

The holy house of Hal Foster.

A critical enquiry of psychoanalysis as art historical method

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Recently, a new art historical bible was published under the title *Art since 1900* (2005). This yet renowned synopsis reviews modern art of the past century through four leading methodologies, the holy houses of art history. Hal Foster (1955), professor at Princeton University (USA), is presented as spokesman of the psychoanalytic art historical method. Introducing his method, Foster states that there are extensive parallels between the development of the psychoanalysis and modern art.¹ Derived from the inspiration artists gained from the psychoanalytic theory by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Foster aims to apply the psychoanalytic theory to reach an understanding of diverse modern art historical expressions.

Foster confuses basic psychoanalytic concepts

Validating his method, Foster states that "one can critique Freud and Lacan, [...] and still remain within the orbit of psychoanalysis."² This might be your typical argument to keep a holy house on its feet, but from a scientific point of view one might wonder how adequate such a statement is. The current essay reports the research I did for my bachelor thesis, in which the scientific adequacy of Foster's method is tested. In his method Foster pleads to follow the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud and, secondarily, the revisions made by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). The hypothesis however, is that Foster con-

fuses basic psychoanalytic concepts from Freud with Lacan's, which might result in what I call the 'Dictionary Effect':³ the use of concepts as given by the dictionary, lacking adequate consideration of their theoretical context. I tested Foster's ap-
pliance to the theories of Freud and Lacan, which resulted in an amount of conclusions with reaching consequences for the scientific adequacy of one of the holiest houses in art history.

The psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud becomes immortally famous stating that the human personality consists of three distinctive personality structures; the *Id*, the *Ego*, and the *Superego*. Freud compares the relation between these structures to a horse driver who is supposed to control two adrifted horses. According to Freud, the *Id* is an unconscious chaos of sexual and non-sexual instincts, that is driven by the so called *lust principle*, urging the individual to gain instinctual satisfaction. However, the opportunities in society to fulfill this urge to satisfaction are limited. Driven by the *reality principle* the *Superego*, the unconsciously internalized moral, prohibits the *Id* to satisfy instincts in the outer world, which however clashes with the *lust principle*. To the *Ego* the delightful task to compromise between these two rivaling principles. To prevent punishment by the *Superego*, the *Ego* could ordain to prohibit the *Id*'s instinctual satisfaction by all means, would that not have been the highway to neuroticism. Luckily the *Id* has the clever method of *defense* at hand: wrapped in disguises the instincts can escape the judgment of the *Ego* and manifest in the outer world, without risking punishment by the *Superego*.⁴ Freud

1. Foster, H., et al. "Psychoanalysis in modernism and as method." *Art since 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2005: 15.

2. *Ibidem*: 18.

3. My original Dutch definition is het Van Dale Effect.

4. Freud uses varied terminology in his work to refer to the system of defense: in early works he uses the concept of

repression as the comprehensive system, which he later identifies as one of more mechanisms under the concepts of inhibition and defense (Freud, S. "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety." 1926. Freud, S. Volume XX. Ed. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1961). Due to the overview by Anna Freud nowadays the term defense mechanism is commonly used. (Freud, A. Het ik en de afweermecanismen.

distinguishes seven *defense mechanisms*, namely *repression*, *displacement of the libido*, *identification*, *regression*, *rationalization*, *sublimation* and *love*.⁵ [fig. 1] In these disguised semblances the instincts will however never be completely satisfied, so that the individual will still be headed towards neuroticism.

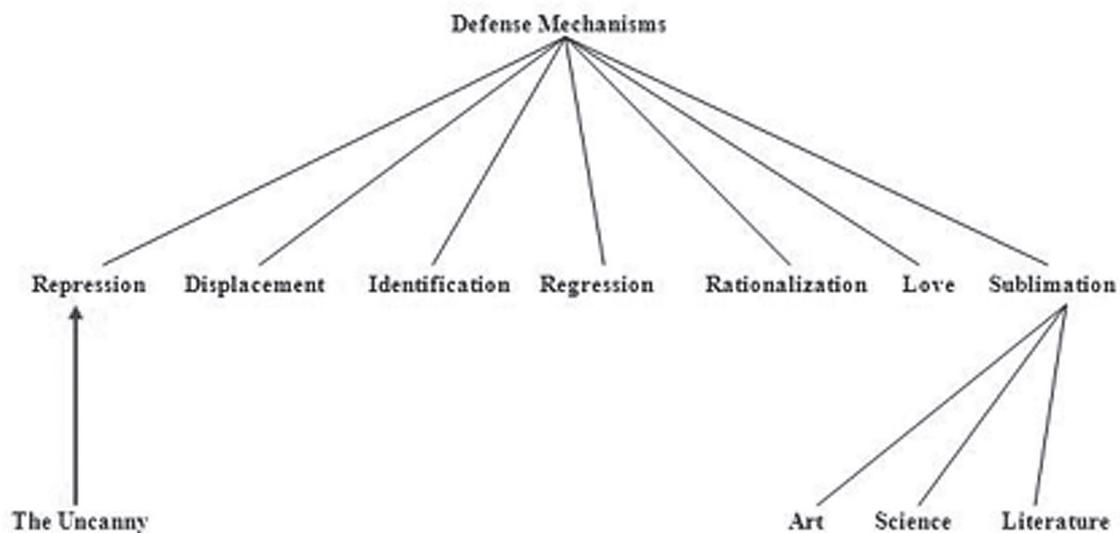
The most commonly known defense mechanism is *repression*. To escape the risk of punishment, the Id does not even expose the instinct to the Ego's judgment, by repressing the instinct to the infinite realm of the unconscious. Although this repressed instinct will never return in the Ego's conscious scope, the individual might one day be confronted by an external stimulus that gives a sense of recognition to the concerning repressed instinct. Yet lacking a conscious source, this recognition causes a destructive uncomfortable and frightening feeling, which Freud calls *Das Unheimliche*, the uncanny. Obviously this disturbance paves the way towards neuroticism.

According to Freud only one of the defense mechanisms escapes the inevitable march towards neuroticism: "one gains the most if one can

sufficiently heighten the yield of pleasure from the sources of psychical and intellectual work."⁶ Using the defense mechanism *sublimation* the instincts are diverted into 'higher' socially desirable and often creative goals, through which not only the satisfaction of an individual instinct, but also the well being of society is secured. One of the outcomes of sublimation is art – in which has to be recalled that the *process* sublimation is unconscious, even though one might well be aware of the *product* art. Art in Freud's personality theory thus is the outcome of a healthy compromise between the lust principle and the reality principle.

The psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan

As psychoanalyst, Lacan is heavily influenced by Freud's *total theory*. To his students he even says that "it's up to you to be Lacanian if you wish; I am a Freudian."⁷ Intrigued by the structuralist linguistic theory by Ferdinand de Saussure as well, he makes an amount of extensive revisions in Freud's psychoanalytic theory: he states that the unconscious is structured as a language, and that socialization is the main motivator to human development. He



Bilthoven: Amboboeken, 1966 [1936]).

5. Freud, S. "Civilization and its discontents." 1930 [1929].

Freud, S. Volume XXI. Ed. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1961

6. *Ibidem*: 79.

7. Sharpe, M. "Jacques Lacan (1901-1981)." Internet

Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2002. <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/lacweb/>>, 10th of June 2010, 1b.

Fig. 1. Freud's Defense Mechanisms.

divides Freud's Superego in two structures – an idea that is known as the *split of the subject*.⁸ The *imaginary* is focused on the *other*, an ideal other person the individual desires to be, while the *symbolic* is focused on the *Other*, the ideal way in which the individual is perceived by another person.⁹ Urged to fit in society, the individual would inevitably be confronted with the awareness that the Imaginary is not real, and that relying on the symbolic is the best possible passage to reality. This transformation from imaginary to symbolic Lacan calls *sublimation*, which can be initiated by stimuli in the outer world. "The exemplary instance of the symbolic transformation of impossible Imaginary demands the work of art."¹⁰

once called an expert, your laurels will be passed onto your method

Lacan's use of the concept sublimation thus has no connection at all to Freud's defense mechanisms; indeed, the position assigned to art differs fundamentally in their psychoanalytic theories. [fig. 2] In Freud's theory art is the *product*, the consequence of an intrinsically motivated system, in which the artwork is created as a solution to the conflict between the elemental instincts of the individual. In Lacan's theory art can *consciously* be employed to initiate sublimation, so art becomes a collective mean to be used by the individual in conforming to the collective. This fundamental difference in the position of art is crucial for the scientific adequacy of psychoanalysis as art historical method, the holy house held by Hal Foster.

Psychoanalysis as art historical method of Hal Foster

Successfully working his way through art historical resistance and critique, Hal Foster victoriously became a renowned expert of psychoanalysis as art historical method. This again might be your typical path to establish a holy house: once called an expert, your laurels will be passed onto your method. However holy Foster's methodological house may seem, its fundamentals are meddled in the current research. I assumed that Foster, pleading to follow Freud's psychoanalysis, does not apply Freud's theory properly by neglecting a fundamental system in the total theory, and moreover confuses Freud's basic concepts with the theory of Lacan. Due to this confusion I accuse Foster's method to be subdued to what I call the 'Dictionary Effect.' This hypothesis is largely induced by the following key quote:

Freud never defines sublimation in clear distinction from repression, reaction-formation, idealization, and so on. But very simply one can say that sublimation concerns the diversion of sexual drives to civilizational ends (art, science), in a way that purifies them, that both integrates the object (beauty, truth) and refines the subject (the artist, the scientist).¹¹

As sexual, indeed perverse, as low, indeed base, these drives are associated with cultural types, which are thus placed outside the process of sublimation, of civilization, either as its other or as its object.¹²

This quote bears witness to one of the most extensive confusions in Foster's psychoanalytic interpretation. Not only Freud certainly distinguishes sublimation from the other – let us just call it as it is – defense mechanisms (to which reaction-formation and idealization were formally added later on), he also opposes sublimation to the other defense



8. Lacan, J. "The subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious." 1966b. Lacan, J. *Écrits*. Complete edition in English. Ed. Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007: 673.

9. Levine, Steven Z. Lacan reframed. London: I. B. Tauris & Co, 2008: 17.

10. *Ibidem*: 32. Lacan made this statement in *The family*

complexes in 1938.

11. Foster, H. *Compulsive beauty*. Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993: 110.

12. *Ibidem*: 260.

Fig. 2. Relation between sublimation and art by Freud versus Lacan.

mechanisms as being the only healthy compromise between the lust principle and the reality principle. In the note Foster equals 'the process of sublimation' to 'civilization,' which is not so much congruent with Freud, who considers sublimation as an intrinsic system focused on instinctual satisfaction escaping civilization, as is with the theory of Lacan, who does consider sublimation as a form of civilization through the transition of the imaginary to the symbolic. Such a confusion of sources is by definition a scientific *faux pas*, but especially substantially it has enormous consequences for the theoretical foundation of Foster's method.

sublimation is not consciously applicable

As explicated, art is assigned a fundamentally different role in the psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan. Strikingly, stating that "Surrealism was drawn to [...] a testing of sublimation,"¹³ Foster apparently sees sublimation as the artist's testable 'task,'¹⁴ so his underlying assumption has to be that sublimation is a consciously applicable method. Freud however sees sublimation as an unconscious system that by mediating the lust principle and the reality principle, may result in the production of art. Foster's interpretation in which art may initiate, test and apply sublimation – in which art thus precedes sublimation – proves that Foster drives on the road of Lacan instead of Freud's. [fig. 2] This moreover proves the Dictionary Effect: equaling the concept sublimation to the verb 'to elevate,'¹⁵ to raise, a transition to a higher phase, Foster is using the daily interpretation without consideration of the original Freudian theoretical load.

Moreover, the Dictionary Effect is particularly perceptible in Foster's use of the Freudian concept of the uncanny. Losing track of the system of defense mechanisms, Foster also neglects its direct connection to the uncanny: the uncanny appears when a stimulus in the outer world evokes a sense of recognition caused by the memory of a repressed situation, but lacking a conscious source; this results in an unconsciously destructive feeling of discomfort. In his appliance Foster however fol-

lows the intention of surrealist artists "not to cover up the real with simulacral surfaces but to uncover it in uncanny things, which are often put in performances as well."¹⁶ Foster thus handles the uncanny as a consciously applicable 'approach' in the creation of art, following artists in their removal of the concept out of its original Freudian context.¹⁷

Foster not only neglects the unconscious and spontaneous feature of the uncanny, he also repudiates the intrinsic hierarchy of the defense mechanisms. According to Freud the artwork follows out of the defense mechanism sublimation. When an instinct is sublimated, that specific instinct will never again be involved in the conflict between the lust principle and the reality principle, as it has already passed the judgment of the Ego and is manifested in altered form in the outer world. The sublimated instinct could thus not also be repressed. An uncanny feeling is evoked by an external stimulus that causes a surprising sense of recognition of a repression; but for the artist such a feeling can never be evoked by his own artwork, because the artwork is the consequence of a sublimated instinct, not of a repressed one. Moreover, the artist could never imply a true uncanny experience into his artwork for its viewers, because according to Freud the sensitivity to uncanny experiences differs tremendously between individuals due to the extensiveness of their own repressions, and is thus not predictable.¹⁸ Following the intention of artists to imply such uncanniness in their artworks, Foster thus undermines the theoretic reliance of his method to the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud.

Though my thesis contains considerably more details of flaws in Foster's appliance, the current essay already shows an amount of fundamental misconceptions in Foster's appliance of Freud's psychoanalysis. Foster overlooks Freud's fundamental system of defense, and neglects the inherent hierarchy of the defense mechanisms by lacking adequate consideration of the original theoretical foundation of the concept *the uncanny*. Further Foster confuses Freud's psychoanalytic terminology with the revisions made by Lacan, which is evident in his application of the concept *Sublimation* that according to Freud precedes the entity art, but in Foster's method is, congruent with Lacan, presented as motivated by art. Both of these

13. Foster, H. The return of the real. *Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, 1996: 158.

14. Julia Kristeva in Powers of Horror, page 18, as quoted in Foster, 1996: 156.

15. *Ibidem*.

16. Foster, 1996: 152.

17. Foster, 1993: 8.

18. Freud, S. "The 'Uncanny.'" 1919. Freud, S. Volume XVII. Ed. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1961: 220.

conclusions confirm my hypothesis that Foster's psychoanalytic method is subdued to what I call the 'Dictionary Effect:' the use of concepts as formed in daily language, lacking adequate consideration of their theoretical foundation. Overall, it has to be concluded that Foster's validation of psychoanalysis as art historical method is *not* scientifically adequate. To say the least, the methodological house of Hal Foster appears not that holy after all. [S]

***Biography:** Femke Truijens, born and raised in Amsterdam, is a 24 year-old student of Psychology, Philosophy of Science and Art History at the University of Amsterdam. She recently finished her bachelor thesis in Art History. Due to her background in psychology and her 'indomitable addiction to question holy houses,' she encountered an amount of intriguing misconceptions in the psychoanalytic art historical method of Hal Foster. For her, these results – especially the ease to evince them – are a tremendous motivation to nourish her 'ostensibly annoying use of the question mark.'*
