

NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP: MAY SEMINAR

Date: Wednesday 20 June 2018

Time: 6-8 pm

Location: Tutorial Room, No.3, NIDA, 215 Anzac Parade

Readings:

Ades, Dawn, (1995), *Dali 170 illustrations, 28 in colour*, revised and updated edition, Thames and Hufdson Ltd, London.

Berressem, Hanjo, (1996), "Dali and Lacan: Painting the Imaginary Landscapes," *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, edit. Willy Apollon and Richard Feldstein, State University of New York Press, Albany.

Paranoia in Lacan's Theory and Dali's Art

"I am because I hallucinate, and because I hallucinate, I am."

"The enigma of desire, my mother, my mother, my mother."

S. Dali

The immediate effect of the discovery of the unconscious in Freudian psychoanalysis, was broadly felt in art, literature, and a new understanding of the aesthetics in Western intellectual tradition. The theory of unconscious and the interpretation of dreams, conceived for centuries as *terra incognita*, were among the first scientific attempts by Freud to rationalize the irrationality in dreams. By 1930s, most of Freud's psychoanalytic notions have become the household names in Europe. Surrealism opened the floodgates for all irrationality and repressed desires in human psychical existence that could come to the imagination of writers and artists. André Breton's residence, Parisian cafès and other European centres became venues for heated debates about dreams and unconscious. Dali joined Breton and his troupe of surrealists in Paris. Dali would like to define his own role in the surrealist movement as a vessel for whom instant and unmediated expression of emotions and dreams in painting was of paramount significance. Breton set out to formulate a theoretical foundation for the surrealist school. In the first *Surrealist Manifesto*, he writes, "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one propose to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern," (Breton 1972, 26). This statement for Dali made surrealism the foundation of modern art where psychoanalysis played a decisive role. When he was still a student, Dali read *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and the book for him was an exciting source for his own self-analysis and a reservoir for self-expression in art. The book, in a way, mobilized and justified his revolutionary thoughts and artworks. Surrealism offered him a field where he can brings psychoanalysis and art together.

The paranoid mechanism can only appear to us, from the specifically Surrealist point of view we take, as proof of the dialectical value of that principle of verification through which the element of delirium passes practically into the tangible domain of action, and a guarantee of the sensational victory of Surrealism in the domain of automatism and the dream. (Dali, cited in Ades, 1995, 124)

Paranoia and hallucination as the symbolic representation of sexual anxiety as a whole make the themes of many of Dali's works, however, his painting, *Accommodation of Desire* is a very typical examples where sexual impulses are so powerfully represented by the image of open-mouth lion, which according to Freud shows in a symbolic manner, the fear of the ego from the overpowering impulses of a dreamer in dreams. Many of Freudian psychoanalytical concepts such as free association, hallucination, dream-work, dream symbolism, condensation and displacement, and Lacanian notion of the mirror stage, repetition, fragmented bodily images, the gaze, multiplication of the images and so on are shining in Dali's works. Surrealism and psychoanalysis, therefore, have become *savoir-faire* of the whole of Dali's art.

Based on the analysis of a Judge Schreber's paranoid delusions such as persisting feelings of persecution, grandeur, jealousy, and erotomania, Freud concluded that paranoia was related to the defence mechanism of Shreber by means of which he fared to ward off his unconscious homosexual drives. Shreber's problem was initially diagnosed as a mental disorder termed as hypochondriac delusion by his psychiatrist. Freud's diagnosis of paranoid individuals, however, was the analysand's obsessive urges for a systematic sustenance of paranoid hallucinatory delusions. His case for illustration was Shreber's compulsive obsession and his hallucinatory delusions and an intermittent outburst of paranoid episodes. Such symptomatic return was part of Shreber's unconscious drives, which did not allow him like that of any other paranoid to neither weaken or deteriorate his condition. Similarly, Lacan based his unpublished doctoral dissertation, *On Paranoid Psychosis in its Relation to Personality*, on the study of a female paranoid, Aimée, the heroine of his patient's novel. While accepting Shreber's unconscious drives outlined by Freud in his *Seminar: The Psychosis*, he revised Freud's homosexual roots of paranoia. Lacan depicts paranoia as a logical product of paternal foreclosure, which is also considered as the principle denominator is psychosis. Lacan locates the foundation of paranoia in the alienation of the ego in the mirror stage. Besides, self-punishing paranoia of Aimée was linked to the dominance of the superego. From Lacan we know that the super-ego is not wholly a moralizing agency. It is rather a torturing machine that never let the subject go free from its prison.

With regard to Dali's notion of paranoia, Lacan "made a cutting remark about S. Dali, and gave his new conception of "paranoia as identifying *jouissance* in the locus of the Other," (Marini, 1982, 203). Dali read Lacan's dissertation and drew upon it as the affirmation of his own theoretical notion, "Paranoid Critical Interpretation of the Obsessive Image," which appeared in the same issue of a Surrealist Journal, *Le Minotaure* with Lacan's essay, "The Problem of Style and the Psychiatric Conception of Paranoid Forms of Experience." Both Lacan and the painter try to formulate a paranoid theory of art. Dali was appreciative of Lacan's theory and emphasized that he brought paranoia from the darkness of traditional psychiatry to the light, as he says, "Before Lacan, psychiatry had made a grave mistake, in that it claimed that the systematization of the paranoid delirium was a belated action and this phenomenon had to be taken as a "thinking madness." Lacan has proven the opposite: the delirium itself is a systematization." (Berressem, 1996, 275-276). On his part, Lacan, while commenting on Dali, termed paranoid system or 'paranoid hallucinatory system' in art as symbolic signifying languages. In a short essay, "On My Antecedents," in *Écrits*, Lacan

writes at the very outset that his “entry into psychoanalysis,” occurred via a “doorway” which he names “mental automatism,” Dali’s ‘critical paranoia’ and R. Crevel’s *Le Clavecin de Diderot*. (Lacan, 2006,51). Meantime, Lacan makes it also clear that the mirror stage was the transition between the imaginary and the symbolic and psychoanalysis makes a “retreat to the same level as the imaginary.” (Ibid)

Dali professes that paranoia as “a form of active psychological invention, contrary to the passive experience of the dream that previously had provided the paradigm for the surrealist appropriation of the Freudian theory of the unconscious,” (Levine, 2008, 75-76). Dali also suggests that a hallucinated surrealist vision is produced in painting by the distortion of the realism of the vision and consciousness as a result of the pressure of the unconscious desire. Looking at the innovative trends that underlines Dali’s art, after he met up with Dali in London in 1938, Freud wrote, “whereas in the works of old masters he sought the hidden note of the unconscious, in Dali’s art it was the conscious intention that he saw.” (Ibid). In addition, a paranoid subject that Dali prefers to portray in his paintings is the object of a voyeuristic and persecutory gaze of the world. The gazing is directed towards a prohibited desire and consequently transgressing the law. Lacan and Dali agree also that haunting surrealistic images of the dreams and their reflections in painting are signifiers that prepare the ground for signification. However, Lacan as it was stated above, places the disfunction of the paternal metaphor or foreclosure of the signifier of the name-of-the-father at the centre of paranoid psychosis. In the imaginary vision of modern painting, according to Lacan, the symbolic lack appears as the phallus, as its symbolic depiction. A classic example of such symbolic representation in visual art was identified by Lacan the shadowy existence of an anamorphic skull at the background of Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*. Lacan in his seminars often comments on Dali’s works that are blemished with the imaginary signifier, the imaginary phallus, as the symbol of castration. Dali’s *The Persistence of Memory* (*soft watches*), *the Great Masturbator*, *Retrospective Bust of a Woman*, are famous examples. *The persistence of Memory* shows a figure considered to be a self-portrait of Dali himself at the middle of the painting and four watches. There are a swarm of ants on a pocket watch and one fly on the other. The title of this painting suggests that Dali’s intention behind the painting is to focus on the unconscious and one of its central themes: the lack of any sense of time. For Lacan art attempts to cover this lack or emptiness, “All art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness,” (Lacan, 1992, 130). The watches termed by Dali as “camembert of time” stand for past-present-future time. There are four watches, but one is faced down. The idea of timelessness in the painting is reinforced in the mind of spectators by a thick shadow, showing the passing sun from the place. An egg at the distance shore symbolizes life. The dried branchless tree that commentator identified as olive symbolizes the end of peace.

In general, each work by Dali portrays an eruption of the imaginary that refuses meaning by dissociation, fragmentation, transubstantiation of the living creatures and so on. Such a chaotic signifying system makes the definitive feature of paranoid discourse as well. The foreclosure of the father that according to Lacan is constituted by Schreber is the name-of-the-father which remains as a ‘hole’ in the symbolic and an inassimilable signifier. Surrealism is in a nutshell an attempt “to paint the ‘primary process,’ to render socially repressed desire, using ‘automatism,’ a passive opening up to irrational images.” (Tambling, 2012, 138)

For Dali, paranoia was the fountain of artistic creation that comes about automatically in an artist’s mind when his or her mind is saturated with surrealism and psychoanalysis. As a

master artist and theoretician, Dali developed his own version of paranoid-critical as a magnifying device for the practices of dreams and automatism that cross the boundaries between reason and unreason.

The paranoid activity offers us the possibility of the systemization of delirium. Paranoid images are due to the delirium of interpretation. The delirium which, in the dream, is wiped out on waking, really continues into these paranoid images and it is directly communicable to everybody. In effect we are going to see how the paranoid delirium can make it so that an odalisque is at once a horse and a loin. The odalisque arrives, she lies down lazily. Notice the beginning of the movement of the horse's tail; it becomes odalisque again and now it is a lion which disappears in the distance. There again is a real phantom. (Dali cited in Ades, 1995, 124)

Dali's paranoid-critical method adds a new dimension to the work of art, which juxtaposes the art with its critical interpretation and criticism. The idea that lead to the creation of a work of art is triggered by paranoia associated with irrational thoughts and spontaneous irrational knowledge. This knowledge serves as the medium between the essential delusional impulses to the reality of day-to-day life. The primary technic of Dali's method is the presence of anamorphic objects which organizes every object in the picture with its symbolic function. Dali divides objects of his painting that he calls 'surrealist objects' into six types (symbolic, transubstantiated, projecting, wrapped, machinic and mould objects). All types are aimed at the production of crowds of objects with ultimate distortion. Lacan in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* seized upon this distortion of the objects in Dali and who saw this distortion as giving way to the presence of the imaginary phallus with a symbolic function that he termed as the 'phallic ghost', "something symbolic of the function of the lack, of the appearance of the phallic ghost?" (Lacan, 1994, 88). Lacan places 'paranoid ambiguities' at the centre of this play with the distorted objects. In reference to Dali's porcelain object, *Retrospective bust a Woman*, Lacan observes that Dali like the skull in *The Ambassadors*, creates that phallic ghost in terms of a loaf of French bread: "Dali was once pleased to place on the head of an old woman, chosen deliberately for her wretched, filthy appearance and, indeed, because she seems to be unaware of the fact," (Ibid). In an exhibition, Picasso's Afghan shepherd dog reportedly ate the bread. Breton in his theories always lays emphasis on the fabrication of the objects that we see in our dreams.

Lacan's theory of the gaze provides a solution or better, identifies the *raison d'être* of that compulsive obsession in distortion and anamorphic alteration of the objects that Dali names 'psycho-atmospheric-anamorphic object'. The phallic ghost or the distorted object symbolizes the lack which in the meantime functions as 'a trap for the gaze'. For, according to Lacan, each picture is "a trap for the gaze. In any picture, it is precisely in seeking the gaze in each of its points that you will see it disappear." (Ibid, 89). This lack symbolizes the lost object which finds its visual signifier in painting that plays with the eyes of a spectator. The painter hides the true feature and meaning of such objects in order to tame the gaze of the other, the spectator. The spectator who looks and enjoys a picture, it is not that he is an autonomous subject of conscious reflection but the subject of desire. The hidden and distorted object is averted from a spectator's gaze and annihilated for it is in Lacanian sense "an embodiment of the *minus-phi* $[(-\phi)]$ castration, which for us, centres the whole organization of the desires through the framework of the fundamental drives," (Ibid).

The greater paranoid aptitude of the artist, for Dali, produces more aesthetically complicated art. Dali would always seek evidence of his theories from his constant hybridization of psychoanalysis and his own experimental activities.

His [Dali's] theories, more prudently, stresses the self-conscious and heuristic aspect of his automatist and psychological activity; hence the appellation 'critical' in his definition –his is a selective, or semi-paranoiac, conscious activity. Thus considered, Dali's famous statement that "the only difference between myself and a madman is that I am not mad" seems close to platitudinous truism. (Wach, 1993, 183)

In conclusion, Lacan's theory of art and the place of paranoia in its production is closely correlated to Dali's art plus theory. Both underpin an overriding obsession on the part of the artist as a paranoiac genius. They are also in close agreement about the use of theory as a device for the interpretation and criticism of the work of art. In this, Dali distances himself in his later works from the automatism in surrealism as it is more of a passive nature of creation. Lacan's theory of the gaze shed more light on how to analyzing modern visual arts. Each picture or painting, for him, is a trap for the gaze of the other. The aim of the trap or in Lacan's sense phallic ghost as the embodiment of castration is aimed at diverting the gaze of the spectator as *The Ambassadors* carries the eyes of the spectator around to find the hidden skull. Lacan related the gaze to desire which is in functional presence from the viewer to the painter and from the painter to his art. Inspirational comments of Freud and Lacan on Dali's work could be used as a powerful instrument for deciphering mysteries of modernist and avant-garde art. For Freud, modernist art epitomized by Dali's work provides a gallery of the unconscious and we are entangled in the maze of consciousness, where in classical art, we need to find the hidden expression of the unconscious. Lacan on his part defines Dali's work as quintessential manifestation of the *jouissance* in the field of the Other. This confirms that desire is aimed at *jouissance* in which the death drive plays a major role. The question that arises from the suspension of the gaze of the other in visual art, is the cause of this suspension itself. Lacan answer this which has been so beautifully put in *Art, Death and Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, a book I read recently:

"The last gaze of life becomes the first gaze of a portrait. The moment of transition from the end of life to the birth of painting vacillates between these two possibilities of the gaze and is hence suspended."

- We will also discuss in detail, Dali's famous painting *Metamorphose de Narcisse* and Van Gogh's *Peasant's Shoes* in the seminar.

- **Dr Ehsan Azari Stanizai**

Notes:

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Lacan, Jacques, (1992), *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (1959-1960)*, trans. Dennis Porter, Routledge, London.

—(1994), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, edit. Jacques-Alain Miller, Intro. David Macey.

—(2006), *Ecrits, First Complete Version in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, WW Norton & Company, New York.

Levine, Steven, (2008), *Lacan Reframed: A guide for the arts students*, I B Tauris & Co. Ltd, London.

Tambling, Jeremy, (1202), *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Wach, Kenneth, (1993), "The Pearl Divers of the Unconscious: Freud, Surrealism and Psychology," *Surrealism: Revolution by Night*, edited and published by the Department of National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.