntary and if they’re involuntary - then they are distinct from consciousness and conscious choice.

now one thing that comes out of Freuds work on dreams that I think is very useful for thinking about music - especially when we get into Musique concret is the way the mind seems to be operating in terms of free association

That is the way the mind associates images or sounds that Don't have any literal or explicit or logical relationship to each other - the craziest things happen in dreams - for instance I’m having a dream and there might be some person the dream and then at some point in the dream even though the identity of the person remains The same - I mean I know its the same person - and yet their physical characteristics change.

And so maybe I’m dreaming about a friend of mine - a percussionist named Bonnie - and then suddenly bonnie turns into some older guy who looks like Liam Neeson - now I know its still Bonnie and in fact I don’t even register that there’s anything strange about the fact that she’s now turned into Liam Neeson - I just accept that that is the reality of the situation. What Freud would say here is that there is an underlying connection not any causal connection but an underlying similarity between these two images - so maybe in this case it’s because I associate the word bonnie with Ireland and Liam Neeson is Irish or some thing. But also perhaps I associate percussion with violence - constantly hitting things - and Liam Neeson is in plenty of films where he hits people - and so there’s another connection I might be making. But of course, in dreams the actual connections are usually quite a bit more inscrutable than this

So for instance I had a dream where I was in a video game arcade or maybe it was a bowling alley or something - with a former TA of mine and I was talking to him I can't remember what I asked him - I asked him if he wanted to go somewhere or something like that - but his response was “no man I'm too stewed and toned” and then suddenly, he was still the same person but he had a completely different appearance, he looked like someone completely different

then his face turned all purple, I looked out the window and the sky turned to a dark purple - then I looked back at my TA and he sucked the air out of my lungs. And I woke up. Now what about my former TA am I subconsciously connecting with a purple face - of course the fact that a purple face and have the air sucked out of you seem to be in a causal connection - so what why am I associating my former TA with the inability to breathe?

The idea that Freud is working with here is that in the unconscious mind, in dreams, there are a variety of different ways that objects or images or sounds can be connected that are not in logical or causal relationships with each other.

maybe its a linguistic similarity - maybe its a color, the shapes of the things in question, or some other formal feature of the things that connect them.

One of the interesting things about how film works - how musique concrete works (that is music made out of recorded sounds, sound effects) - one of the interesting ways about how these work is that they operate in very much the same way as the free association of dreams.

So if you go back and watch the video on Eisensteins 5 methods of montage - you’ll see the shower scene from psycho - and in addition to how the montage or cutting makes us think we see the knife going into the body of Janet Leigh - even though its never actually shown - much in the same way that eisensteins machine gun works - in addition to this you have the famous match cut between the drain and the eye of the murder victim. and it just seems to make sense — of course there’s no causal relation between a drain and the eye of a dead woman - but the formal similarity - the roundness the black color in the middle of the shape - of course the darkness - the blackness takes up a larger part of the drain than the eye — and there’s a greater sense of depth in the drain - and so when it cuts between the drain and the eye we see that depth into the eye of the dead woman and so these images are not just related on a formal level but conceptually as well — also in the relation of depth and death - there’s also a linguistic connection here - the word depth sounds like death - and there’s also a cultural association for instance the idea of things going down the drain - these are all combined through free association - not that there’s any literal connection of cause and effect - but that doesn’t mean the connection isn’t real - we can’t help but make the connection. Sort of like how that image of the sun / smiley face we know there’s not really a smiley face there and yet we can’t help but see it - so in a sense there really is a smiley face in the sky. [SLIDE 2]

I think in a piece of musique concrete its even stronger than that because you can take to sounds - blah blah about texture - sonic quality -revealing the cause of the sounds - birds pianos satellites - church bells

And of course from these formal connections we could make certain inferences or at least plausible assertions about the significance we read into them when we hear them combined in this way

Birds Flight Mastery over nature

And this seems to be the way that free association works in dreams

now most stories films and so on do have literal meaning but they also function on this subterranean or unconscious level of free association

[SLIDE 3]

Ok, let’s take a look at Repression

Now one thing about free association according to Freud is that it acts as a sort of defense mechanism to deal with desires that we don’t want to admit to ourselves, or traumatic experiences that are too painful for the conscious mind to deal with.

We’ve already talked about sublimation though not by that name - sublimation just refers to the things people do transform their unacceptable desires into socially useful activities - so in the case of Wagner this involved channeling the inner turmoil of the will into epic opera cycles and that sort of thing.

Another way to think of this is in the character of the dentist in Little Shop of horrors who channels his desire to cut up bodies into the profession of dentistry - although in this case sublimation is not totally successful because he beats up on his girlfriend.

According to Freud neroses like OCD basically function in the same way - there is some underlying trauma that the subject can’t or doesn’t want to deal with consciously and so it transforms into neurotic behavior.

One of the more controversial aspects of freuds theory is the claim that dreams represent a sort of wish fulfilment

[SLIDE 4]

that the manifest content of dreams functions in a way that takes latent desires that we hold unconsciously - and manifests them through free association as images or events that are more benign - when this happens, it seems as though a middle level of consciousness what freud calls the preconscious performs a sort of self-censorship to translate disturbing or unacceptable desires into a more acceptable form. This is the crux between the concepts of latent content which he sometimes calls dream thoughts (the underlying desires or meanings) and manifest content or dream content, which is how these underlying things appear in the dream.

Just as dreams seem to be a form of involuntary thinking, the unconscious seems to know things that are hidden to the conscious mind - unknown knowns - things we desire or believe deep down but don’t want to admit to ourselves. And so in dreams, free association acts as a way to fulfill these desires in a way that the conscious mind can handle - according to Freud this is sort of a defense mechanism - desires that might be too intense for our conscious mind are sanitized - and this is also the case for trauma - past experiences that are too painful to accept as real or to remember are transmuted into a milder form.

There are two primary ways this happens according to freud — condensation is that aspect of a dream where unrelated things may be combined into a single thing - like the way a person can change into another person and yet still be “the same person” - displacement involves the translation of an unacceptable desire or thought into a more acceptable form.

[SLIDE 5]

**Read the empanada dream**

“I’ve been to this market before,” I thought, “but I didn’t know they had an empanada stand.”

The hard-working owners, a middle-aged, portly little Italian-American woman and a slender woman from Jamaica, beckoned me over.

Me: “Ok, so I have this empanada shell, but why is there a gaping hole in it? ... Oh I see, I’m supposed to fill it with ingredients from the shelf and give it to you to deep fry?”

I had wanted to get some of that pork belly but it seemed too troublesome, given that it was tightly wrapped in plastic and locked in a box behind a sliding glass window. Stuffing the empanada shell as full as I could, I realized that I was putting way too much meat in, and started worrying that my gluttony might be noticed, and punished.

At this point the Jamaican woman started softly and fretfully groaning. “Oh no, now it’s coming…it’s coming”

Then, a distant screeching echo followed by a low witchy-sounding voice saying “you like to eat blood?…” I looked down at the shelf with the various ingredients and saw torrents of blood streaming across it. The thing is, I don’t remember being very disturbed by this, at least not yet.

I woke up in my childhood home. It was a drab little bungalow with ill-considered attempts at style: garish postage stamp-themed wallpaper, brown, foraging-height shag carpet. I felt a strong need to tell someone about my dream.

When I started recounting it, it occurred to me that I had visited this shop before in other dreams. I was about to get to the part with the weird voice, but each time I tried, someone new would come into the room and interrupt me. This was starting to get a bit ridiculous. Now, I looked over and saw Harvey, my dog, trying to initiate play, in his typically terrier way.

“I wanna watch Nick at Nite”, he said, but I would not entertain such a frivolous request. He repeated his plea again and again.

“Harvey, I’m your dad”, I burst out, finally laying down the law.

“Now where was I? Oh yeah, that weird disembodied voice.”  “what happened again?” That lady said “Oh no it’s coming, something is coming”. Blood, and then …….(open mouth, tense vocal cords, no sound) …….I couldn’t bring myself to quote the witch. I suppose I must have thought, or even known, that quoting the voice would instantiate it again in “reality”.

At this point I woke up again. I had been reading a copy of “The Dream Work”, and was trying to make a habit of clinically describing the physical conditions I found myself in after waking from a dream. Thinking back on the moment with the voice made tears well up. I noticed my tongue was far back in my mouth, which was very dry.

It reminded me of an awkward moment at one of those Whole Foods wine tastings. It was just me, the sample lady and a mother with a young kid. The sample-hostess mentioned that one wine paired well with pork, to which the mother responded with a comment about porcine uncleanliness, followed by a lengthy exegesis on a passage in the Bible where Peter has a vision in which the voice of Jesus (in red text) tells him not to call anything unclean that God has made clean. Then she said that it’s not the meat that’s unclean but that you have to follow the law or some such thing. I thought of my mother, a lapsed Jew cum hippie vegetarian spiritualist, and further, of my own lapsed faith, of my inability to resolve my love of animals as friends and as food.

Analyze - what’s condensation: - what’s displacement? here

**Freud Beyond pleasure**

The things that I said about freuds dream theory is that underlying the strangeness of a dream is this mechanism that functions as a form of wish fulfillment - the fulfillment of desire - that desires that we can’t or don’t want to admit to ourselves can in some sense be fulfilled in the way a dream transforms them into other things.

We also looked at this in conscious life in the notion of sublimation - the idea that people are constantly engaged in the transformation of underlying, potentially harmful desires into more socially useful forms — music, art, technology - the desire for mastery over the world, mastery through understanding - mastery through technological manipulation - I mentioned the way the dentist in little shop of horrors channels his destructive desires into the profession of dentistry, for instance

Now one way to think about the fulfillment of desire is that it is something that brings us pleasure - and a common idea not only in psychoanalysis, but in political theory in economic theory is that all human behaviour can basically be reduced to two desires or interests: the desire for pleasure and the desire to avoid pain — this basic pleasure good/pain bad - scheme is called utilitarianism. And it seems like a reasonable enough way to characterize a lot of human activity.

But one thing Freud encounters working as a physician at the end of the the first world war are trauma patients, patients who today we would say have PTSD - that seem to exhibit a sort of behavior that can’t be characterized in terms of pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance. And at the same time their behavior doesn’t seem to indicate repression - the transformation of trauma into another form. What he sees are patients that seem rather than repressing their trauma, to compulsively revisit their traumatic experiences in neurotic ways - in the form of recurring nightmares that place them back on the battlefield — or daytime flashbacks — or in obsessive repetition of certain facets of their lives at the time of the trauma — compulsively standing at attention for instance. So that it’s not like these patients are hiding the trauma from themselves as in the normal case of repression, instead they constantly and consistently return to the source of their trauma.

and so it seems that this sort of behavior can’t be reduced to simply seeking to exerience pleasure or avoiding pain: what about situations where people seem to be seeking to experience pain. So in 1919 after his experiences treating vetrans of the 1st world war, Freud writes this short book called Beyond the Pleasure Principle - where he develops a theory of the seeming desire to experience pain — now this theory is highly speculative and just like his theory of dreams very hard or even impossible to study empirically — and in fact Freud in his own words says "What follows is speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection"

at another point he says “the poets came before me” — in other words that you find the basics of his theory in literature well before Freud’s own time. And it’s interesting because it’s not just in war vetrans that he sees this strange compulsion to return to painful experiences — one of the things he observes is how his nephew, who I think is 3 years old at the time, his nephew makes up this game that he plays when his mother puts him to bed — where he has this ball attached to a string where he’s throwing the ball away and since this is vienna when he throws the ball he says “fort” which means away and then pulls the string back and says “da” which means here so over and over and over and over again fort da fort da fort da fort da — and Freud speculates that it’s very interesting that this toddler is so interested in fact almost obsessively interested with this process of losing and recovering his prized toy the ball and he talks about how this might have something to do with detachment anxiety from his mother (and of course this is vienna of 100 years ago so the child has a wet nurse and doesn’t see his mother that often) — and there’s this idea that the child is returning to a feeling of separation over and over again in a way that makes it fun, a game. But I don’t think we need to rely just on Freuds example — You know I think if you’ve ever been around small children you see this sort of thing a lot like in hide and seek (and I mean hide and seek is a really strange game when you think about it) and especially with very young children because they tend to be interested in hiding really cherished things their toys - their own mother - I remember when my daughter was very young she would make her mom hide behind heavy curtains and so that she couldn’t find her and she did this not just a few times - but over and over and over again. (and of course not being able to find her mother should be a pretty traumatic thing - I mean another thing about my daughter is that she would cry for hours whenever her mother left the house)

And so for Freud just as repression or sublimation of desire is not abnormal at all, but something that everyone is engaged in all the time - so this desire to experience pain. So what is it about painful experiences that makes us want to return to them?

In each case — the war vetrans and his nephew — Freud surmises that the return to trauma involves an attempt on one hand to gain mastery over the trauma — but on the other hand to experience pain in a pleasurable way.

Now this idea of experiencing pain in a pleasurable way is really for thinking about our experience of art — and not just art You know its sort of like if you think about canker sores - they hurt but at the same time at least for me I weirdly enjoy chewing on them — there’s something about that where pain and pleasure seem to be intertwined. I mean canker sore hurt and it hurts when I chew on them - but It seems that there’s something about choosing when to experience the pain that’s pleasurable - that gives me a sense of mastery over it. and so there seem to be situations in which we consciously seek out pain — where we don’t just try to avoid it.

[SLIDE 2]

And from these observations freud develops this theory that he calls the death drive — the drive to experience pain — the desire for destruction. Now this theory is one of the more speculative elements in the book and its a theory that doesn’t seem to be borne out too well in empirical research — but I think it is still a really interesting way to think about how pain and pleasure combine in our experiences of art and in our own lives.

Now what you might remember about the structure of desire that I talked about in relation to Wagner and Schopenhauer is that desire arises from a moment of disunity and moves toward unity, in schopenhauers terms deisre is a representation of a lack of unity — so in the case of hunger you have two objects - me and the ham sandwich and the act of eating unifies these things — brings about a state of equilibrium between me and my environment — the same sort of situation apples sexual desire — we also talked about how the desire for the cadence is the desire to reach a unity between all the disparate and dissonant notes and have them all arrive on the same note the pitch center.

And so the idea behind the death drive, this instinct to seek out pain, according to Freud is that just as an organism’s desire is oriented between establishing equilibrium or unity between itself and its environment (eg by eating part of its environment) the organism seems to be attracted to establishing unity between the totality of itself and its environment to completely resolve the gap between itself and its environment. And the way that this happens is in death when the organism dissolves into the inorganic world. He talks about this in terms of a return to the “quiescence of the inorganic world” (i.e., dust to dust)

Now this again is a place where freud seems to be moving more into the sphere of poetry than medical science - and freud is explicit about this - that its not something that would fit well with experimental methodology - and yet he says - but I just can’t shake this idea -there just seems to be something very right about this. And as well see I think this is very discriptive of the way narrative works in fiction and in music.

And just by way of terminology Freud describes these different sorts of drives in different ways — drives like the will to live the drive to reproduce the drive for nourishment etc. he calls Eros or the life instincts — so sexual or erotic desire would be included here — and this new idea of the death drive which he thinks about not only in terms of the desire for death but also the desire for aggression or destruction, annihilation of the self-perhaps even of the world— he calls this thanatos after the greek deity of death.

Now on freuds account its not just that we desire unity with our environment, with the inorganic world — but that we desire unity ***on our own terms***it’s not that we as organisms just want not to exist, but that we want to gain mastery over our death — we want our deaths to be meaningful — now from the perspective of evolutionary theory we can see this in terms of the distinction between modification and mutation:

mutation is the idea that there are spontaneous changes in the genetic structure of a species that may or may not be useful for survival —> if they are useful for survival they’re more likely to be passed on to future organisms through reproduction.

Modification is when an organisms environment changes —> and changes in the environment can cause whole species to die out very quickly that in a way that is external to the genetic mutations that take place in the species —> like the way an asteroid wiped out the dinosaurs for instance

so there are two ways that evolutionary principles can lead to a species demise internally through mutation or externally through modification

And so freuds notion of the death drive is at the level of mutation it has to come from within —> when we say the desire is for unity *on our own terms* this is the basic idea —> we don’t want to be simply killed by some blind external force, rather we want our death to in a sense arise from deep within ourselves. We want our deaths to be meaningful to us.

Now of course this is a very strange idea, indeed — how could our deaths be meaningful for us — we’re dead we certainly can’t experience our own deaths. and this is where narrative comes in —> the idea here is that because we can’t experience our own deaths we narrate our deaths in advance. Now if you remember what I said about the compulsion to repeat trauma or painful experiences — trauma can be pleasurable if we make it meaningful to ourselves. And this is where narrative comes in because the way to gain mastery over trauma pain and death is to fit it into a meaningful narrative.

cf. example of technical malfunction in a performance of a piece (piece is caused to end by outside force), awkward for performers audience

cf. if the technical malfunction had been part of the performance it could have been really great – but here the “death” of the piece is part of the internal logic of the narrative – so that there if done well, the seeming demise of the piece could be transformed into a really cool experience. This is what is at the heart of the exciting ambiguity of “breaking the 4th wall” where you’re not sure if the piece, movie, play is breaking down for external reasons, technical failure, bad performances, etc. or if it is all part of the internal logic of the narrative. Cf. movies like Vice, or the performances of Andy Kaufman, etc.

Now this idea that narrative can transform pain into pleasure is an idea that once again goes back to Aristotle, but in the Poetics Ari says that a plot must be of a certain magnitude. What does he mean by this? The idea is that if the plot is too short it's not very satisfying. This is something I experience with my students all the time when I give them creative assignments. Very often the student will come up to me and ask what is the easiest way to fulfill this assignment another words where do I absolutely have to do this assignment, which is really just aware of asking what is the most efficient way to write this piece what is the minimum number of things I have to do. Of course one can I could tell them is spend 25 years mastering the Art of music composition then its easy — of course it never really gets easy to write a really satisfying piece of music or story. But the idea is that if the story or the piece of music is too short it's really unsatisfying: could you imagine a romantic comedy that goes like this boy meets girl girl and boy get married THE END

But not only that — Aristotle tells us that a plot has to consist of three parts

can you guess what those three parts are?

A beginning a middle and an end — not a big surprise perhaps

But if you think about it — I can undertand why a narrative has to have a beginning and an end has to start and end somewhere —why does it have to have a middle? Not only that Aristotle says the middle has to be of a significant magnitude — but why? The idea here is that the middle is the locus of meaningful failure in a story. It’s where pain can be experienced in a story in a way that renders it pleasurable. And so it’s not that we want the most efficient most painless series of events in a story - rather we want to experience the pain - we want to experience the dissonance in a piece of music - the deceptive cadences the failure to reach unity — it actually gives us pleasure. But only because it fits into a meaningful relationship between the way the story unfolds and how it ends — and even if it’s not a happy ending the logic the consistency of the story make those dissapointments failures those moments of pain pleasurable.

So that pain is a force that gives us meaning: this is a paraphrase of a book by the journalist Chris Hedges that came out around the time that the US invaded Iraq in 2004, that book is called war is a force that gives us meaning - and the book is highly critical of the bush administration but the basic conceit is the same, that in some sense we seek out pain conflict the failure to fulfill desire because that is what makes our lives meaningful — just in the way that when we get what we think we want we keep on desiring — desire itself, striving, and in fact pain make our lives meaningful.