

The Role of the Unconscious in Culture: A Review Article of New Work by Green and Bainbridge, Radstone, Rustin, and

Yates

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**Xiana SOTELO**

**The Role of the Unconscious in Culture: A Review Article of New Work by Green and Bainbridge, Radstone, Rustin, and Yates**

The concept of culture and its relationship to the unconscious weave both a sinister and a healing magic: they point to the constitutive presence of collective making and human destructiveness. Thus, the role of the unconscious in culture remains an uncanny and unruly one. Its unfolding resists any type of classification. Instead of acting in binary or oppositional terms, it stresses the simultaneity and multiplicity of potentially contradictory layers of the self. In the quest to decipher the unknowable, many affinities and imaginative methods arise between psychoanalysts and cultural producers. Culture, a complex and contested concept in its definitions and approaches to its study, shares with the unconscious the attempt to chart human subjectivity in its past modes of human thought and behavior. In the rejection of cultural stability between word and meaning, symbol and symbolism, either artistic manifestations or psychoanalytic insights have become fruitful resources for understanding the self throughout our culture. Hence, the unconscious has emerged as an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting the material and symbolic forces which shape the fabric of our daily life. Since Freud's intervention, fantasies, desires and the pursuit of pleasure play as important and constructive role as rational judgment and standard political action. But what is the psychological role of language? Where is the linkage between individual souls and collective unconscious? And how much does personal history play in pathological conditions?

*Culture and the Unconscious*, edited by Caroline Bainbridge, Susannah Radstone, Michael Rustin, and Candida Yates (2007) and Anna Green's *Cultural History: Theory and History* (2008) approach these issues from an interdisciplinary stance, the former from a theoretical review of the concept of culture and the latter from an applied psychoanalytical case study. What both have in common is a motivation to bring together different ways of thinking about the relations between culture and the unconscious and the different ways of approaching the unconscious dimensions of culture into dialogue with one another. In the first book, creative artists, academics, and psychoanalytic clinicians who have made the unconscious the basis of therapeutic practice, explore the response to subjective experiences of discontinuity, fragmentation, disintegration, and extreme anxiety that characterized the beginning and first half of the twentieth century. Through a collage of many art forms — poetry, novels, films, plays, fine art, rock music and opera — these authors of the articles draw on a range of psychoanalytic traditions including Freud, Klein, Bion, Winnicott, and Lacan. Art itself is a way of analyzing the self, an alternative language of exploring the unconscious, a vivid account of the aesthetic experience from a psychoanalytical point of view. Thus, creative artists and psychoanalysts are bound together by their desire to promote the lifting of a repressed spirit. The volume is divided into three parts. The first part, entitled "Psychoanalysis and Culture: Historical and Theoretical Encounters" draws out subtle and complex relations between psychoanalysis as an ever-changing body of theories and ideas, and its encounters, over the years with a range of related fields of culture and ideas.

In Chapter One, Veronica Fuechtner's study of Alfred Döblin and the Berlin Institute reveals the cross-fertilizations that took place between psychoanalysis and the writers and artists of the Weimar Republic. Döblin, both a physician and a novelist, embodied the fusion between psychoanalytic thought and social theory, poetry and clinical terminology with an emphasis in its political and social implications. In a post-World War I scenario, inner landscapes projected the social and mental misery and disjunction of post-war Berlin. The brutal treatment of war neurotics and its subsequent psychological devastation created an everlasting inner war that perverted the self in its deep connections between mental and material misery. Thus, as Fuechtner points out, for Döblin and his colleagues at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute "mapping the city was also mapping the soul" (20). In Chapter Two, Karl Figlio's "A New Naturalism: On the Origins of Psychoanalysis as a Social Theory of Subjectivity" moves us from Berlin to Vienna in the first half of the twentieth century. This study of the relations between psychoanalysis and naturalism continues the project of mapping the development of psychoanalysis within specific, cultural and historical landscapes while emphasizing, the theory's challenge to individualism. Naturalism, which seeks to observe the operation of natural forces and laws in human

beings and the world was, suggests Figlio, more than a close friend of psychoanalysis: "indeed," he continues, "psychoanalysis was the social institution through which this new naturalism was formulated" (24). Three prominent figures in Freud's time — Ernst Mach, Robert Musil, and Arthur Schnitzler — are used to depict this naturalistic urge. Schnitzler's fiction viewed human condition in a way that matched Freud's since both understood the psyche as inherently social, rather than unitary; as ephemeral, as driven by forces, "yet still a subject and an agent" (25). Mach and Musil sought a new naturalism that would bridge science and art, thinking, and feeling: In their view, "the self is a moment at which elements compose themselves into an apprehension of unity" (30). In Chapter Three, Mica Nava in "The Unconscious and the Others" attempts to unravel the psychic and affective elements of the unconscious working through empathy and inclusiveness for the socially ostracized in 1930s Vienna. She explores what she coins as "the visceral cosmopolitanism" which is in play in feelings of desire, sympathy, and hospitality towards cultural, racial, or gender others and the foreign, in the face of great adversity, jeopardy, and danger of their own lives. In a time of strong anti-Semitism, figures such as Virginia Woolf, Hugh Gaitskell, or Jan Struther married or have love affairs with Jews. Thus, in the exploration of the eroticization of difference, she wonders: "what unconscious mechanisms are involved in the emotional and libidinal attraction of difference? Or how can gender differences in responsiveness to 'others; be explained in terms of sympathy and desire?" (51). In Chapter Four, Michael Rustin in "Culture in Secular Times" explores how secularization and the rejection to religious constraints became crucial to open up new imaginative, emotional, and therapeutic artistic avenues. In Chapter Five, Janet Sayers continues with the exploration of the works of Winnicott, Bion, and Kriseva and the ways they have united art and psychoanalysis via Freud's ideas of free association, interpretation, dream-work, primary and secondary process thinking, and the unconscious. In the final chapter of this part of the book, Ben Higmore brings into play the work of Michael de Certeau and how he refashions psychoanalysis for the study of culture in the search of the voice of "Otherness" retained in the silences of the archives and the buried meanings of culture.

Part two, entitled "Culture and Trauma as Working Through," begins with the exploration of the field of trauma studies as attempt to construct models of collective, racial, and cultural trauma. At the cross-fertilization between psychoanalysis and cultural and film studies, these articles address the relationship between the curative potential of creativity and the unconscious from a therapeutic, cultural, and ethical ground. The emphasis on the unconscious, coupled with trauma and despair, leads to the necessity of channeling and creating alternative forms of representation. Thus, in Chapter Seven Caroline Bainbridge and Candida Yates examine the relationship between new masculinities and new media technologies in the context of an increasingly fragmentary and postmodern world, raising questions about the role of such technologies in forging spaces for exploration of psychological and emotional consequences of homosociality. Using as case studies the films *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, USA, 1976) and *Memento* (Cristopher Nolan, USA, 2000) new technologies emerge as the psychosocial spaces for working through the shifting parameters of contemporary masculinity (on *Memento*, see Adrian Gargett, "Nolan's Memento, Memory, and Recognition." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 4.3 [2002]: <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss3/3>>).

By contrast, Phil Cohen in "Landscape after Ruins," addresses this theme of working through by focusing on "the hidden malevolence rather than the visible scars" (136) on war, loss, and trauma as depicted in images of ruin and annihilation. Drawing attention to contemporary anxieties around the so-called "the war against terror" in Chapter Eight the geopolitical uncertainties as located in a landscape of the "interminable uncanny" are examined, which, Cohen argues, "cannot be envisaged but lived" (106). Exposing the blurring of boundaries between safety and danger in war zones, the collective unconscious is codified as an aesthetic practice relevant to knowledge production. In the next chapter, Sam Durrant draws on J.M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron* to explore the curative potential of culture and psychoanalytic perspectives. In the interrelation of the ethical status of both the unconscious and art, the unconscious is caught up with producing new collective identities and meanings. Durrant argues that in the novel "trauma is neither an individual nor a collective phenomenon, but rather arises in the impossible relation *between* the individual and the collective" (151). Hence, Apartheid is not envisioned "as a collective trauma but a trauma of collectivity, a crisis of relation" (152). Drawing on the Freud's and Lacan's dream of the burning child, Durrant explores how art can enable a better understanding of the other and its suffering. In Chapter Ten this theme of suffering also reso-

nates in Suzy Gordon's "Film, Feminism and Melaine Klein" where the ambiguity of the weird lullaby with its "inseparability of loving protection from hostile assault" (154) provides a metaphor of the problematic encounter between feminism, film theory, and psychoanalysis. In a feminist reading of *The Piano*, Gordon argues that its opening statement, "the voice that you hear is not my speaking voice" (164), capitalizes on the feminist's association of muteness and resistance, denial and affirmation. Its challenge is to show that transgression and transformation can only be imaginable when the heterogeneous, discontinuous and unconscious nature of the self is embraced and celebrated.

Part three, titled "The View from the Clinic," exposes an use of clinical ideas in discussing works of art and the broader issues they raise by psychological clinicians. It explores the potential of cultural activity to enrich or enchain the inner world of individuals and the shifting collective fantasies of cultural and political life. In the first of its chapters, "Reality and Unreality in Fact and Fiction," Ronald Britton explores how works of literature, in their correspondence with psychic reality, need to be valued in their own psychic truth. Contrary to traditional approaches to dreaming (access to psychic reality) and day-dreaming (escapism) through the analysis of a poem of Emily Brontë, he shows how day-dreaming and dreaming can nevertheless be closely and fruitfully connected to one another. In the following chapter the idealization of a lost object is explored by Debbie Hindle and Susie Godsil through Martinu's opera *Julietta*. Stressing on the interlinking nature of art and the clinical experience, the opera channels and depicts an inner drama where music, narrative and spectacle enable a healing connection with the patient's emotional struggle. Thus, the interrelation between art and the unconscious aspects of the mind reveals itself as an affirmative approach to the issue of subjectivity in so far as it looks at the workings of trauma in terms of its complexity and multiplicity of the relations that structure it. In the same vein, Marguerite Reid, in "Grief in the Mother's Eyes: A Search for Identity," draws parallels between her own clinical work with the grief of mothers who have had natural miscarriages and Nicholas Wright's play *Vincent in Brixton*. The play, which shows how Van Gogh's was affected by the fact that he was born after the death of his brother (and was given the same first name) prompts questions about which unconscious layers of the self sit at the heart of our most unknown traumas and to what extent a contradictory self is somehow prefigured by the difference within. In Chapter Fourteen Marilyn Lawrence and Geoffrey Pearson, in "Forever Young: Not Psychoanalyzing Bob Dylan," draw upon the relations between musical creativity and the state of mind of the creator through the exploration of two different versions (one fast and one slow) of Bob Dylan's song "Forever Young." To the authors the text resonates and speaks directly to the unconscious and explore how psychoanalysis can throw light to the shifting contexts and subjectivities embedded in any creation process. In the final chapter of the book Dave Bell presents a psychological interpretation of the Greek tragedy *The Bacchae*. He suggests that the story must be seen as having several simultaneous meanings. Seeking to grasp the psychoanalytical boundary between life-promoting and life-destroying drives, Bell reads the play as exploring aspects of the self, longing for the sanity that comes with balance.

From a more historical perspective, in *Cultural History: Theory and History*, Anne Green explores the various ways in which cultural historians have understood the concept of culture at the intersection between the symbolic/intellectual and social/material realms. In the search of a more interactive model of human consciousness, cultural historians have been eclectic, drawing in particular from psychoanalysis, anthropology, cultural Marxism, and linguistic (post) structuralism, semiotics, and discourse studies. The book is divided into six chapters aimed at tracing the evolution of the dichotomies which have been permeating human thought: mind/matter, conscious/unconscious dimensions of human subjectivity, and elite versus popular expressions of culture. Chapter One, entitled "Zeitgeist and Hermeneutics," takes as a starting point historicism and its definite break with previous traditions of historical understanding. Its main figure, Leopold von Ranke, argued that each period in history needed to be understood in its own terms, and therefore it required of empirical methods to decipher it. However, two prominent cultural historians, Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) and Wilhem Dilthey (1833-1911) challenged Ranke's belief. Burckhardt, seeking to explore a multifaceted nature of human consciousness, both individual and collective, emphasized that the historian's imagination, aspirations, and assumptions are as much important as the empirical observation of historical facts or events. Dilthey, on his part, drew attention to the role of the historian's relationship with the past through recreation and identification, sympathy, and empathy.

In the following chapter, Burckhardt's search for underlying collective's modes of thought is also evident in the French school of history known as the *Annales*, established by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch. They consolidated and put into wider circulation the concept of *mentalité*. Moving beyond conscious thought or clearly articulated theories, they highlighted collective attitudes, ordinary people and unspoken or unconscious aspects of everyday thought. Coupled with Emile Durkheim's concept of "collective consciousness," the concept of *mentalité* allows for considering culture not as a self-appointed or self-designated subject position, but a collective shared and constructed, joint enterprise in which fundamental categories of human reason are the projection of collective representations. In the 1960s, psychoanalysis burst upon the historical profession and became crucial in theorizing and representing human beliefs and behaviors in the past from a non-unitary vision of the self and the subject. As a result, the interaction between the psychosexual and psychosocial, fantasy, and the unconscious started to monitor multiple cultural codes. Thus, in Chapter Three, entitled "From Agency to Symbols," Green explores how from 1960s and 1970s cultural Marxists such as Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson emphasized agency and experience and rejected simplistic modes of economic determinism in favor of an approach to human agency. Moreover, Antonio Gramsci coined the concepts of hegemony and the subaltern to explain how in order to overthrow dominant hegemonies this subordinates people and that they must become aware of their own oppression. A decade later, a new approach called symbolic anthropology shifted the weight of analysis even further towards the figurative and symbolic content of human consciousness. Clifford Geertz's new theory — symbolic mediation of reality by historical factors — gave rise to the symbolic aspects of language and behavior, and cultural history began to move towards a semiotic direction. Hence, in the final chapter of the book, "Semiotics and Discourse," Green focuses on deconstruction and destabilization and on theoretical post-structuralist's tools. Known as the linguistic turn, the 1980s and 1990s encapsulated a swift in emphasis onto historical explanation, one that gives language the starring role in the creation of historical meaning. Michel Foucault's concept of knowledge and discourse refigured and revealed culture as an unequally consolidated social system of power. However, the new rhetoric of power did not guarantee any gender perspective and a new generation of feminist historians, who drew on Foucault's premises, challenged the displacement of cultural meaning from an andocentric perspective. Under the rubric of gender theory, the production of proliferating new subjectivities, restatements and mixtures of gender, and sexuality and identity became one of the most important transformative influences in twentieth-century culture.

The last two chapters, Chapter Five "Remembering" and Chapter Six "Collective Memory" share the conviction that memory is pivotal and crucial to the self. By reference to early theorists of remembering such as Richard Semon, Frederic Bartlett and Maurice Halbwachs, Green explores how the act of remembering has been approached as an on-going interpretation, both culturally and socially constructed, in which contradictions and conflicts can be read as recurring symptoms of a shared cultural unconscious. Moreover, the weight of personal memories/narratives, as much as the influence of myths and legends, started to be valued as an integral part of the process of remembering history. The path-breaking study of Luisa Passerini in the 1980s, around the memories of working-class life under fascism in Turin pushed cultural theorists to new expressions in which to heal historical distortion. A new motivation arose among cultural historians aimed at disentangling the cultural layers and shifting collective meanings that shape imagined communities (Benedict Anderson). In the growing need of historians to listen to memory in order to grasp the past, the unconscious is re-inscribed in the dualism individual/collective, and collective memory is neither self-evident nor obvious anymore. Indeed, it is in the relationship between memory and history that cultural historians have sought to interpret the past through the exploration of a collective memory. Nevertheless, memory, as much as the unconscious, defies and eludes classification or categorization by virtue of its subjective nature and therefore collective remembering opens the avenues for uncharted cultural territories to be discovered by cultural historians.

Both books surveyed in this review article share the impetus and vantage point of charting an accessible way through the concept of culture and the unconscious, albeit a very broad and eclectic field in terms of both subject matter and theoretical perspectives. *Cultural History* is recommended to scholars and undergraduates in cultural studies interested in understanding how cultural historians, in their quest for the unconscious unifying basis of cultural expression, have approached culture from the



nineteenth-century concept of *Zeitgeist* to the twentieth-century concept of discourse. The discussion of key concepts such as *Zeitgeist*, hermeneutics, the unconscious, agency, symbolism, gender, narrative, discourse, and collective memory, is depicted in such a comprehensible way that it makes it also accessible to a larger audience. *Culture and the Unconscious* ties together the meanings of culture in a connection between clinical theory and practice and the curative potential of art, political activism, and innovative fiction. Taken together, the scholarship presented compromise a representative introduction to a multidimensional and interdisciplinary grid in which historical narratives move with the unconscious while also altering anew the mechanisms by which culture operates in its collective making. Both works outline culture and the unconscious as social and symbolic, material and semiotic, singling them out as the primary location of subjectivity which encompasses both micro and macro-relations. Nonetheless, in their attempt to shatter the boundaries between culture and the unconscious, it could be asked whether there are multiple realities which are knowable through representations of culture, deconstructions of language, and discourse with no single truth or accessible reality, or whether realities are only what people believe them to be, since the unconscious journey towards subjectivity seems to entail de-essentialization as an appealing form of consolidation.

Reviewer's profile: Xiana Sotelo is completing her doctoral dissertation in cultural/literary and gender studies at Complutense University Madrid, entitled *The Evolution of Differences within Anglo-European Feminist Consciousness in Its Journey towards Intersectionality*. Her interest in research include the conjunction between comparative literary studies and feminist studies with technoscience studies exploring how new media is helping to negotiate gender identities and to destabilize social hierarchies and the deconstruction of "race" as a cultural category in a globalized society. E-mail: <[xiana\\_sotelo@yahoo.es](mailto:xiana_sotelo@yahoo.es)>