

## The “Face” in Aesthetics and Psychoanalysis

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Shierry Nicholzen, PhD FIPA, presented her paper “Now It Looks at Me”: Aesthetic Experience and the Work of Psychoanalysis” on April 17, 2013, as part of the NPS Scientific Meetings series. Shierry’s paper was also presented this spring at the conference “On Aesthetics and Psychoanalysis” at Simon Frazer University in Vancouver, BC.

Shierry has a unique background that links her long-term interest in aesthetics with her training in psychoanalysis, specifically British Object Relations. She received a PhD in literature and philosophy from Cornell University and, while there, she studied with Theodor Adorno, who founded the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory. Shierry has translated a number of Adorno’s books, as well as books by Juergen Habermas and other members of the Frankfurt School. She has given many papers on Adorno's work at academic conferences and, in 1997, published *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (MIT Press). After many years of teaching in colleges and universities, most recently in the Environment and Community program at Antioch University Seattle, a program she designed, Shierry entered analytic training at NPS, where I was fortunate enough to be part of her cohort. Currently, in addition to her clinical work and teaching at both NPS and SPSI, Shierry maintains a small studio where she creates sculptural forms out of stone. Her work has been exhibited in several Seattle venues.

Shierry began her presentation by naming six key metaphors that she used to describe the processes at work in both aesthetic and psychoanalytic experience: face, field, enigma, rhythm, metaphor, and configuration. She then went on to elaborate on them, referencing authors from diverse fields, including Adorno, Sigmund Freud, Hans Loewald, Donald Meltzer, Thomas Ogden, Adrian Stokes, Walter Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty, and C.H. Waddington. She explained that the title of her paper, “Now It Looks at Me,” came from the painter Paul Klee description of the moment when a painting “acquires a face.” Adrian Stokes, an analysand of Melanie Klein, took up this notion when he described the face as an indispensable metaphor for the work of art, in his essay “Form in Art.” Although Shierry didn’t reference Klein’s concept of the depressive position explicitly, she alluded to it in her description of the face as “that aspect of the work that has compacted and articulated itself into a separate and enduring other object....”

The notion of field was explored in terms of reciprocity: we look at a work of art while it looks at us. Again, Shierry summoned Stokes, who describes the viewer succumbing to what he calls the “incantation” or “enchantment” of the work and being drawn into a kind of fusion with the psychic dynamics inherent in the work’s form-image. Taking Stokes’ comments about “the viewer having his mental furniture rearranged” a step further, and linking it to the transference/countertransference encounter in the work of

psychoanalysis, Shierry spoke about the experience of art as a whole-object synthesis, which always conveys a benign integration. Shierry continued her discussion of the field as a third by referencing the contemporary work on figurability by César and Sara Botella, which follows the work of the Barangers from the early 1960s.

The next metaphor that Shierry discussed was that of enigma, “the inexhaustible unconscious which points back to the roots of being, to the unknown from which both life and death emerge.” Referencing Laplanche’s concept of “enigmatic signifiers,” Shierry reminded us that the work of analysis is concerned with retranslating a patient’s enigmatic signifier, recognizing that there is never a final or ultimate retranslation. In terms of encountering a work of art, Shierry stated that it was Adorno’s belief that a work of art is inherently enigmatic in that it both reveals and conceals while forever eluding our capacity to grasp it conceptually. For me, this statement is evocative of contemporary sculpture and installation pieces, in which the viewer’s experience is implicitly considered as an integral part of the artist’s creative process. The potential for enigma arises by virtue of the fact that the viewer’s unconscious experience is perpetually in flux, thus creating a new experience each time the work is encountered.

Following her consideration of enigma, Shierry spoke about the concepts of rhythm and repetition. She stated, “If enigma points us both to the inexhaustible generativity of the unconscious (the nourishing breast) and to the terrifying and potentially overwhelming unknown to which it bears witness and with which it threatens us (Meltzer’s aesthetic conflict), then repetition is the way form emerges from enigma. The notion has deep resonance both in approaching aesthetic experience as well as in conceiving the work of analysis. I recently came across a review of a series of exhibitions in New York commemorating painter Ellsworth Kelly’s 90th birthday. The five exhibitions, which present 82 works produced between 1951 and 2013, celebrate Kelly’s deep explorations of the monochrome as particularized through permutations of shape and color. His “repetition with a difference” culminates in what I would term a “radical elegance,” which extends beyond the specifics of each individual piece. In terms of the way repetition may be considered in the work of psychoanalysis, Shierry cited Hans Loewald, who “likens the analytic process to a drama in which the ‘original’ infantile neurosis is not reproduced exactly in the transference neurosis but is rather contextualized—and recontextualized over time—through the interaction between the past and the present both of the analytic situation and the patient’s external life.”

Shierry’s description of the use of metaphor as it is found both in art and in the psychoanalytic process struck me as highly resonant. She describes metaphor as a general term for the linking or binding that reconciles primary and secondary process and, as such, it functions as the assertion of the similarity between two things in which difference is also simultaneously evident. In this section of the paper, Shierry references the work of cognitive scientists Lakoff and Johnson, who describe metaphor as reaching down to the archaic or “carnal” level of corporeal experience. Likewise, as we know, the psychoanalytic process is replete with metaphors, each analytic couple creating their own metaphoric language in terms of free association on the part of the patient and reverie and interpretation on the part of the analyst.

The last metaphor Shierry considers in her paper is that of configuration, which, to some degree, serves to recapitulate the previous five. Thus, she states that “What Stokes calls the face of the work of art, with its radiant flowering contained within compactness, and the work of analysis with its complex reenactments and rearticulations and retranslations of something that touches undifferentiated experience, are both webs of multiple overlapping and interwoven linkages reaching from the undifferentiated sensorimotor and corporeal to the higher-level organization of secondary process thought, perhaps expressed in language, perhaps not. She ends the paper with an example of configurational form from a text about Kafka’s novel *Amerika*, written by Adorno. Encompassing a mere six sentences, Adorno’s text both captures and synthesizes the metaphors Shierry developed and expressed so eloquently in her paper.

The discussion following Shierry’s presentation was notable for being less dialectic and more in the realm of free association. For example, candidate Josh Cohen likened Shierry to a disc jockey sampling a number of disparate riffs to create something new and generative. Following Josh’s comments, another candidate, Nicole Wiggins, made an association to the performance artist Marina Abramovic. Nicole explained that Abramovic and an artist who goes by the name Ulay had been involved in a romantic relationship in the 1970s, performing art out of the van in which they lived. When they felt the relationship had run its course, they decided to walk the Great Wall of China, each from one end, meeting for one last hug in the middle, and then never seeing each other again until Abramovic’s MoMa retrospective in 2010. In the piece “The Artist Is Present,” Abramovic shares a minute of silence with each stranger who sits in front of her. When Ulay arrived without her knowing, the two of them shared a remarkably intimate moment that brought both of them to tears. Those of us in the audience for Shierry’s presentation came away with a sense of fullness, each of us having had the experience of entering into the psychical work of both aesthetic experience and psychoanalysis in a fresh, unsaturated way.

*Maxine Nelson, LICSW, is a senior candidate at NPS with an enduring interest in the intersection between visual art, film, and psychoanalysis. She maintains a private practice in Bellevue, Washington, and is active on several committees at NP,S including Curriculum, Publications, and the organizing committee for the Tenth International Evolving British Object Relations Conference (2014).*