

Examine the Role of Psychoanalysis in Metaphysical and Surrealist Art

“I is another”
(Authur Rimbaud, Letters)

Andre Breton’s novel *Nadja*, an iconic work of surrealist fiction, opens with the tentative question “*Who am I?*” Almost immediately this question is replaced with the more enigmatic and distinctly more surrealistic question of “*whom (do) I haunt?*” (Breton, *Nadja*). This distinction contains within it the idea that gave birth to surrealism, the idea of an otherness within us, an idea that is rooted in, and feeds off the psychological theory of the subconscious. In his first surrealist manifesto Breton credits Sigmund Freud with unearthing this other, deeper layer of being. (Breton, Manifesto) He draws on Freud’s use of dreams as a gateway into this subconscious and predicts “the future resolution of these two states, dreaming and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*.” (Breton, Manifesto) But the pre-eminence that Breton gives to Freud’s theories in his manifesto masks a more complex, nuanced and often strained relationship between psychoanalysis and surrealist visual art. This relationship is layered. The use of psychoanalytic ideas in the *creation* of surrealist art is distinct from, if still related too, the use of psychoanalytic ideas in the *interpretation* of surrealist art. This relationship is also contentious. Different artists use psychoanalytic ideas in different ways and divisions ruptured the surrealist’s ranks around the correct way to access and communicate the true subconscious voice. In this essay I will only discuss the role of psychoanalysis in the initial creation stage. In order to best illustrate just how differently surrealist artists used psychoanalysis I will contrast the automatic drawings of Andre Masson with Salvador Dali’s approach, in particular his paintings *The Lugubrious Game* (1929) and *The Metamorphous of Narcissus* (1937.)

But before we delve into surrealism we must take a quick look at its precursor, Metaphysical painting, in particular the art of the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico. In 1911, in Paris, de Chirico began to paint a series of strange, melancholy and disquieting paintings that were to have a huge influence on Breton and the rest of the surrealists. Drawing on the ideas of the philosophers Nietzsche and Schopenhauer (Barrow 2005) these works seem to occupy a space between layers of different realities. His canvases are populated by uncomfortable combinations of classical sculpture, industrial architecture, bunches of bananas, steam trains and lonely figures all cast in a harsh light of elongated shadows. He described his paintings as a search for what lies “beyond physical things.” (Barrow 2005) In this move beyond the physical

he has created a reality with a distinctly dream-like quality. Take De Chirico's 1913-14 painting *The Philosopher's Conquest* (figure 1.) The unusual arrangement of the oversized artichokes, the clock, the steam train and the menacing shadows cast by figures outside of the picture plane seem saturated in significance, in metaphor, in some sort of importance. Yet the painting is completely incomprehensible, a perfect enigma, like the contents of a dream. All the elements, the displacement and juxtaposition, the harsh lighting, the flat, bold, almost crude style of painting all collide to create a disquieting feeling, a psychological state of discomfort. At the time of painting his Metaphysical paintings, de Chirico was unaware of Freud's theories of dream interpretation (Barrow 2005). He was absorbed instead in the philosophical investigations of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer into the nature of reality. This does not mean that we cannot interpret and analyse metaphysical paintings from a psychoanalytic point of view, and it does not undermine the huge influence de Chirico's work had on the Freudian influenced surrealists, it is simply to say that psychoanalysis just did not play a direct role in the creation of these works. While de Chirico may have drawn from his subconscious as he worked, he did not do so *consciously*.

While de Chirico unconsciously foreshadowed the techniques the surrealists would use to create an atmosphere of psychological tension in visual art, the surrealists very consciously concerned with psychology, what it signified and how to manipulate it. While risking oversimplifying a very complex relationship you can say that there are two main ways surrealist artists used psychoanalytic ideas in the creation of their art. The first is automatism. The second is a more literal use of dream imagery, displacement and references to Freudian complexes. Both these processes are complex in and of themselves and are certainly not antithetical. But first, let us take automatism. In his 1924 Manifesto Breton defined surrealism as "pure psychic automatism". (Breton, Manifesto) He then described automatism as gaining direct access to the subconscious by means of "a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties, a monologue consequently unencumbered by the slightest inhibition and which was, as closely as possible, akin to *spoken thought*". (Breton, Manifesto). When written this became automatic writing and, even though Breton first conceived surrealism as being primarily a literary movement, he applied the same process to drawing, describing it, not so much as creating images, but as tracing them from your mind, onto the paper (Breton, Manifesto). In its purest form automatism represents the perfect expression of the 'inner otherness' that is central to surrealism. It is the voice of the unconscious, finally heard. Breton indicates that these automatic techniques follow in the vein of Freudian free association. However, it has been argued that surrealist automatism (as described by Breton) comes much

closer to the practices of French dynamic psychiatry, in particular to the practices used by the Janet. (Gibson 1987) The surrealists passed these techniques of the earlier tradition through the lens of psychoanalytic free association and this allowed them to apply layers of meaning to the process itself (Poling 2008). For psychology automatism was a process that was useful in solving problems, it was a means to an end. For the surrealists automatism was an end in itself.

The most striking works of visual automatism were penned by the surrealist poet and artist Andre Masson. Masson claimed that the images he created, emerging half formed from his undulating mass of lines, came to him fully formed and that he recorded them with the strokes of his pen too quickly to allow room for conscious thought (Poling 2008). Masson appears to have been the perfect “modest recording instrument” (Breton, Manifesto 1972) described by Breton in his first Manifesto, passively reproducing the images that came to him without exerting any effort to stem or control this flow. Yet it is not quite as simple as that. Automatism is a process of two layers. There is the line, the unadulterated flow of the hand, a line that is constantly being interpreted by the mind, interpreted to create forms. It could be say that these forms are suggested to the mind by the lines. Often these processes are separate, as Breton describes, with the artist creating a mass of lines, looking at them and quickly working them into the image that immediately presents itself to him (Breton, Manifesto 1972). In the drawings of Masson however we get the impression that the two happened simultaneously, that as the hand flowed the mind suggested and images rose half formed, twisted and changed with the rapidity of the movements of his hand.

Figure 2 is an automatic drawing by Masson that was published in a Surrealist periodical in 1925. Curving continuous lines create fleshy articulations of torsos, legs, hands, breasts and suggestions of internal organs that morph into architectural features or bird like creatures. The second automatic drawing published in the same periodical (figure 3) is similar in content. A central female torso with splayed guts, could also be the body of a fish, or a jellyfish, with tentacles, hands and feet undulating beside it and bird forms bursting forth from the placenta-like body of the drawing. The quality of line in this second drawing is slightly different from that of the first, it less flowing, more agitated and doubled back upon itself. Possibly Masson was experimenting, possibly the line change represents different subconscious states, either way one cannot doubt that both were drawn at great speed. Neither drawing has a trace of being ‘planned’ in a traditional sense. Lines were drawn, forms where suggested, executed and pulled back into the line. How much Masson’s automatism was informed by Freudian ideas is debateable. There is no doubt that, as enthusiastic member of the surrealist group, he ingested

the Bretonian fusion of traditional French psychiatric techniques and Freudian free association and it is very possible that he may have read more of Freud's writings, we know that Freud's *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* was on display at the Surrealists headquarters around the time he created these drawings (Poling 2008). But there is, no doubt, something in the uncomfortable, visceral nature of these drawings, not just the content, but how it is presented, in the disturbing honesty of the lines, that makes one feel as if they truly could have been pulled directly from Masson's subconscious. They read as works of art as automatic as can possibly be.

Automatism met its first real challenge from within the ranks of the Surrealists in 1929 when the painter Salvador Dali, rose triumphantly from the Catalonian seaside where he had been slumbering (and no doubt dreaming). A painter of supreme technical ability, Dali was also a fanatical consumer of Freud's writings, he described Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* as "One of the capital discoveries of my life" (Lomas 2000). His letter of introduction to the surrealist group, his painting *The Lugubrious Game* (figure 4), reads like a declaration of his surrealist aesthetic. Painted with photographic precision and intensely saturated colours, a strange, floating, swirling series of forms and figures populate a dreamscape. Strange distended hands, sexualised fedora hats, fossiliferous fragments, faces, bird heads and colourful, semi-molten fleshy extensions converge in a kaleidoscope of anxiety. This is all placed in a seemingly infinite landscape penetrated by glaring white light. The forms make brutally clear references to sexual desire, shame, masturbation, filth and ultimately imply a castration complex (suggested by the bearded father figure in the foreground, with feces splattered underwear, holding a bloodied cloth).¹ This painting makes clear how Dali's use of psychoanalysis differed from the others Surrealists. To put it in Freudian terms, Dali consciously decided to include elements of the latent content (which he discovered through a sort of self psychoanalysis he called the Paranoiac Critical Method) into the manifest content. That is to say he uncovered his unconscious desire by analysing his dreams or behaviour, then made explicit reference to that desire in his work alongside the more traditionally surrealist use of the more veiled expression of the subconscious. This, mixed with the lewd exhibitionism with which he laid bare his various complexes, caused controversy. Dali, it would seem, had essentially eliminated the enigma of the unconscious that was the seduction of surrealism.

Criticisms of Dali's process came not only from his fellow Surrealists but from Freud himself. When, in 1938, Dali went to visit Freud in his London home, he brought with him his masterpiece of the paranoiac critical method, *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (figure 4). While Freud

¹ Georges Battille included a full psychoanalytic study of this painting in his review published in the surrealist periodical *La Revolution Surrealiste* in 1929. (Battille 1985)

admired the obvious technical brilliance of the painting, he later criticized Dali's process as being, paradoxically, too conscious, too knowing. And yet *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* presents a beautiful and painful exploration of the anxiety of the unconscious. Dali, through his paranoiac critical method has managed to create an image that both preserves the enigma of the unconscious and reveals the unconscious process to us. It depicts a colossal Narcissus bending over the mirrored surface of the mythical lake. The forms of his image are duplicated beside him but transformed into a giant ossified hand gently holding an egg which is cracked and sprouting a small Narcissus flower. The process between the two figurations appears both a process of death and one of renewal. The warm blooded body of Narcissus changing into the cold stone of the monstrous hand. Yet the egg sprouts a Narcissus flower, new growth sprung from the hand of death. A poem Dali wrote to accompany the painting, and which he intended to be exhibited alongside it, gives us clues to interpreting the meaning of the painting.² He identifies himself with the Narcissus figure and the flower and with his muse, wife and the love of his life, Gala (Lomas 2000). The painting and poem together appear to describe a painful process of introspection. The result is a work that is both graceful and garish. A self-indulgence that we allow pass through the supreme mastery of its execution.

Psychoanalysis was used by surrealist visual artists, be it through automatism or through Dali's paranoiac critical method, quite simply as a tool, or a guideline for accessing the subconscious voice. The theories of Freud were of great inspiration and use to the surrealists. In some form or other they inspired both the processes discussed in this essay. However I must stress that psychoanalytic ideas *inspired* these processes, and did not dictate them. The Surrealists took what they would from Freud and passed it through their own understanding of themselves. They developed their own distinct means for accessing and communicating the subconscious. Each artist developed their own personal surrealist psychology. The broader surrealist psychology, encompassing all the personal psychologies of the surrealists artists, poets and madmen, had a cultural and intellectual influence upon western society, I will be bold enough to say, rivalling even the influence of Freud's psychoanalysis.

² A detailed analysis of the painting can be found in either, in Chapter 4 part ii or *The Haunted self* (Lomas 2000) or in Heyd's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus Reconsidered* (Heyd 1984). Unfortunately I don't have space in this essay to give a full analysis.

Images:

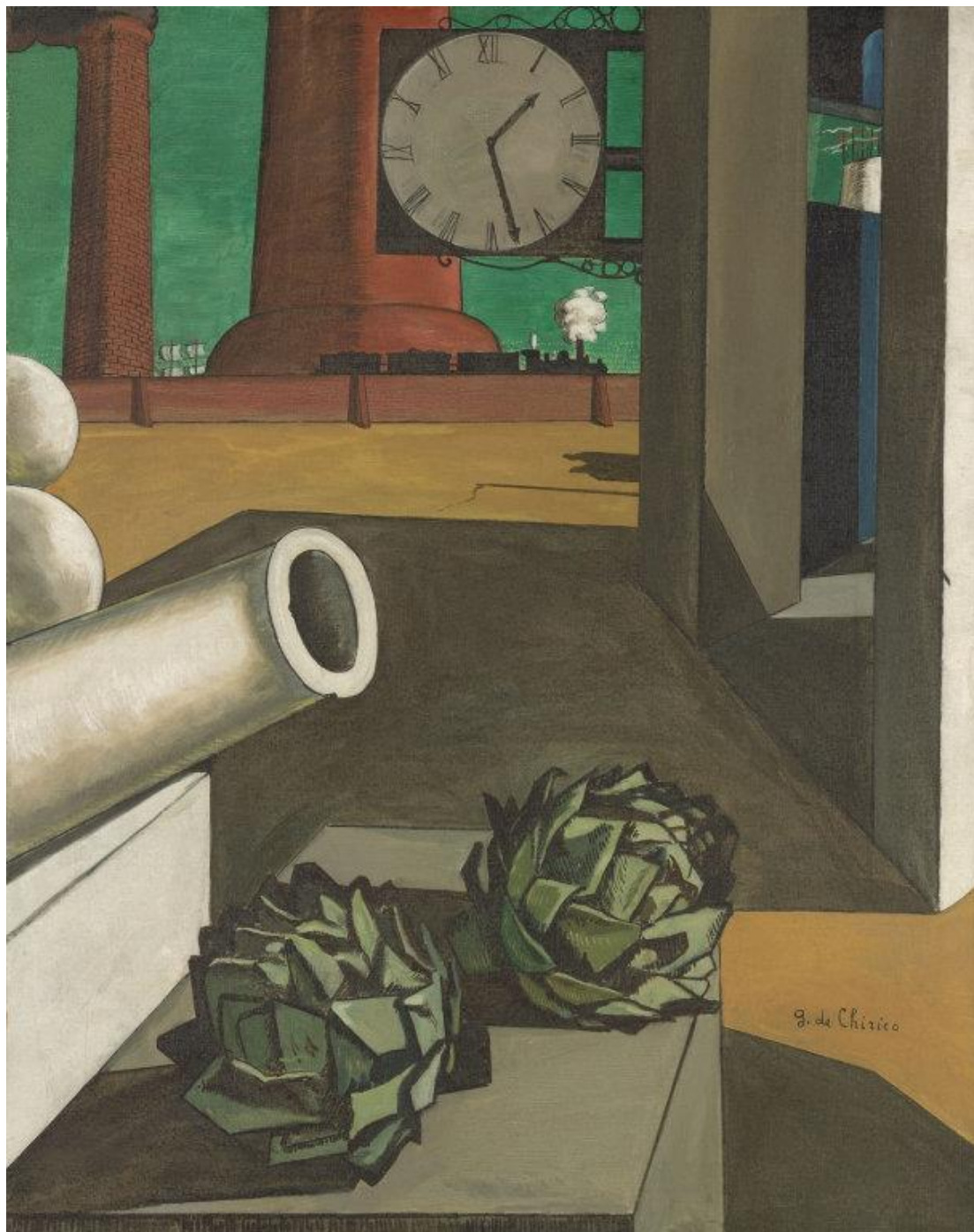
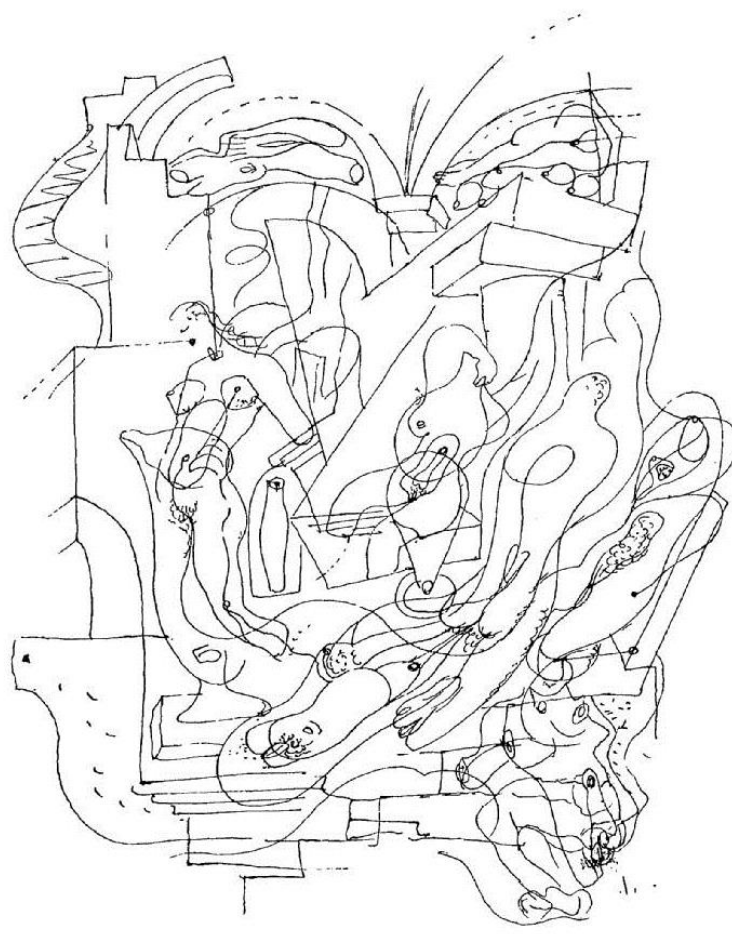
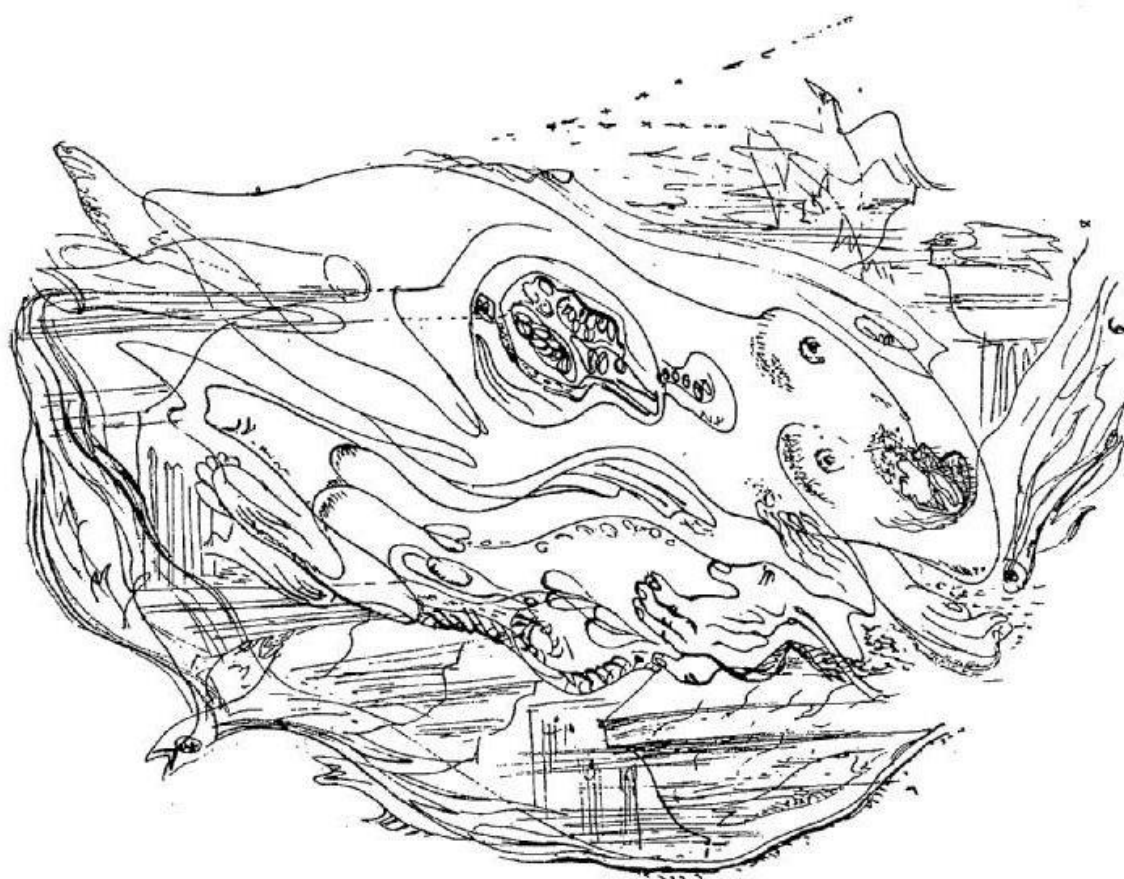


Figure 1 (Giorgio de Chirico, *The Philosopher's Conquest*, late 1913 - early 1914)



André Masson.

Figure 2 (*Andre Masson, Automatic Drawing, La Revolution surrealiste, 1925*)



André Masson.

Figure 3 (*Andre Masson, Automatic Drawing, La Revolution Surrealiste, 1925*)



Figure 4 (Salvador Dalí, *The Lugubrious Game*, 1929, private collection)



Figure 5 (*Salvador Dalí, Metamorphosis of Narcissus, 1937, London: Tate Gallery*)

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