



# **THE MIRROR OF ART: REFLECTIONS ON TRANSFERENCE AND THE GAZE OF THE PICTURE**

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Cognition, language, myth and art: none of them is a mere mirror simply reflecting images of inward or outward data; they are not indifferent media, but rather true sources of light, the prerequisite of vision, and the well-springs of all formation.

(Cassirer 1955a, p. 93)

This presentation (given at the Art and Psyche conference in San Francisco, 2008) is about art and its formative nature. To be clear about the title, I am not suggesting that art is a mirror in the sense of a cold or flat reflection. Rather, within analysis, art reveals and so reflects the multi-layered contents of the psyche and presents them for the gaze. It is the irreducible, non-discursive role of pictures that is psychologically transformative and so, within analysis, art offers a very particular means of mediation. The making of art may lead to confrontation with shadow elements of the unconscious, revealing mythical or archetypal images as well as their underlying psychological states. Thus Contemporary Developmental and Classical Jungian approaches to understanding individuation converge in “the field of vision.”

### ***Two Aspects of Art within Analysis***

There are two different stages related to image making and the viewing of pictures within analysis. These I have called “the life *in* the picture” and “the life *of* the picture” (Schaverien, 1992). “The life *in* the picture” relates to the imagery that is revealed in the art work, whilst “the life *of* the picture” refers to the effects of its continued existence as an object in time and space. The first stage, the making of the picture, uncloaks images, previously experienced only as unformed sense impressions or transient mental imagery, and presents them for the gaze of the artist. In viewing the picture there is a gradual “dawning of consciousness” as shadow elements are brought into the light. Although a picture is not a mirror

reflection it does, in another sense, mirror aspects of the psyche. Moreover its enduring existence offers an opportunity for becoming reconciled to these elements over time. Viewing pictures may lead to mythical associations, cognition, and eventually to language and the ability to speak of previously unspeakable states. In such cases the eyes play a significant part in the process of individuation.

### ***Consciousness – Jung and Cassirer***

Jung's respect for the images of the unconscious was profound. This often quoted passage from *the Psychology of the Transference* forms a background to our understanding consciousness.

Consciousness... must always remain the smaller circle within the greater circle of the unconscious, an island surrounded by the sea; and, like the sea itself, the unconscious yields an endless and self replenishing abundance of living creatures, a wealth beyond our fathoming. We may long have known the meaning, effects and characteristics of unconscious contents without ever having fathomed their depths and potentialities, for they are capable of infinite variation and can never be depotentiated. The only way to get to them in practice is to try to attain a conscious attitude which allows the unconscious to co-operate instead of being driven into opposition (my emphasis).

(CW16, para. 366, )

Pictures illustrate some of these “living creatures” that may be present but unseen in other forms of analysis. This conference, and the papers we have already seen and heard, makes it clear that most of us here are convinced that art is psychologically transformative. Therefore my interest is not merely to show that this happens but to offer ways of developing thinking about how and why

that might be. What are the processes involved in the making and viewing of art works? How does the therapeutic relationship influence and mediate the processes of image making and viewing?

I turn to Cassirer, who had much in common with Jung and, yet, they never met, (Avens, 1980). Although Cassirer (1957, p. 93) was not writing of art, or of the individual psyche, his elucidation of the development of consciousness in culture is applicable for the very personal developmental processes of analysis. He traced a progression from concrete or undifferentiated thinking, through myth, the making and use of tools to other less practical material objects such as religious artefacts. This leads to differentiated consciousness, symbolisation and ultimately to language.

Art in analysis can be viewed in a similar way. The picture is a material object, created in the interest of expressing some unarticulated aspect of the psyche. It brings shadow elements into the light and so a conscious attitude, (Schaverien, 1992). Cassirer, like Jung, made a connection with alchemy which he calls a “semi mythical science of nature” (1955b, p. 66). The thought processes implicit in alchemy are similar to those found in the analysand’s relationship to pictures. This is because in art the psyche is mediated through material substances; we mix pigments, draw in charcoal or pastels, mould clay and so chemicals are brought together to create something new. Jung’s work on alchemy has of course been influential in my thinking about this. However with regard to the transference particular to art within analysis I was drawn to a brief passage from the volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* where Cassirer writes:

All alchemic operations, regardless of their individual type have at their base *the fundamental idea of the transferability and material detachability of attributes and states* – the same idea which is disclosed at a more naïve and primitive stage in such notions as that of the scapegoat.

Cassirer (1955b, p. 66)

The art object made in the analytic context is subject to a particular type of “transferability and material detachability of attributes and states” (Schaverien 1992:42). In the Jewish tradition, at Yom Kippur, the scapegoat is transformed through ritual into an embodiment of the sins of the community and is understood to take them away. Thus in the disposal of the scapegoat the sins are expiated. As Cassirer points out this is “a real physical transference not a symbolic substitution.” It is concretely experienced rather than a symbolic act. It is similar with pictures, which are sometimes experienced by their maker as live and they are not merely symbolic but concretely imbued with affect. They too may be experienced as objects of a transference of attributes and states and so transformed into an embodiment of affect. Thus, art in analysis works similarly to the scapegoat and forms what I have called ‘the scapegoat transference’ (Schaverien 1992, pp. 30-61.

### ***The Scapegoat Transference***

Pictures viewed in the analytic context might be seen as an embodiment of such attributes and states. Thus for the artist they have a formative function. A picture may “uncloak” an image of which the artist had previously only a vague sense impression. Once pictured, the image is “out there” rather than internal. As a result of this, even without verbal interpretation, transformation begins to take place in the inner world of the artist. The picture, by embodying a

transference, creates a space between the image and the act. The picture is its own interpretation.

### ***The Mirror***

In considering the effects of the gaze of the picture on the artist as viewer of his or her own work it is relevant to turn briefly to two European psychoanalysts, Winnicott (1967) and Lacan (1949), who both contribute to analytic thinking about mirroring. Winnicott's interest was in the effects, on psychological growth, of the ways in which an infant is cared for in the early years of life and, the emotion reflected in the mother's eyes. The baby looks at the mother and what s/he sees there contributes to how s/he feels about her/himself. Thus if s/he meets a loving gaze s/he feels lovable but if the gaze is depressed or distracted, s/he may feel guilt or unlovable. Such early emotional experiences very often remain active, influencing interpersonal relationships throughout life. Like Winnicott's mirroring mother, the gaze of the artist rests in his own picture and in this his existence is affirmed. Pictures feedback to the artist, confirming a feeling state and, similar to the mother's gaze, the picture is the result of reverie, emotional investment and it reflects the self state.

Lacan suggests that the moment the infant sees his reflection in a mirror s/he becomes aware of the objective gaze, the gaze of the other. This is the moment of recognition of his status as a separate being (1949, p. 3-4). We might here see a parallel with the picture that presents for the gaze, not the outer image of the person, but the emotional state. Like Lacan's mirror pictures offer an aspect of separation and differentiation from a fused state. The experience of being is reflected in the marks the artist makes and a subjective state is objectified.

Fordham's (1976, p. 16) Jungian perspective was to consider that the infant self was in existence from the start of life. His close observation of infants led to the theory of integration and de-integration. For Fordham the baby is an integrated self from the beginning and, as he develops, he de-integrates, moving towards the maternal environment to take from it what he needs, returning to sleep to integrate the experience. This process too continues throughout life. The picture offers a de-integrate for the gaze of the artist and, following a period of integration, a further separation - differentiation occurs.

The idea is that a picture, as it unfolds or reveals itself, becomes its own interpretation and so no words are needed. The process reflects back to the gaze of its maker, offering a gradual dawning of consciousness. Not all pictures offer this opportunity; it is a result of the effects of the 'life in the picture'.

### ***The life in the picture - Two types of "image"***

The idea that a picture embodies meaning is derived from aesthetic theory and particularly Suzanne Langer, who was both a student of Cassirer and his translator. She writes:

Non discursive form in art...articulates knowledge that cannot be rendered discursively because it concerns experiences that are not formally amenable to discursive projection.

(Langer, 1967, p. 240)

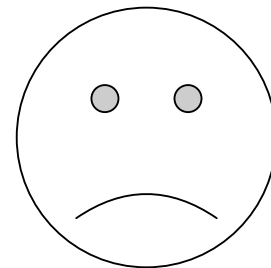
Langer draws attention to imagery which is merely embellishment. This is like the design around the edge of a plate, which signifies the edge of the plate; such imagery is not "significant form", it is "significant motif." Genuine art is profoundly symbolic and the picture is an irreducible entity, which she calls the "art symbol." This is different from the symbols in pictures. I have developed

this, and following Arnaud Reid (1969), called it “the embodied image (Schaverien 1992).”

A distinction is needed between art that is formative in the true sense and art that is functional. This relates to its symbolic depth. I have differentiated between those images that merely signify and those which are profoundly symbolic. The distinction is made on the basis of considering the aesthetic effects of pictures. In analysis there are times when a person wants to describe a situation, maybe something that happened long ago, or maybe something that shows a sequence of events. In that situation the analysand makes a picture to tell something to the analyst.

### ***The Diagrammatic Image***

This is what I have called a diagrammatic image (Schaverien, 1987, 1992). It is descriptive, usually linear, and the point about it is that, in its making, it changes nothing in the psyche of its maker. Its aesthetic quality is limited. This image is not formative in itself; in the process of its making it changes nothing. It is functional, made for a conscious purpose – it is made to tell something to the analyst. Even if such a picture leads to unconscious associations it does not reveal the depth psychological situation. Such a picture needs words to embellish its meaning and sometimes the analysand might write words on their picture. In hierarchical terms such an image is of poor aesthetic quality – it embellishes the spoken word and the spoken word embellishes it - but it does not engage the gaze of either its maker or the analyst viewer. It is more like a house on a map; it refers to something outside of itself. This is different from the embodied image.



***Figure 1 I feel sad.***

### ***The life in the Picture – the Embodied Image – Symbolisation***

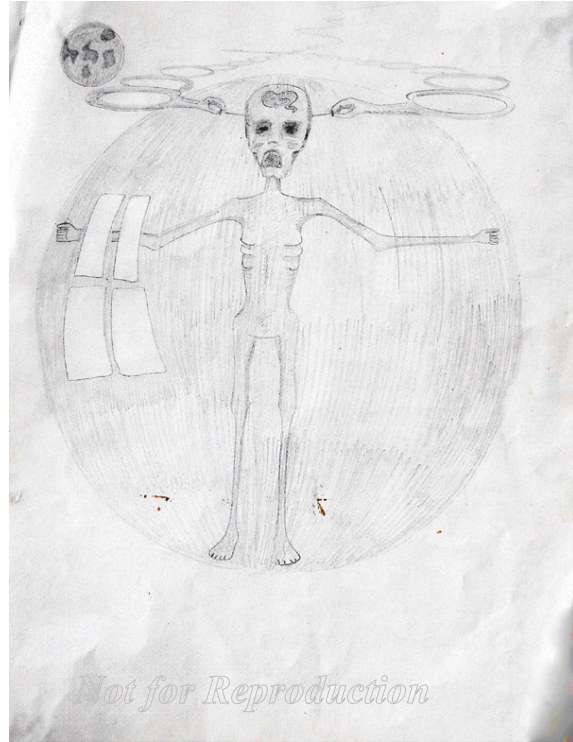
Embodiment begins with the analyst who is moved to use the art materials to attempt to externalise pressure from images that can find no other mode of expression. Led on by a half formed sense impression, s/he makes a mark on paper or in clay. This first unspecific mark leads on to another and, as this process develops, image making takes over. The process begins to lead and have its own momentum. If there is no conscious attempt to depict the image that is in the mind, the picture leads the eye and the hand onwards. The engagement in the process at this point is total. The artist is totally identified with the image in the process of its creation.

### ***The Embodied Image***

Like the “art symbol” the embodied image is one that cannot be reduced to its parts. Thus it is not about symbols in pictures but about the whole work as an irreducible entity. Words may embellish such a picture but they cannot be substituted for it. Unlike the diagram, which needs the elaboration of the spoken or written word, the embodied image is not immediately amenable to discourse. While the diagrammatic image usually stays within known territory, the embodied image transcends what is consciously known. It develops from a combination of selective attention and inattention (Harrison, 1978); thus the act of painting takes precedence over the original sense impression or mental image. Even when there was a preconceived aim, the picture develops in unexpected ways and usually takes a form, which could not have been predicted and so it surprises its maker.

## ***The Embodied Image***

If we regard this picture I think you will agree that no words could replace it. It is profoundly symbolic. This articulation could take no other form, no other mode of expression. This is the first picture in the series that I will show today. The gaze of the picture engages the viewer and, of course, the first viewer of any picture is the artist who made it. The image is no simple



**Figure 2 *The Bubble***

mirror of an inner world state but rather it conveys it through a powerful form of embodiment.

This picture was made by a young man suffering from anorexia. (For the whole history, see my book *Desire and the Female Therapist: Engendered gazes in Art Therapy and Psychotherapy*, Routledge 1995). The points I want to draw out here are related to the way in which, at times, pictures embody a form of transference themselves and echo the transference to the analyst. In developmental terms we might see this image as depicting the psychological situation; trapped within the womb, the body has atrophied. In the picture we see a body without substance or sexual characteristics. It is indeed a deathly state and the gaze of the picture is deathly; one from which the viewer might recoil.

Art presents for the gaze – for the eyes – images that may be half formed and seen only initially in the mind's eye. In presenting images in pictorial form,

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those which have been experienced only as sense impressions or dream residues are transformed, given an external form. Thus it is that consciousness emerges and that gradually the “I comes to grips with the world” (Cassirer, 1955).



**Figure 3 The Castle**

This picture, made within a few days of previous one, might be seen to show a very similar situation but less literal. A dream-like image of a castle surrounded by a moat and covered in cobwebs depicts a very similar state. In this series the position of the sun is significant. Here it is behind the castle and the path is circular. Like the bubble there is no access: no way of entering or exiting and the drawbridge is raised. There is also a deep precipice between the castle and viewer. Like the atrophied figure in the bubble it reveals, in symbolic terms, a trapped situation. The cobwebs that are draped over it might be seen to echo the maternal nature of this castle and its inaccessibility.

This was confirmed in the picture of the Madonna mother with cobwebs in picture 4. This idealised image of a Madonna he said was his mother. However the idealisation is tempered by the spiders' webs. The spider is often thought of as symbolic of the mother. This image embodies a psychological situation for which no words could be substituted.



**Figure 4 Mother**

### ***The Embodied Image – The Art Symbol***

- The embodied image such as this embodies meaning
- It embodies a form of transference
- It is not about symbols in pictures but the art object as an irreducible entity

### ***The Transference Revealed***

The transference to the analyst in the traditional Freudian or Jungian sense was revealed in a picture given to me by the analysand very early in his analysis. He made it at the same time as the bubble picture.



***Figure 5***

At this stage in the analysis the analysand was regressed and he made this picture, which is my name made out of positive elements; the sun, a tree, the moon and stars. The masculine principle was projected; the maternal principle was experienced at this time as a trap. He was unable to move. If we view this picture in conjunction with the one that he made next we can see more clearly how his idealisation of women, and his mother in particular, was a point at which he was arrested. Unable to claim his masculinity he had retreated to being his mother's child; but this was an unsatisfactory psychological situation.



**Figure 6 Birth**

–perhaps warming it. The solar colours, the masculine principle, and light that were previously identified with the analyst in the picture of her name (picture 5), are now his own.

### ***The life of the picture***

Now I would like to pause and consider the processes involved in this series of pictures, by turning to what I have called the *life of the picture*. While dreams and most other analytic phenomena are transient, the art object continues to exist; it reflects back to its maker. It presents an object for the gaze to engage with while cognition catches up. I have identified the following stages in the artist's relation to his or her own art works. Terms borrowed from Cassirer's (1955) discussion of the evolution of consciousness in culture are shown in quotation marks.

As this series progresses we see that this is the state prior to separation differentiation. In the next picture a gradual separation begins to take place. This is an image of mirrors and, as someone who suffered from an eating disorder, his body image was distorted. As he begins the journey of separation he looks along a dangerous precipice road. The sunshine – the masculine principle is behind him as if permeating his body



**Figure 7 Body Images**

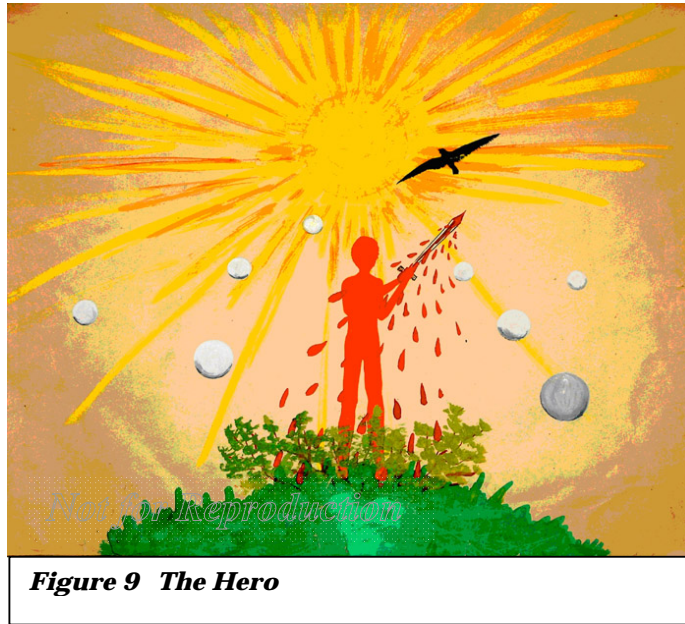
- **Identification** This is the state of the artist immediately after the picture is made; “the phenomenon is bared” and the artist contemplates the picture. At this stage, the artist attached to his or her picture by the gaze and words can rarely add to the experience.
- **Familiarisation.** The picture is viewed and begins to become familiar. The artist begins to understand the “immanent articulation” of the picture. The picture is now seen as outside and so this is the beginning of differentiation. Because the articulation is immanent – visual – words or verbal interpretations are rarely helpful at this point and might well be experienced as intrusive.
- **Acknowledgement.** The artist now begins to consciously acknowledge the implications of the picture: “the dawning of consciousness” as the artist might speculate about other possible, previously unconscious, aspects of the picture. In analysis this is likely to be explored in discussion with the therapist and so words and even interpretations may help.
- **Assimilation.** This is the stage of re-integration of the material: the implications of the imagery, its psychological impact and dawning of conscious meanings are gradually assimilated. This is an additional contemplative stage and so it takes place between the artist and the picture and so words are again unlikely to be needed. This is the stage of living with the picture and may continue for some days, weeks or even in some cases years.

In the next picture (8) the battle to separate from the mother begins in earnest; the inner world state is powerfully uncloaked. His own words – added later – embellish this embodied image. At the time it was made all we could do, he as the artist and I as analyst, was to regard this image and silently acknowledge its powerful multi-layered meanings.



***Figure 8 The death of the child.***

As the separation of the diverse aspects of the self continues, a dangerous state is revealed in this picture. Even though there is regression during this phase, it is notable that a form of separation is taking place.



**Figure 9 The Hero**

This image is a relief in contrast to some of the earlier ones . Now, as he was gaining weight physically, he was also gaining weight psychologically and emotionally. I see this as a rebirth image. In it we see a hero figure who stands facing the sun and holding a sword in his hands. We might see this as revealing a change in his psychological state; his sexuality and life force are accessible. He commented that previously the sword would have been turned inwards. It seems as if the mound on which he stands symbolises the rebirth from the maternal/ earth body. This too can be seen as a developmental state expressed in powerful archetypal imagery. This is very different from the bubble picture (Picture 2), where the deathly figure was trapped as if in the womb. Now we witness a profound psychological change. We have observed a battle with his own psyche, which has led him to be able to engage in life.

This image is also about separation differentiation. Various elements that have been seen before are now, a year later, evident. The castle is reminiscent of the earlier castle (Picture 2) surrounded by a moat and cobwebs. Now, rather than this trapped



**Figure 10 The Sun**

unconscious state, it reveals a conscious light one. The castle is flooded with light and all the elements that were projected onto the analyst, in the picture of my name (Picture 5), are owned. The projected elements of the idealised transference are beginning to be assimilated and owned. The unconscious state is transformed to a conscious awareness.

### ***Life of the Picture - Disposal***

The final stage of the Life of the Picture is disposal. If there is a material object some decision needs to be arrived at as part of the termination of analysis. What happens to the art work? This needs to be worked through, thought about and a conscious decision made.

- **Disposal.** This is a direct result of the previous stages. Some embodied images become empowered in the process of their making; and, as I have elsewhere discussed, such pictures become talismans, holding magical power for the artist. This is additionally so when there is an intense transference within the therapeutic relationship.

The disposal of the picture is the last stage of the process and it is

dependent on the investment made by the artist in the object. Some pictures lose their power once the implications of the image have been consciously assimilated; others continue to be empowered long after the termination of analysis.

### ***Conclusion***

I hope to have shown how these pictures reveal a process in which the making of art was formative in the emergence of consciousness. As the externalisation of internal images brings into the light elements that were previously in the shadow, a transformation takes place in the psychological state of their maker. Thus, although a picture is not a mirror reflection, such pictures do mirror elements of the psyche, revealing them to the artist in an acceptable symbolic form. There is a powerful psychological mirroring function in these pictures; they reveal the life and death battle that is sometimes the stuff of an analysis but this is not “mirror image.” They are a reflection of the changing state of the inner world situation. It is imperative that such states are mediated because they have the capacity to tear the person apart. The gaze of the pictures is compelling for the artist/ analysand and the analyst/ viewer. The pictures are a form of visual interpretation where words are for a time unnecessary. Viewing of pictures subsequent to their making leads to cognition, and eventually to language and the ability to speak of a previously unspeakable state.

### ***Note***

The pictures shown here are extracted from a fuller series from *Desire and the Female Therapist: Engendered Gazes in Psychotherapy and Art Therapy*

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More detailed analysis of the pictures within the transference and the patient's own words are to be found in that book.

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