

The Subconscious Mind of Paintings

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Introduction

It is against a background of personal reticence that I can measure the true importance of heightened self-revelation that has occurred in my paintings and drawings since 25 May 2016. That night, I woke up and saw a string moving in and out of an infinite depth and it occurred anywhere there was sufficient shadow and darkness. It is important to mention that it was a moonlit night, so it was not blinding dark, and the light was dim and seemed mystifying. The peculiar visual disturbance lasted for about 30 minutes and I attribute this experience to something like an “awake dream”, where the dream-like state sort of lingered because the brain was not sufficiently awake.

As the vision cleared I felt anxious, not ready to go back to bed, and therefore I began drawing. The heightened self-revelation amounted to nothing more than the comprehension that I have no idea where the images that I choose to produce come from and that they totally can move, reorganise and transform on their own without me being conscious about it. Therefore all articulated conceptions of why I choose *this and that* will never truly be justified, at least not how I had previously approached my motives. The vagueness of my choices correlated to the vagueness of the materiality of the new motives.

To put it as specifically as I can, my new motives displayed a dematerialization at the same time as materialization, which was profoundly shown in their fragmentation. For example, many lines or dots worked together to create an image, but yet maintained a stubborn individuality that made them into isolated particles.

Being something of a sentimentalist and knowing that my actions react more to association than conceptualization, I feel this material sensibility is channelling the movement of darkness. This is a movement of visual disorganisation to organisation and from visual materialisation to fragmentation right in front of our eyes. It also has the almost magical significance that it can appear out of nothing and remain so fragmented that it can assemble and then

disappear, only to reassemble. I can detect that my sentimentality wants to summon something mystic, and at present I am not too critical about that.

However, this visual quality, relies equally on what might be there—a chair in the darkness of a corner—and what we could possibly imagine is there, a dead relative sitting on that chair for example. What we imagine is often governed by fear, hope, or the lingering of a dream. This reminded me of paintings. I could recognize this aspect in them and I thought that paintings to some extent rely on this “exchange” of visual significance. In that way they are like darkness, although seldom dark, that is not what I mean, but that the distinction between what is there and what we think is there become blurred and unimportant. The ability to do this, to fluctuate between what is there and what could possibly be there, can be essential for the experience, and I was inspired.

I have set out to reproduce this quality of darkness in my paintings. To do this I have come up with two concepts in painting that I think are useful. One is the indecisiveness of paint and the other is the chemicality of paint. The indecisiveness means that in the end paint will be several things, it is not locked to one thing even though me and other painters might intend it to be so. This I believe is the potential opportunity to capture the assembling at the same time as the disassembling of figuration. The chemicality of paint can provoke movement because at some point the material avoids all imagination and reacts just like a chemical, universal and fundamental, beyond manipulation. As I said I usually respond more to association than concepts, but these two concepts are not means to an end in itself, but amount to something else, a certain unawareness, secretiveness, graveness, a subconscious within paintings. That is what this thesis is about. First, however, I want to talk a bit more about my own work.

There is considerable evidence in the art I have produced since 25 May 2016 of the influence of Co Westerik, specifically of his

intimate matters that it seems can only emerge from introspective therapy. I have come to realize that there is a cathartic, therapeutic aspect to his art, and that anxiety, as well as sadness and depression, could be harnessed as creative forces.

Drawings and paintings that I made during the winter of 2016-2017 relate directly to this period of self-discovery and to the sleepless nights spent exorcising demons that were visiting me when I was living in what felt like exile in Norway. I discovered various images, the most important of which is a foot that looks as though it has been found in the woods, and an image of tall buildings swinging with the wind. I do not know their true nature, but they might represent ideas about death, immortality, or foolishness, and speak to me in the most creative sense of stumbling upon and scavenging for ideas. Why I should share this is hard to justify, but the obvious connection between a subconscious in paintings and images that might very well stem from my own subconscious is too apparent not to mention.

Although I must be careful not to give the impression that I have discovered a direct link, as this is not what I am about. My true fascination lies in the treating of surfaces and their materiality, which is what really shape my imagery. I am more confident about the link between the subconscious mind of a painting and the metaphysical materiality of paint. Through Westerik's influence I have not only been painting fragmented, but also in many thin layers that cannot help but reveal what is underneath. Here there is an apparent connection because, as in Westerik's paintings, the thin layers simultaneously disguise and reveal a subconscious tension, which is both material and symbolic.

I am a painter that is struggling with how to paint and what to paint, but this has never been a major hindrance in motivation and productivity, in fact the reverse, and in many ways it has proven to be a sufficient subject matter. In reality I have not known why, but recently more clarity has come to me in this regard, which has determined the subject of this thesis. This thesis has contributed with more clarity, but perhaps through a lengthy process of temporary obscurity.

An Assumption That Paintings Possess A Subconscious

Say that paintings are in possession of a subconscious and that they are “dual” like the human mind. In other words, that there is an awareness of what they are which forms a surface, and that below that surface there’s a great abyss in which gears are turning in darkness, unaware. How would this come about? Wouldn’t we suspect that all paintings, as they are intended by a conscious painter, are conscious, and that all subconscious that may appear is simply laid out on display, made aware, and is therefore no longer truly subconscious?

To clarify the question within the assumption, namely “Do Paintings Have A Subconscious?”, and to avoid unnecessary questioning of my disposition, I’ll elucidate a premise inspired by W. J. T. Mitchell’s book, *What Do Pictures Want?*¹

To save time I want to begin with the assumption that we are capable of suspending our disbelief in the very premises of the question of whether paintings possess a subconscious. I am well aware that this is a bizarre, perhaps even objectionable, question. I am aware that it involves giving images a subjectivity, or a dubious personification of inanimate objects, which flirts with a regressive, superstitious attitude toward paintings.¹

W. J. T. Mitchell writes about what pictures want. He treats them as having a human nature and willpower, which together would suggest a consciousness. This is not the point though, the point lies within the approach, namely that to truly understand pictures, to really validate the exchange, we should look at them as we look at ourselves. And then, how do we apply this notion, and what do we look for? I will proceed in the same way. I am however not afraid of giving images a subjectivity, you could call it collateral damage or a necessity, but it is there all the same. All encounters with a painting are in the end deeply individual and therefore subjective. The dubious personification becomes my tool, call it the access point, but I will do my best to stay coherent.

1. W.J.T.Mitchell, “What Do Pictures Want?”, p. 2



Snijden aan Gras no 1, Co Westerik, (oil and tempera on panel, 1966)
A finger getting cut on grass.



Snijden aan Gras 1.²

I met *Snijden aan Gras 1* once and as far as personal encounters go this was one of them. There were key features to this meeting that elevated an otherwise secluded individual experience to a relevant example of the subjective, associative and imaginative. These three things could also be traced back to painterly substances, strict materiality that embodies interesting theoretical problems, which has become the main interest of this paper.

Firstly, this is an important one because it is the materiality of painting that fascinates me, what the living, breathing body of a painting is made up of, not the conceptual playground of the notion of painting. If so I would share an encounter with Lucio Fantana's *Waiting* (1960), which in many aspects would be interesting, but I am not because there is no paint on it. *Snijden aan Gras* is made up of small painterly entities, obscuring and revealing at the same time. They are small disorganized cells that can be seen as through a microscope, but that together make up the bigger picture.

Secondly, *Snijden aan Gras 1* has an unmistakable subconscious tension. That is to say, it is a painting with a secret that gives the feeling that there is something underneath the veil of obviousness and that nothing is what it seems. With a secret I mean something hidden, but still with a presence. This I found intriguing because it aims at a subconscious, that the crucial aspect of the painting is not obvious or conscious. Further, I wanted to understand how this might establish itself purely materialistically, within brushstrokes.

Thirdly, and most importantly, this encounter would shed light on the notion of the cut, not just the cut on a finger but also paintings as cuts. I will come back to this shortly.

Here is a recollection of the encounter. *Snijden aan gras 1* was on display in Stedelijk museum in Schiedam. After arriving at the station I hurried through a town that looked like most of the other small towns I've seen in the Netherlands. It had canals with house-

2. See painting on page 8-9

boats and winding roads in between brick houses, leading to an old church with a square, a market, in the middle of town. I found my way to the museum, got a ticket and ran through the whole exhibition in search of the painting. It caught me by surprise as I turned around and found it hanging in a corner. It was displayed alongside other works by Dutch artists regarded important in the decades after WWII. The exhibition contained a huge variety of forms, sounds and mediums with no obvious connection to their individual thematic. As I laid eyes on the painting for the first time I was also aware of a neon light in the shape of a square behind me, an old fashioned voice speaking in Dutch and a statue of a somewhat deranged and organic black hand in stone to my left. The space gave me a feeling of looking at the painting inside a space craft, which I thought made sense because I could imagine this painting going with some astronauts to outer space, reminding them of how grass felt like back on Earth.

These are some words I put down in my note book at this first encounter: Plastic layers, shine from underneath a thin film like paint on a window, sun-damaged photography, faded memory, fingers looking like fat juicy pink-coloured larva, bulging and pulsating, the space between the fingers shaping an invisible grass blade that I can't see because it's too close to my eyes, like I am down in the grass observing the fingers.

Also, as my vision was submerged in grass and fingers, I made a visual connection to the opening of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*³ and that got me thinking of what Slavoj Žižek says about this very opening scene in his documentary about film, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*. This is how Žižek describes it, "In the beginning of *Blue Velvet* we see Jeffrey's father falling down. We have the eclipse of the normal paternal authority. Then instead of showing the family confused, calling for the ambulance or what ever, Lynch does something typically Lynchian. The camera moves extremely close to the grass, even penetrates the grass and we see the real of this idyllic green lawn. [Bugs and insects squirming about between the blades of grass in a close-up]. We should not forget this happens

3. David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. Psychological thriller from 1986

precisely when the father figure has a seizure, that is to say symbolically when the paternal authority breaks down”⁴.

So in order to look at the psychology of the situation instead of the practicality we penetrate the surface and figuratively submerge ourselves into the subconscious. And so do we not do just that when we look at paintings? I can apply this scene to my visit in Schiedam. Like in *Blue Velvet* I see something familiar, slightly mundane, and then I penetrate the surface. The painting is an open wound, it bleeds, and is unable to contain what is within. I then imagine paintings everywhere, in all the houses and buildings, like wounds in our collected surface, our preordained tapestry of agreement and familiarity.

This takes on a metaphysical shape in *Snijden Aan Gras 1*. Here the painting, whilst spilling out its secret or subconscious tension, also depicts a cut that does much the same thing. The strong connection elevates the understanding of a cut, or at least forces us to perceive the latent qualities of a cut. The cut becomes its own thing; it is itself born. This wound is a vessel containing space on display like a jacket turned inside out. It contains something that exposes itself and this takes the form of a structure, which needs to be looked at more closely.

Much like the structure of the familiar tapestry cutting itself to show what it contains, this tapestry, the painting’s surface, poses itself as skin. The cut takes over the painting and rifts the glossy thin-layered skin apart. The thin layers of paint cannot help but show what is underneath, as if looked at through a microscope. We can see that it is constructed by all these small brushstrokes that move around, and in-between there is space and we can look even further into the depth. It is like, if we can only look close enough at the fabric, we can see through the threads.

We can also see through the imposed knowledge to the other side where we are met with something new, a certain not-knowledge. Not-knowledge is the same as the death of knowledge, which is when knowledge can no longer sustain itself because there is no

4. Slavoj Žižek, “The perverts guide to cinema” See Film-stills on page 14.

longer anything familiar there to make sense of it. The tools and systems we have learned to use in order to characterize things and make logical connections become invalid, but there is still something there and we are confronted with it. It should not be confused with something actually dead, it is more that in its uncharacterized state it can only be defined by what we are losing in order to gain it. We are losing our pre-disposed knowledge, but are also gaining something, though we do not know what is in terms of recognition⁵.

In *Snijden Aan Gras 1*, the hand is so weird that it is almost as if it does not look like a hand equally as much as it does look like a hand. The interesting thing is that it only does not look like a hand because it initially does look like one. We can see here that the image confronts us with something new and the only way of truly experiencing this is to expand our understanding of hands. What else might they tell us? We have to incorporate this new weirdness and suddenly the hand becomes new to us, just like when we saw one for the first time. It can be truly personal and subjective because it pulls at new strings and makes our mind go places right there and then that are entirely our own. In many ways, it becomes our own moment of creation. The cut in the finger increases in significance because of this and metaphysically speaking reincarnates as the notion of *the Rend*, which I will now explain.

The Rend

A Rend can be a wound or a cut. In a fabric, a Rend would be a rift that reaffirms the structure of the material whilst ruining it. Because a fabric can be defined by the way threads are knitted together, or built up according to a specific system, that system can also rift, and it rifts in a way predetermined by that system. To reassure the notion of why the rift talks of the system of a fabric I guess you can say it is because it simply gave birth to it. And more simply put, a forest cannot have a rift, which presupposes that a rift requires a system and a construction that allows its existence.

5. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Confronting Images", p. 140



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1-3. Three movie stills from the opening sequence of *Blue Velvet*, 1986.
First still taken at 1.39 min into the movie, second pic taken at 1.55, third pic. taken at 2.11 min.
A zoom in on a lawn, revealing what is below the mundane green surface, beetles and darkness.



4. *The snake charmer*, Henri Rousseau (oil on canvas, 1907)

So in that sense the rift can define the fabric, or better yet, reveal it. The rift, which is a Rend, suddenly determines the fabric on how it breaks and not how it is made.

The Rend reveals a hidden or ignored way of seeing it, a dark efficacy, or a subconscious. One could call it a negative side, but only negative in order to distinguish it from its relationship with a positive side. The “positive” side is determined by a “positive” sight, which is the sight that confirms the stability and our expectation, opposed to the “negative” sight, the one that reveals the instability and the unexpected. This is my comprehension of *The Rend* in Didi-Hubermans book *Confronting Images*. He applies this to paintings and I will continue with his introduction to the chapter, *The Rend*.

*“To open? To break something, then. At the very least make an incision, to rend. What exactly is in question, To struggle within the trap that all knowledge imposes, and seek to render the very gesture of this struggle”*⁶. Didi-Huberman takes an interest in making an incision into knowledge to see what is underneath, within or beyond. He problematizes knowledge, maybe because it is preordained, so that we see only what we expect or what we already know. And that knowledge relies on a construction of logic that only goes so far, as he says, *“...a ‘world’ that coheres only up to a point, beyond which logic reveals its flaw, its constitutional flaw”*⁷. In order to go further, experience what we do not yet know, we have to give up logic and find the joint where we can slip through it.

What is this construction that we need to slip through? By referring to Kant, Didi-Huberman describes it as a box made out of mirrors of representation within which every subject will throw themselves at the walls as of reflections of themselves. In the box we see what we already know, we recognize the familiar and are trapped within it.

Am I able to establish a subconscious here, can it be determined outside of the “box”? That which lies beyond certainly has qualities of the subconscious. It is yet unknown, we are not aware of it,

6. Georges Didi-Huberman, “Confronting Images”, p. 139

7. Georges Didi-Huberman, “Confronting Images”, p. 141

it is significant, but usually ignored, and has the potential of a new understanding—one that does not cling to systems or tries to maintain logic under all circumstances. The familiar, which is knowledge, is the conscious, when we slip through it we encounter the unfamiliar, which is not-knowledge, or the painting's subconscious.

Still something is not right with my phrasing “outside of the box”. Paintings are themselves too much of a “box” not to give the idea that the subconscious lies beyond them, and that is not my intention. My approach is to see what lies within them. And Didi-Huberman has the same idea: “*There is a work of the negative within the image, a “dark” efficacy that, so to speak, eats away at the visible (the order of represented appearance) and murders the legible (the order of signifying configurations)*”⁸. It can take some “analysis” until we find something that does not ad up in “the order of represented apperance”, it can be ignored, thought not to mean anything, but it is still there and it can have a world of meaning. But I’m getting ahead of myself, first, what is this thing that does not ad up?

I will appropriate the cliché of the “Freudian slip” to elaborate, because paintings have them all the time. It can be a painted red hat that does not look exactly like the kind of hat that is recognized. Why is that when it initially tried to look like one? Maybe it is because it is too big, out of proportion and that becomes its subconscious “slip” and it gives it away. This is not because the painter messed up. We have to take the painting seriously for what it is in order to experience the subconscious. That the hat does not look like that kind of hat is a potential for a new encounter, not another categorisation. How we see that the hat does not “recognize” is the dark efficacy that eats away at the visible which is the hat we thought we recognized. Now the painting has lured us in and displayed its underbelly, its subconscious in the form of a strange hat.

I’ll introduce another painting, *The Snake Charmer*⁹, 1907, by Henri Rousseau. This is a painting that figuratively draws away the curtain to reveal what is underneath. I’m also tempted to compare it with a 3D cinema experience, there you have two separately

8. Georges Didi-Huberman, “Confronting Images”, p. 142-143

9. See painting on p. 15

transmitted images that only just does not align. This becomes the 3D effect when they are synchronized by our 3D glasses, but when you take them off the separation of the two images is apparent. It is like the top image or layer has ever so slightly shifted to the right. Now, who is the snake charmer? It is a woman, and her hair becomes her cloak, and it looks like she came out from the shadows whilst still remaining in shadow. This also applies to the snakes, which can be mistaken for being just that, shadows. Either the shadows come alive or the snakes were always present but disguised as shadows, and now they reveal themselves when called upon. The snake charmer is arguably a manifested aspect of the painting, saturating the ambiguity of what we recognize. She possesses the painting like a spirit and plays her tune to distort, equally drawing the light to one side and the darkness to the other, like we suddenly lost our 3D glasses, revealing something.

So the subconscious might be within, and visible, but in the strange way that it is only visible because it eats away at the visible. This makes it harder to distinguish the formally established imagery, the recognizable if you wish, and makes it harder to maintain the agreement that enables old connections through pre-disposed knowledge. This is only if the gaze tolerates it or is allowed to incorporate it, by taking it seriously and not ignoring it. All of this is a contradiction in terms perhaps, but in agreement with the understanding of the negative side or quality perceived at the same time as the positive. They are there together and therefore the notion of the Rend gives room for the subconscious mind of a painting. It shows that it is not necessarily hidden by the conscious or that the consciousness has to give way to it, but it is within and beside it.

To bring back the example of the fabric again, the conscious is the fabric and the subconscious is the rift, the Rend. In *Snijden aan Gras I* the skin on the hand is the conscious, the familiar exterior, and the cut is the Rend at work revealing the subconscious. The conscious consists of a thin layer that is unable to hide what is underneath, but becomes thin and revealing only because it has

something to hide in the first place.

Westerik has expressed fascination for skin and its dubious character, and especially what happens below it, " ...*the flesh and the blood pulsating and rumbling, it's incredibly beautiful when you open it and look inside! All of that is covered by a piece of skin, it's a subconscious secret*"¹⁰. Johanneke van Slooten remarks on the importance of skin in Westerik's paintings. She writes that it embodies itself as a figure, fragile and fleeting as a plastic and repelling surface that makes the mind seek deeper¹¹. She even says poetically, "*the epidermis is transparent, smooth and shiny, stretched across the brown pink meat. Blue white dust form as foam cups on the waves*"¹². So the skin generally reveals subconscious feelings and cuts through to the deep layers, the inner life that is not exposed to sunlight. This applies itself to the whole surface of *Snijden aan Gras I*. It's all covered in "skin" and so the cut is not only in the finger, but in the whole painting.

Didi-Huberman goes on and formulates this question, "*To know without seeing, or to see without knowing?*"¹³. He specifies that we are not confronted with a choice of either/or, but of knowing how to remain in the dilemma between knowing and seeing. This is not favoring one alternative over another, but proceeding whilst appreciating both. The construction of logic and its disintegration are opposites, but they rely on each other to exist and be visible. Or like he puts it, "*thinking the thesis with its antithesis, the architecture with its flaw, the rule with its transgression, the discourse with its slip of the tongue, the function with its rend*"¹⁴. The Rend is not an attempt to abolish knowledge and logic, because if these two things are not already established and appreciated, there is nothing to slip through, or no way of going further. We want to encompass both sides in our understanding and our experience, the positive and the negative. We remain within the question, which is the struggle.

All in all, the world of images does not reject the world of logic, but instead, plays with it. Didi-Huberman concludes that The Rend creates space¹⁵. But what space? Space for what? It is the space for the painting's subconscious. Everything does not logical-

10. Johanneke van Slooten, "De ontdekking van de huid", (Quotation from Co Westerik), p. 196

11. See image on p. 20

12. Johanneke van Slooten, "De ontdekking van de huid", p. 196

13. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Confronting Images", p. 140

14. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Confronting Images", p. 144



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1. ***De Handkus***, Co Westerik, (oil and tempera on panel, 1984).



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4. Detail from *Snijden aan Gras*.

5. *Snijden aan Gras no. 4*, Co Westerik, (oil and tempera on panel, 1974).

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ly line up anymore, formality breaks down, and in between space is created. The logical line-up, or the formality of the painting, is related to the question of “how does it resemble?” The space, or the glitch, the in-between is related to the question “How does the painting not resemble?” Or how it differs.

The approach of the Rend towards paintings is an approach that includes the awareness, or “take-in”, of its conceivable faults. These “faults” become not faults then, but opportunities, as it were, to shatter the preconceived— what we already know that constructs the box of representation. Take shatter in a literary sense and we have knowledge and logic in fragments, but not destroyed. In between those fragments there are spaces. It is funny then to think of how fragmented Westerik’s painting is, all those brush strokes like scattered matter that show what it was or what it is going to be, but still moving in a state of destruction and disintegration, coming together as much as going apart. Here there is room for something, something that was unknown, now seen, but not knowledge, just a new thing that you are in the presence of. It doesn’t repel where it came from but appears indefinite like an ink stain soaking into a carpet, into all the nooks and crannies, filling them with depth.

I think depth is a good word here, meaning that the subconscious is comparable to depth, and it creates an equally qualified substance by being below the surface and in return creating the surface. But what are the signifying qualities in painting that can be understood as the Rend, like the rift in a fabric? I have mentioned that what we recognize in painting is the pre-disposed knowledge that shapes “the box of representation”, but also, because of the recognition, we have the opportunity to be able to see how the recognizable does not recognize. The recognizable is knowing, and how that does not recognize is seeing. This is the Rend that makes it possible to break “the box of representation”. Yet recognizability is not sufficient, it is too objective and too passive as a term. The painting does something, and what it does is that it

actively resembles. It resembles just so we can see how it does not resemble, and that brings us to the next chapter.

Resemblance

Figures in paintings resemble real things, which is ultimately what figuration in painting is. In other words, brush strokes are manipulated compositions in order to resemble reality. Yet they are taken seriously for what they resemble, what they represent, and this is a sort of phantasmatic paradigm. Here I mean that we deal with the figurative elements as real within the painting and this is both what we want and what is expected, and this sustains the paradigm. It is easy to see that “resembling” in painting is positioned in a direct line from the artist to the viewer. For the painter, through wilful manipulation, builds up a resemblance that you can recognize. But what about the things that we do not recognize, that are not familiar? Simply put, what about where the resembling does not resemble?

The figuration will also reject the recognition. Mostly through materiality, strokes will be visible, the paint will be imprecise, it will float, crack, discolour, act on it’s own accord, so to speak. And therefore it will distort what it has been made to create. Imperfections of the creation will be visible, things might not be anatomically correct, the perspective might be off, a lack of knowledge of things visual expression might show itself, but most importantly perhaps, the unknown will appear. The gaps that needs to be closed between the knowledge and determination during creation, the unaware choices, and finally the tolerance for all the above mentioned. This tolerance utilizes the capacity of *The Rend*, the wilful action of letting go and then incorporating the back side, the rift in the fabric.

So proceeding with the *Rend* in mind, symptoms occur. Symptoms are expressions signifying two or more different ideas at once. This shall be elaborated through Freud and what Didi-Huberman says about his dream work, because we will now enter the dream of the painting. Didi-Huberman surmises from Freud’s work, *“For the dream*



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1. Photograph of a diver encountering a halocline. (<https://thegoldenscope.wordpress.com>)

2. *The Entire City*, Max Ernst (oil on paper laid on canvas, 1934)



3. *They Have Slept In The Forest Too Long*, Max Ernst (oil on canvas, 1926)

*draws an essential part of its visual power from resemblance. Every thing, in the dream, resembles or seems to bear the enigmatic stamp of a resemblance.”*¹⁶.

The word resemblance becomes a shell, and is superficial. It is merely a function used as a cloak disguising true meaning, or true importance. A crucial function because it allows the creation of composite images, something that can be several things at once. As Freud says, “*To the dream “No” does not seem to exist*”¹⁷. By resembling several things at once the connection, or common element, of these things become apparent, which is the true meaning, and is a way of visualizing something that could not otherwise have been visible. This is like the blood in *Snijden aan Gras 4* with its weird characteristics that gives insight to its nature and to a deeper meaning¹⁸.

The blood spilling from the fingers is unleashed, leaping out like creatures or even like animalistic tulips. The wound becomes a rupture that unleashes this blood-creature like a thing that moves and wants. It is both repulsive and attractive. The big clumsy vessel, that is the finger, cannot contain it any longer and the inner life is now on display. The subconscious has breached the familiar, found the slit in the conscious, and filled the painting with tension.

In *Snijden aan Gras 1* the most striking distortion of “reality” is that the cut inflicted by the grass appears to bite back¹⁹. Cor Blok mentions that there is always a danger involved in the encounter between the “hand of men” and plants. Either the plant is in danger of getting plucked or the hand might get “*bitten*”²⁰. In this painting the bite is reversed or mutual. It is an obvious utilization of the ambiguous potential of a cut, namely, that it can look like a mouth. In the event of the actual cutting it becomes difficult to distinguish who is inflicting and what is inflicted, the cut is mutual and we witness an encounter, not an occurrence. They meet and give birth, not by copulating in a reproductional sense, but how encounters between things can create something new like in a chemical reaction.

16. Georges Didi-Huberman, “Confronting Images”, p. 149

17. Georges Didi-Huberman, “Confronting Images”, (Quotation from Freud), p. 148

18. See image nr. 5 on p. 21.

19. See image nr. 4 on p. 21.

20. Cor Blok, “Looking at Pictures”, p. 3.

These symptoms emphasizes how the familiar things, like skin, blood and grass, can reveal an unfamiliar subconscious force that pours out of its confinement. This force does not carry a distinguished clear meaning, but imposes itself as something forgotten or overlooked that demands immediate attention. *“As if the dream-work were driven by the paradoxical stakes of a visibility that simultaneously imposes itself, troubles us, insists, and pursues us—precisely insofar as we do not know what about it troubles us, what kind of trouble is in question, and just what it might mean...”*²¹. Although frustrating, it provides the authenticity of the Rend’s true being.

The rend can never reveal something we already know, if it did so, it would cease to be a rend. The dream wants us to figure out something, but why make it so hard? It is because the dream is not capable of showing what it is intending to show, but it does it anyway by the only means it has at its disposal, until it breaches its own method and reveals its incapacity, which is that the dream can only resemble. It is relentless in pursuing visualization and paradoxically this is what breaks it open, it is the thing that reveals its true intention. By splitting at the Rend, it breaks its positive superficial structure of representation, that makes sense, and reveal that it is all fragments of resemblance that can seek new constellations we have not seen before. Then, instead of seeing something flawed and imperfect, we make use of it to make new connections. We can look at it as defined atoms making new molecular structures. To really look at the flaw and question “what does the flaw resemble?” and then again “how does it not resemble?”.

New images are created out of the old ones by mashing them together and creating composite images. This happens by exploiting the fragility of what we know and the logical construction we apply to them. All the things that we usually ignore, because they do not fit the pre-conceived, we can look closely at and then they become crucial because they are free to be used, since they are not tied up in logic.

21. Georges Didi-Huberman, “Confronting Images”, p. 149.



Detail from *Snijden aan Gras 1*, picturing blades of grass and a speck of orange paint in the middle.



I gather this much about the function of Freud's "resemblance" and how it can emerge in a painting as a self-representing stroke of paint. Resemblance is an excuse to create, because it's significance is not really to look like something else, but a means to an end. It occurs in order to make two previously separated elements meet in a composite image that will create something different and intentionally does not completely resemble. Therefore it is a process that turns the formation of an image into a distortion of an image. In the end the similarity presented is infected with difference. As formation is turned into distortion, figuration is turned into disfiguration. Disfiguration is the *Rend* in action and that is what happens when the resemblance ultimately does not resemble. Paradoxically this is the capacity of the incapacity within the material of paint. For within paint there lies an incapacity to express logical relations, it can only go so far and after that the paint shows its incapacity, it's *Rend*, and represents only itself, not the figuration, but just paint ²².

The Self-Representing Stroke Of Paint

In *Snijden aan Gras*, self-representing specs of dust appear on the surface ²³. They are like the very tip of an iceberg that is almost completely submerged. The "tip" is the self-representing incapacity to maintain a consistent figuration. In a way it is the inner-most pathetic, yet honest substance. Its duality and indecisiveness is honest because it shows us what the struggle is, whilst remaining in it. Its struggle, which is the clash of what the painting is made of and what it is made to resemble, is insightful yet pathetic because it shows no determination, no illusion of destination, only doubt about what that might be. In this finality, in this state of coming to terms with its own weakness, it avoids all figurative context and symbolism, and creates a new context. This context incorporates the flaw, and therefore reinvents the materiality of the whole painting. Each stroke is now double sided, it has a shadow and a subconscious. It not only reveals this to us, but urges us to take that side as seriously as the other, and to think its success with its defeat.

22. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Confronting Images", p. 150-155.

23. See image on p. 28-29.

We are now seeing flaws that become distortion everywhere. It resembles, and it does not resemble, and there is no distinction. It both figures and disfigures, and is in many ways a disfigurative painting. The painting has truly reinvented itself. It is like we are divers in a submerged cave encountering a halocline, the phenomenon of fresh water lying on top of saltwater giving the illusion that it is air. We think we have surfaced, discard our oxygen-supply and get ready to breathe in some good old air, but fill our lungs with water instead²⁴.

In Max Ernst's painting, *The Entire City* 1934, in which he used the technique of *grattage*²⁵, layers are presented horizontally like a cross-section showing structure and material. Here the incapacity of paint takes the form of a familiar concept by resembling geological appearance. This is the method of a dream; that it has to allude to something recognizable because of its incapacity of showing it as it is. Still the un-representational is shown anyway by resembling something representational and failing to do so. This is almost a disappointment because it becomes explanatory and exemplified, but manages to maintain integrity through the method of *grattage*. This means that it is based on autonomous markings that introduces a chance-like aspect to the figuration of the painting. The point is to introduce something clearly self-representational and random that merges with the more explanatory idea and makes a composite image, a conjunction. This conjunction is created between the alluding image, logic, and the stubborn self-referring foundation of the *grattage*. We are faced with a *Rend* because we see the construction of the material, the markings, that break open the logic of the recognizable and figurative. All of a sudden these "deposit layers" reveal decomposition and disintegration. The subconscious is finally at large, showing us a material pessimism at work, which is that the city is also a ruin crumbling in front of our eyes. It assembles figuration while showing crumbling disfiguration.

It is tempting to draw a connection to another painting of Max Ernst, *They Have Slept In The Forest Too Long*²⁶, 1926. If you have slept in the forest too long, you start seeing things, trees become creatures.

24. See image on nr.1 on p. 24.

25. Grattage: A technique which involves running an object or piece of material, such as a plank of wood or the backbone of a fish, over the painted surface to incorporate unexpected marks and shapes, and to imbue an element of chance (tate.org.uk).



Forest troll, Theodore Kittelsen (colour pen on paper, 1906)



Forest troll, Theodore Kittelsen (pen and aquarelle on paper, 1890)

If these tree-root -like things in the painting really resemble humans then they are truly disfigured human beings. The night does that to us, it breaks up the figurative, turns it into particles that we unwillingly reassemble into our fears or secret urges. It may seem that this is our fault, or the fault of our gaze, and we can ignore it by applying rational logic, like saying: “I need some more sleep and then I won’t let my imagination get the better of me, and I will see that it is only trees and rocks again”. Yet we no longer see faults because we take the image seriously by incorporating this flaw and allow ourselves to be confronted with this unfamiliar image. The perspective is then changed from criticizing our gaze in order to maintain logic, to abandoning logic and seeing disfigured humans that themselves have slept too long in the forest and have begun to look like it.

This is similar to the old Norwegian myth about trolls²⁷. There is no accident that trolls are similar to boulders and trees, because these are the elements transformed by darkness and reassembled into trolls in the dark forest. Also they cannot stand light, they are allergic to illumination, which turns them into stone, or simply back to stone. The trolls are made of a self-representing material, something that just is what it is, like trees and boulders, but they have been rendered alive through the resembling of our fear. Often the trolls wear the self-representing material on their nose, commonly a tree, which is the stuff they are actually made of. You could say that a dubious fear takes a hold of human gaze in the fragmented particles of darkness, but then the sun comes up and, as the myth goes, they are subsequently turned into stone. In reality they are, as mentioned, just turned back to stone, which is the illuminating power of knowledge and logic. So what is it that cannot stand light? It is the *Rend*, but to remain within the question, “*To know without seeing, or to see without knowing?*”, we need to allow our inner ambiguity, our inner life to play with us, playing with what we think we know by remaining in the twilight.

What does this mean for painting? And why is Freud so important? Didi-Huberman says this, “*Of understanding how Freud’s notion of figurability, if as we said it ‘opens’ the classic concept of representation, might concern or breach our gaze when we look at art images. In short, how the representation*

26. See image nr. 3 on p. 25.

27. See images on p. 32-33.

that 'is opened' can show us something more in what we usually call the *representations of painting*"²⁸. He means that visual representation has an "underside" in which seemingly intelligible forms lose their clarity and defy rational understanding. This is a side that shows that paintings harbour limits and contradictions, but also that paintings use this incapacity, incorporate their own disfigurability, or build their representational failure into itself for the unknown to take shape. It is a move away from the assumption that visual representation is made up of legible signs that lend themselves to the mental processes of acquiring knowledge and understanding through rational thought. Therefore it is important to look to Freud's concept of the "dream-work," not for a code of interpretation, but rather to begin to think of representation as a mobile process that involves substitution and contradiction.

The subconscious mind of paintings (Conclusion)

Let us say that the painters, knowingly or not, transcend their own knowledge in the process of painting, or better yet, that they have to. There will be a point where the painter comes up short, whether they are aware of this or not. It is a point where the painter does not know how to proceed or where paint refuses to be manipulated and starts looking unmistakably just like paint.

Let us call this a gap in-between knowledge, a gap in coherent logic. The the point is that the gap gets filled regardless. The gap in between predisposed knowledge gets filled with something else, something not-knowledge. This gap is the Rend at work. Even voids, ever so slightly yet persistently, get filled with something. Just like the dream, the painter reveals their incapacity, but stubbornly proceeds nonetheless, in spite of their better judgment. Like the material of paintings and that of dreams, they have an incapacity and it is laid bare.

One could say that this knowledge deminish the integrity of the artist, but I do not believe so. To defend the integrity of a creation by subduing it to the artist's infinite control is only an attempt to establish beyond doubt wether it is good or bad, and that smacks of pride and fearful presumption. It is pride, because we want to

28. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Confronting Images", p. 149

think greatness is only up to us and if we accomplish it we get all the glory. It is fear because the realization that things are out of our control and everything is only our own lonely and secluded experience is terrifying. In other words, the fact that there is no common ground.

My take is that we should set the painting free. Let us cut the umbilical cord so the detached painting can live its own life with its own subconscious mind . Only then we can truly get to know the works presented to us.

The positive construction used to define what we are looking at, is one determined by logic and knowledge. This construction does not manage to maintain itself because a “flaw” will become apparent that it cannot correct. The flaw, which is a Rend, is the child of signifying logic, and they are bonded in a mutual relationship. It is much like something being wrong is only defined by something being correct, and something correct is only defined by something being wrong. The key here is to discard the implied notion that correctness is a positive and wrongness is a negative.

Let us look closer at the incapacity of darkness. Darkness wants to be seen as if it was light, but it fails to do so. Light saturates things and makes them clear, and then they are easy to put into their pre-conceived “boxes”. Darkness does the opposite, but still wants to do the same. However, it fails and therefore has to create a whole variety of new “boxes”, new definitions, new images. In that way its incapacity becomes its capacity.

The dream is in our head, and regardless of its inherent constraint it tries to make us discover or realize something different from what we already know. On the other hand, it is only able to use what we already know and what we already have seen, to that end. Distortion of what is “known” becomes crucial in order to allow us to see through it and look at our reality differently.

The painting, much as darkness, wants to be seen as if it is illuminated, that it looks like it is full of knowledge and logic, but fails.

The consciousness of a painting is the signifying logic, basically, the intended choices of an artist. They are the threads knitted together to make the fabric that is recognizable. And the Rend is when it riffs, which all paintings do.

Paintings can't help it, they have to because of their inherent incapacity to follow figuration to the end, which for paintings is synonymous with the incapacity of following logic to an end. Like a dream, it can only resemble what we already know, so it starts distorting and turns figuration into disfiguration.

Here we are met with a painting's subconscious. The subconscious of a painting is much the same as it is in humans. It is an ongoing distortion of what we know, made up by the ambiguity of clarity. Clarity is not the natural state of anything, rather, it is an idea, and the subconscious is everything that might counter that idea. These counter-points reveal themselves through contradictions, limitations, substitutions, faults and misunderstandings. It is often new to us, it was always there however, but the veil has been drawn to the side.

We have breached the box of representation. No longer confronted with what we already know, we see through the cut in the fabric and experience something we do not recognize, something disfigured. We are not interested in pleasantries anymore. We are through with the "hello's" and the "how do you do's" and we have already overstayed our welcome. Does not everything now seem all too familiar, but also strange? How is it different then? Why is she saying the same thing as the last time, but still the words seem detached and to hover in-between us like they belong to no one.

Out of discomfort we turn to the right and see, hanging on the wall, a painting called *Snijden aan Gras 1*. We look at the grass cutting the finger and we reflect upon and think about grass. To ourselves we might say something like: "I see that grass renounces what it usually is and becomes something else on its own accord. Grass is a character because it acts, but this action is different to

what I thought it was. It is cutting the finger like a sword, it becomes individual and self-aware. What was that preconceived idea I had of grass again?"

What grass has in common with other plants is that it is victim of a certain inconsistent treatment and appreciation by us. They are often embraced with tenderness and affection, but they're equally often treated with a total insignificance and disregard for them as living organisms. At the same time as I see grass as life, I still cannot give it a individual identity. I do not differ between the single blades of grass, and so if I pluck one by its roots it makes little difference to me. As long as the idea of the plant survives it doesn't really die. It's a totally unfair conception, one that I cannot come to terms with.

And here I see it cutting a human finger, striking back. Is the human like a blade of grass then? Am I a blade of grass? A beautiful living thing, but with no individual identity? We look around us and see only grass, a well-trimmed room full of grass and chatter, a lawn. It is weird, like in a dream.

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