

By Lilian Munk Rösing

Against Against Interpretation. Or: In Defence of Association

Is the work of art a rebus of signs to be interpreted or a highly sensuous object before which you should refrain from interpretation in favour of aesthetic experience? The latter position is maintained by Susan Sontag in her influential essay “Against Interpretation”. My claim is that Freud’s method in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, interpretation by association, offers a third alternative to the decoding of signs on one hand, and the prohibition against interpretation on the other hand. Freud’s associations are often born from the aesthetic (sensuous, material) qualities of speech (sound figures, metaphors). Yet, the association does not stop at these qualities to simply celebrate them, it does perform an interpretation, but through attention to the signifier’s material qualities and context of other signifiers, rather than by isolating it and translating it into some kind of symbolic meaning.

As an academic scholar I have been taught that argumentation by association is no-go. “This reminds me of...”, “this is like...” are ways of argumentation that should be avoided. This is also what I teach my bachelor students. As an analysand on the couch, and as an essayist, on the contrary, I have experienced association as the way to go, the way that leads to insight. Perhaps “insight” is not the right

metaphor, perhaps “a change of sight” is better. I know that this is what I am always looking for in an analysis of a literary text, or a work of art: that it makes me see something that I did not see before. “Go on, change my view!” – as the art historian T. J. Clark demands from art historical writing, even if he admits that “reading the scholarship with that test in mind [...] is hopeless, pompous [...] (which is why I read so little and give up on so much.)”¹

Clark’s reflection is from his book *The Sight of Death* which is a kind of diary over a period of half a year when he went every day to the Getty Gallery in Los Angeles to look at the same two paintings by Poussin. He gave himself this small daily break in a stressful academic life. He lets his gaze and thoughts wander in front of the paintings as the light changes with the season and the time of day. The result is art writing in an essayistic rather than academic style. He observes and associates in front of the paintings and even finds himself writing poems.

What I would like to do in this article is, on the one hand, argue for association as a valid method also *within* academia, and on the other hand, argue for association as a way of interpretation that does not disrespect the specific aesthetic qualities of literary and art works. I will base my argument on examples from Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* and from French art historian and philosopher George Didi-Huberman’s writings.

ASSOCIATION BY SONORITY

One of my favorite dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is the one in which Freud walks into a kitchen to have some “Mehlspeise” (sweet dishes made from flour, eggs and sugar, such as pancakes) and is met by three women rubbing their hands as if they were making “Knödel” (dumplings). Freud has an amazing association to his mother rubbing her hands in front of him when he was a small boy to give him evidence that “we all owe to nature a death”. The evidence was the small black flakes of dead skin that fell from her palms.

But Freud’s associations also unfold chains of words and names connected by sonorous similarity. He associates Knödel to the name Knödl, a university professor who was caught in plagiarism. The German word for plagiarism, “Plagiat”, joins (through sonorous association) the name Pélagie, which is Freud’s first association to the dream and stems from a novel he read as a teenager; at the end of the novel the hero falls insane and keeps calling out three women’s names, one

of which is Pélagie. So Pélagie connects to the three women theme (the three women in the kitchen, associated with the three Parzen, norms), but also (through sonorous association) to the Plagiat theme and even to the verb “plagen” (trouble) – Freud’s desires trouble (“plagen”) him.

As often in Freud’s interpretations of his own dreams, the associations move on two different tracks, one concerning his achievements as a scholar including his relations to teachers and colleagues, all men – and another one concerning his relation to women. Through perhaps the most remarkable association in the Knödel dream, Freud connects those two tracks by the sound figure “Brücke”/ “Brüsten” (bridge/breasts). “Brücke” pops up as the name of a respected professor. “Brüsten” pops up with a line from Goethe’s *Faust* about the enjoyment at the breasts of Wisdom, “*der Weisheit Brüsten*”. Freud longs for the time when he felt fully satisfied at the breasts of wisdom, and regrets that he has had to go for other breasts. The remarkable thing is the way that “Brücke” is both this name popping up and a name for the operation of bridging that this name performs, building a bridge (“Brücke”) from Brücke to Brüsten. Freud stresses this himself, he sees the meta-dimension or performative dimension in the word “Brücke”. “Brücke” contains a self-reflection on its own performative operation.

What is remarkable is also that a recurrent theme throughout Freud’s associations to the Knödel dreams is ridiculous names – or names that can easily be made fun of because they are close to a word with a meaning: Knödl, Brücke, Fleischl, even Freud. There seems to be something comical in the coincidence of proper name and common noun, in the signifier posing as the signature of the unique subject and being at the same time an arbitrary signifier with a vernacular meaning. Even the family name, le nom-du-père, which ought to be some kind of master-signifier, the authorizing stamp that gives to the subject its identity, is caught up in the chain of signifiers.

It is analyses like this that make me consider *The Interpretation of Dreams* a basic textbook not only for psychoanalysts, but also for students of art and literature. Its method is association, but association based on the formal aspect, the aesthetic qualities of the sign, here the sonorous qualities of the words. Freud has an eye and an ear for the aesthetic qualities of the word, for its taking part in a chain of signifiers through this aesthetic quality, and for its performative dimension.

The Interpretation of Dreams abounds in associations through sonority. Another example is the associations that a woman patient has to a nonsense word that has occurred to her in a dream: “Maistollmütz”. Her associations dissolve the word into its syllables and produce a chain of sonorously related names and words: Mannstoll (mad for men), Olmütz (town in Czechia), Meißner Porzellan, the English word “Miss”, and the Jewish slang word “mies” (disgusting).

Freud here states: “eine lange Kette von Gedanken und Anknüpfungen ging von jeder der Silben des Wortklumpens ab.”² (“A long chain of thoughts and associations led off from each syllable of this verbal hotchpotch.”³)

With his metaphor of “Wortklump” – which literally means “word lump” rather than “hotchpotch” – Freud sees the word as a lump of syllables, made from mixed materials, in deed some kind of verbal “Knödel”. Thus, the “Knödel” of the Knödel dream might be seen as a metaphor for the condensation that certain dream words perform, like “Maistollmütz”, or (in the Knödel dream) “Plagiat”. The associations to these word lumps (“Mannstoll”, “Olmütz” or “Pélagie, plagen”) are based on the material of which these lumps consist, rather than on their signification.

In Chapter VII Freud explains his special attention to “Gleichklangsassoziationen”, associations based on sonorous similarity, by the fact that such associations are disdained by our conscious thinking.⁴ Our unconscious thinking can attach itself to figures that are not regarded as significant, such as sound figures.

Being attentive to the materiality of the signifier means being attentive to that dimension of language which is conventionally regarded as a kind of waste from the production of meaning, but this waste is the stuff that literary language is made of, which is why Lacan rearranges the letters of the word “littérature” and speaks of “litureterre”. A pun on “litière”, litter or waste, and terre, earth or dirt. Letters as litter, literature as “litteradirt”, a kind of dumping ground for the waste product of communicative language.⁵

SUSPENSION OF INTERPRETATION

In 1966 Susan Sontag published her essay “Against Interpretation” which has been highly influential in the aesthetic disciplines. Sontag states that “Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art”⁶ and that “Interpretation [...] indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else”.⁷

Here Sontag herself performs quite an interpretation, in the manner of vulgar Freudianism I would say, as she claims interpretation to be driven by an unconscious wish to replace the work of art with something else, as if interpretation were the art critic's envious revenge on the artist.

Sontag's essay does have an important point, though – and a great appeal to lovers of art and literature – in its insistence on staying with the aesthetic experience of the artwork. Replacing the “surface” of verbal or painterly materiality with some “message” or “morality” beneath or behind this surface, is indeed disrespecting the artwork and the specificity of aesthetic experience and cognition. But the prohibition against interpretation disrespects the fact that interpretation is just as much an aspect of the subject's genesis as is sensual experience.

Even biologists would say that perception at a basic level involves selection and interpretation. To psychoanalysis, the subject is born as an attempt to interpret what the world wants from it. The subject originates in its relation to “the Other” which is basically a relation of interpretation: What is the Other's desire, and what am I to the Other's desire? We could say it à la Laplanche: The subject is born as an attempt to interpret the enigmatic messages that surround it from the beginning.⁸ Or à la Zupančič: The subject originates at the “paradoxical joint between the biological body and the Symbolic”.⁹ Or à la Eric Santner: The subject is life trying to make sense of itself – while failing.¹⁰

If “interpretation” is understood as a decoding of signifiers detached from their sensual qualities and from their context of other signifiers, I am also against it. But Freud's interpretation through association is based on these qualities and this context.

It may be relevant to speak of a *suspension* of interpretation, though. To be sensitive to the aesthetic, material, performative dimension of the signifier and its inscription into chains of signifiers, we have to suspend its reference to some signified. This suspension is part of what Freud terms “gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit” (“free floating attention”) which is the attitude he recommends the analyst to adopt when listening to the analysand speaking from the couch.

Suspending interpretation and letting one's attention flow freely are part of that “suspension of knowledge” that to Lacan defines the analyst's discourse. To become the screen of projections (*a*) for the

desire of the analysand ($\$$), the analyst must suspend knowledge (S_2), put it “under the bar” where we find it in Lacan’s formula:

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \xrightarrow{A} \frac{\$}{S_1}$$

The analyst’s “free floating attention” responds and corresponds to the analysand’s free association. They are, respectively, a way of listening and a way of speaking that suspend the conventions and hierarchies normally governing our perception, deciding what we think deserves our attention; what we find “worth listening to”, “worth speaking of” – or “worth looking at”. To Freud, the unconscious speaks through details and matters that we would “normally” judge unimportant, rather than through overtly “important” themes such as “my relation to my mother . . .” Likewise, when confronted with a painting, we miss something if we do not “suspend” the naturalist and/or iconographic conventions of art history, directing us towards motifs that we want to judge by their degree of “realism”, or to interpret as “symbols” of this and that. An analysis of a work of art inspired by psychoanalysis will respond to it by free floating attention as well as free association – by the analyst’s as well as the analysand’s attitude, strictly speaking. Except that even in psychoanalysis, both attitudes are also at play in both the analysand (who will start listening to her own speaking) and the analyst (who will also freely associate as part of her free-floating attention).

The French art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman refers to Freud’s concept of “gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit” (in French: “attention flottante”) when describing how he approaches Fra Angelico’s fresco of the Annunciation in the San Marco Convent in Florence and is overwhelmed by the sensuous experience of its central field of white pigment which to a figurative reading is just emptiness, and to a historical reading an evidence of the primitivism of Fra Angelico’s early renaissance Tuscan style.¹¹ Well-read in Lacan as he is, he might as well have referred to the “suspension of knowledge” that defines the analyst’s discourse. Because this is what Didi-Huberman does: In order to become sensitive to the material and performative dimensions of the painting, he suspends the historical (and biographical) knowledge which in art history often overrules

aesthetic experience. As we shall see, this special sensitivity also makes him freely associate.

ENDLESS APORETIC EKPHRASIS

Didi-Huberman has a special name for the point where the materiality of the signifier overshadows its semantic reference. He calls it “pan”, a word that he takes from Proust’s, or rather Proust’s character Bergotte’s, line about the little patch of yellow wall, “petit *pan* du mur jaune”, in Vermeer’s painting *View from Delft*. Bergotte has an aesthetic revelation in front of *View from Delft* as the yellow material paint imposes itself upon him and suspends its reference to a wall in Delft. “Patch” (the materiality of the signifier) overshadows “wall” (signified), so to speak.

We are here in the realm of painting, and not, as in the examples from Freud, in the realm of verbal language. Didi-Huberman stresses the difference between painting and language: The smallest units of language (letters) are coded, whereas the smallest units of painting (strokes or drops of paint) are not.¹² Nonetheless, as we have seen above, even when it comes to verbal language, it has a material surplus which exceeds the semantic code. This transference from painting to verbal language is carried out by Proust’s Bergotte as well. His aesthetic revelation faced with *View from Delft* is actually more like an aesthetic shock: He falls down on a sofa in front of the painting and... dies! He just has the time to think: “That is how I ought to have written. My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with several layers of colour, made my sentences precious in themselves, like this little yellow patch of wall.”¹³ I thus find the same attention to the materiality of the signifier at play in Didi-Huberman’s (and Proust’s and Bergotte’s) attention to patches of paint as in Freud’s attention to lumps of words.

Didi-Huberman presents the attention to “pan” as a third alternative to interpretation as decoding on one hand, and the prohibition against interpretation on the other. In art history, interpretation as decoding has a strong tradition, the so-called iconographic method funded by Erwin Panofsky who regards paintings as assemblages of signs whose signification can be interpreted if you know the code. If a male figure in a medieval painting holds a knife, he is Saint Bartholomew, if he holds a corkscrew, he is not.¹⁴ Didi-Huberman introduces Svetlana Alpers as an opponent to this iconographic tradition. Alpers argues that a painting such as *View from Delft* is purely

descriptive; the walls, the clouds, the towers do not mean anything but walls, towers, clouds.

According to Alpers, the painting is a perfect rendering of the view and testifies to Vermeer's mastery of accurately observing the world and reproducing what he has observed.¹⁵ Thus Alpers, in line with Sontag, issues a prohibition against interpretation. But at the same time, she disregards the material of the painting "as if paint, an opaque material of the painting, 'rendered' the visible with as much transparency as a well-polished lens".¹⁶ And she reduces the painter (as well as the beholder) to a kind of pure optic instrument, a non-subject:

[S]he presupposes a Vermeerian 'subject' of the gaze that is absolute, non-human: what is in play, she repeats, still about the *View of Delft*, 'is the eye, not a human observer'. As if the eye were 'pure' – organ without drive.¹⁷

Paying attention to the "pan" (the material signifier) is paying attention to the place in which coded as well as mimetic representation breaks down. To Didi-Huberman *pan* is a "symptom" in the Freudian sense – it is a kind of tic or gesture taking over where conventional signification stops.¹⁸ But this does not mean that it does not mean anything. Just like Freud's "lump of words" launches a chain of thoughts and associations, so does Didi-Huberman's patch of paint.

In another Vermeer painting, *The Lacemaker*, Didi-Huberman finds the *pan* in the patch of red paint which figuratively represents a file of red threads (and which to Alpers is a poor representation, a spot where Vermeer, the master of accurate depiction, has failed¹⁹). The chaos of red thread/red paint launches this chain of associations in Didi-Huberman:

this is ... a file of ecru threads ... but that are like blood ... but that flow from a cushion ... but that turn back on themselves ... but that fall again like rain ... but that make a stain or a landscape.²⁰

Didi-Huberman is here beginning to write that kind of "endless, reticulate, aporetic ekphrases" that he attributes to "the man of the *pan*" as different from "the man of the detail" who writes "romans à clefs": raising a question in the beginning and answering it in the end by

decoding (figurative) details as symbolic “keys” to understanding the work.²¹

But is this then the ideal of art criticism? To write “endless, reticulate, aporetic ekphrases”? Would not the Lacanian objection be that the endless web of associations has to be arrested at some point – the point where it touches upon the real...?

As Alenka Zupančič has it: “[Liberation [...] does not come from total immersion in the unconscious and its rhizomatic, all-encompassing network.” To Zupančič, the “subjective dimension” (that separates the subject from ChatGPT, which is in fact a kind of endless web of associations) emerges “when an association touches a particularly sensitive point, or a blind spot (what psychoanalysis would call the *real* or the *impossible*).”²²

Even if Didi-Huberman sees in *pan* a potential for endless associations, he does connect it to the Lacanian ‘real’, to “the real object of painting in the sense that Lacan situated the ‘real object’ of the gaze as a ‘pulsatile, dazzling, and spread-out function’ in the picture itself: a function connected to ‘unexpected arrival’, to trouble, to encounter, to trauma, and the drive.”²³

The *pan* has the effect of infecting the entire picture, shattering its system of signification. Taking *The Lacemaker* as his example, Didi-Huberman shows how “the mimetic self-evidences begin to crumble” in the light of the red chaos of thread: “The green carpet liquefies, the tassel at left turns diaphanous”, and the “blotch of anthracitic gray” to the left of the lacemaker’s face looks like “some kind of big black bird clasping [her] neck”.²⁴

Perhaps the issue is not that the endless chain of associations must stop when we touch upon the real. Perhaps the question is rather: When is a chain of associations a line of flight from something that touches upon the real, and when is it rather a circling around the real in the manner of the drive? Or: When is it a hysterical enjoyment of the symbolic order’s chains of signifiers, and when is it the effect of the symbolic order having been shattered? When does it coincide with this “change of view” that T. J. Clark (and I) demands from art criticism, opening a flaw in and a possible rearrangement of the symbolic order?

ALLEGORY OF HOPE OR ANGEL OF HISTORY?

My last argument for association (sensitive to aesthetic qualities) as method will be Didi-Huberman’s interpretation of an image from

Jean Luc Godard's film *Histoires du Cinéma*. An interpretation by association that does change one's view, I would argue.

It is to be found in *Images malgré tout, Images In Spite Of All*²⁵ which is about four photos from Birkenau, taken by a prisoner, and all the ethical questions about images and interpretation of images that they raise. I will here leave those extremely important questions aside, though, to present the argument that I find in this book for association as a fundamental engine of thought.

With reference to among other Jean-Luc Godard's concept of *montage*, Walter Benjamin's *dialectical image*, Baudelaire's concept of *correspondances*, and Freud's method of association, Didi-Huberman argues that associating from one image to another is basically thinking: As soon as one juxta- or superposes two images, thinking is going on.

One of his examples is this shot from Godard's *Histoires du Cinéma*:



This is a montage of Giotto and George Stevens, of a part of Giotto's *Noli me Tangere* (1303) and a scene from the film *A Place in the Sun* (1951), by George Stevens. Stevens is mostly known for his Hollywood comedies and dramas, but as a leader of a special unit of the U. S. Army he filmed in Dachau and Neuhausen when the camps were liberated in

1945. (Thus, even this image has a connection to the central theme of *Images malgré tout*: pictures from the concentration camps.)

From the Giotto painting, Godard has taken a detail in which Maria Magdalena reaches out her arms toward Christ, and Christ's hand rejects her, telling her not to touch him: *Noli me tangere*. Godard has turned this cut from Giotto 90 degrees and double exposed it with the shot from Stevens' film, so that Elizabeth Taylor rising from the water is embraced by the space between Maria Magdalena's arms and Christ's hand. Jacques Rancière has interpreted the figure of Elizabeth Taylor here as an angel of resurrection, and the image as a celebration of the resurrection of cinematic art after World War II.²⁶

Godard's image is in itself an association of two seemingly unrelated images: Elizabeth Taylor in a swimsuit and Maria Magdalena reaching for Christ. Didi-Huberman's interpretation also works by way of association: He associates from Giotto's Maria Magdalena figure to the allegorical figure of *Hope* who reaches out her arms in the same way in another fresco by Giotto. From Giotto he further associates to Andrea Pisano depicting the gesture of *Hope* similarly in a bronze panel.

Until now, Didi-Huberman's chain of associations is not controversial. I guess that even the most conventional (that is, historicist) art historian would find it legitimate to refer from one Giotto fresco to another one, and from one allegorical figure of *Hope* to another one from about the same period. The conventional art historian would then probably want to examine whether Pisano has seen Giotto's figure of *Hope* and could be inspired by it. This is not Didi-Huberman's interest. Instead, he takes a leap: From Pisano's allegory of *Hope* to Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* who also reaches out his arms, but in a gesture of horror rather than hope.

Here we can talk about free association, an association rooted in Didi-Huberman's mind and certainly not in conventional art history which disdains such anachronistic leaps, unless a direct inspiration from Pisano to Klee could be proved. This association has the character of a "leap", not only an anachronistic leap in time, but perhaps even a "leap of faith" in the Kierkegaardian sense: a daring and seemingly irrelevant association that you must just throw yourself into, trusting that it will imply some kind of insight – or change of sight.

The link in Didi-Huberman's mind is Walter Benjamin, who has written small ekphrases of both images, Pisano's *Hope* and Klee's *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin's ekphrasis of *Angelus Novus*, from his *Theses*

on the *Philosophy of History*, is well-known. He interprets Klee's angel as the "Angel of History" who turns his face towards the past and is blown backwards into the future by a storm emanating from Paradise. With eyes wide open, he sees an ever-mounting array of ruins piling up in front of him. This is a counter-narrative to the notion of History as an unbroken sequence of growth and progress. For Benjamin, History is an endlessly unfolding catastrophe.

In accordance with Didi-Huberman's own claim, that the juxtaposition of two images is *thinking*, I would claim that this association from Pisano to Klee, from *Hope* to Benjamin's *Angel of History*, is the moment that triggers thinking, the moment when Didi-Huberman's analysis produces new thoughts. A new light is shed on Elizabeth Taylor's figure in Godard's *montage*: She is not the angel of resurrection (of cinematic art), as Rancière would have it. Rather the reappearing Hollywood star, hovering in the empty space between Magdalena's reaching arms and Christ's rejecting hand, is in the grip of the Benjaminian angel of history, history as ongoing catastrophe. The anachronistic association from the allegories of hope to the angel of history as catastrophe is the moment when Didi-Huberman meets Clark's requirement for art criticism: Change my view!

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- 1 Clark 2006: 53
 - 2 Freud 1972: 298
 - 3 Freud 1965: 331
 - 4 Freud 1972: 566
 - 5 Lacan 2001
 - 6 Sontag 2006: 7
 - 7 *Ibid.*: 10
 - 8 Laplanche 1999
 - 9 Zupančič 2008: 207
 - 10 Santner 2001
 - 11 Didi-Huberman 1990: 25
 - 12 Didi-Huberman 2005: 263
 - 13 *Ibid.*: 246
 - 14 Panofsky 1972: 7
 - 15 Alpers 1983
 - 16 Didi-Huberman 2005: 242
 - 17 *Ibid.*: 245
 - 18 *Ibid.*: 261
 - 19 *Ibid.*: 255
 - 20 *Ibid.*: 269
 - 21 *Ibid.*: 269
 - 22 Zupančič 2026
 - 23 Didi-Huberman 2005: 271
 - 24 *Ibid.*: 256
 - 25 Didi-Huberman 2003
 - 26 Rancière 2001: 231-232

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