

The Freudian Poetics of Naked Truth: Psychoanalysis and the Modern History of Nakedness and Nudity

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Abstract

This article examines the poetic and affective dimensions of Freud's psychoanalytic writing through the interrelated metaphors of nakedness, nudity, and revelation. It argues that *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* develop a poetics of naked truth, in which psychoanalysis emerges not solely as a hermeneutic of unveiling but as a literary practice that produces aesthetic pleasure. By analyzing Freud's oscillation between concealment and disclosure, the article demonstrates how his texts perform the very dynamics they describe: their figurative and narrative structures transform the act of reading into an embodied and affective experience. Situating these textual strategies within the broader cultural and literary history of the body, the study traces how Freud's reflections on dreams, jokes, and sexuality engage with discourses of nudity as both epistemological trope and anthropological figure. In dialogue with traditions of classical reception and the long-standing metaphors of the textile, Freud's writings reveal a poetic epistemology that blurs the boundaries between science and literature, critique and pleasure. The article thus proposes that psychoanalysis, in Freud's own practice, functions as a modern aesthetic discourse that integrates knowledge, embodiment, and affect.

Keywords: nakedness, body, psychoanalysis, Freud, affect

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Introduction

Since its inception by Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century, psychoanalysis has become known as a form of therapy, a psychological model, a culture theory, and a hermeneutic paradigm, among other things. While its applications and developments are fluid and widely ramified, a core aspect of psychoanalytic thought is the insight that things and humans, indeed the world in general do not appear in their ‘true form’, but rather in a concealed manner and can therefore be revealed through an act of critique; for Freud, psychoanalysis therefore represents a method of revealing the naked truth wherever circumstances remain in a state of concealment. Paul Ricœur classifies Freud’s thinking within this perspective as part of the ‘hermeneutics’ or ‘school of suspicion’, a school of thought to which he also counts Marx and Nietzsche and which does not stop at the surface of reality but seeks to look behind things (Ricœur 1970). The more recent approaches of ‘postcritique’, particularly proposed by Rita Felski, also build on this critical or ‘revealing’ dimension of psychoanalysis, which, according to Felski, aims to uncover hidden meanings and ideologies within texts (Anker and Felski 2017, 4; cf. North 2017); for Freud, as Anker and Felski put it, “the text unwittingly reveals an often shameful or scandalous truth” (Anker and Felski 2017, 4).

While postcritique distances itself from such approaches and criticizes them for keeping their objects of investigation always at a critical distance without allowing for affective proximity, engagement, or even joy,¹ this article, on the contrary, centers on the affective, literary, and poetic dimensions of Freud’s psychoanalytic writings.² Freud’s own literariness has been interpreted,

¹ For post-critical approaches, see above all Felski 2015 and, in a similar vein, Sedgwick 2003 and the concept of ‘reparative reading’.

² While metaphors and figurations of nudity have not yet played a role in scholarship on Freud, the literary, poetic, and narrative dimensions of his writing, particularly in light of the ‘resistant’ and, for a scientific discipline, strikingly unsystematic character of psychoanalysis, have in fact attracted considerable attention in international research. These lines of research have emerged primarily in the wake of poststructuralism and, through deconstructive readings, emphasize the inescapability of language as a fundamental condition of psychoanalytic technique. Cf. among others Kofman 1970; 1974; Cixous 1972; Muschg 1975; Felman

particularly in poststructuralist-influenced work by scholars such as Sarah Kofman (1970; 1974), Samuel Weber (1982), and Neil Hertz (1985) among others, as a form of systematic ambiguity within psychoanalysis itself. This ambiguity has been linked to a problem of immanence: Psychoanalysis can access its objects (the unconscious, dreams, jokes, etc.) only through the very language in which it also operates, resulting in a continuous tension between scientific ambition and poetic writing. As Samuel Weber puts it (in the preface to a new edition of *The Legend of Freud*), “Freud’s writing and thinking are progressively caught up in what they set out primarily to describe and elucidate. Such involvement of the observer in the observed contrasts with the efforts of most scientific or scholarly texts to keep their subject matter at a safe distance” (Weber 2000, 1).³ While these reflections are primarily concerned with aesthetics of production (with a focus on Freud’s writing process), they can also be extended to the level of reception, in order to ask how this absence of a ‘safe distance’—when combined with the figurative, poetic language—shapes a specific mode of reading. From this perspective, the phenomenon of the literary touches, beyond the debates surrounding the scientific status of psychoanalysis, upon more general literary categories—such as the experience offered by the act of reading itself.

In this article, I argue that Freud as a “*doctor poeta*” (Assmann 2012, 168) activates the metaphorical network of nudity/nakedness and revelation in order to endow psychoanalysis with a literary and poetic epistemology that not only conceptualizes the complex epistemology of psychoanalysis,⁴ but makes reading his texts a source of pleasure beyond all scientific imprinting,⁵ as Freud himself noted, “daß die Krankengeschichten, die ich schreibe, wie Novellen zu lesen sind, und daß sie sozusagen des ernstesten Gepräges der Wissenschaftlichkeit entbehren” (Freud 1952, 227). In doing so, Freud refers to the literary and cultural history of nudity, beginning with Adam

1977; Mahony 1982; Hertz 1985; Weber 1982; Jens 1991; Reeder 1992; Lorenz 1996; Thomé 1998; Frankland 2000; Gallop 2002; Liebrand 2008; Rabelhofer 2008; Wübben 2008; Assmann 2012; Lindner 2013; Geisenhanslüke 2018; 2019.

³ From a similar perspective, Gallop (2002, 10) argues that Freud considered dreams not as a mere object of investigation but as method, thereby dissolving the boundary between the analytic material and the metalanguage used to articulate it: “Freud used his dreams to theorize; he did not just take his dreams as evidence of his theory but theorized in his sleep. For example, he credits a dream he had with the discovery of the Oedipus complex. Freud showed us how dreams theorize in riddles and in the play with language”.

⁴ However, scholars—particularly those working in deconstructivist and/or poststructuralist traditions—have also pointed out that Freud’s poetic and figurative language runs counter to the psychoanalytic claim to reveal hidden truths, insofar as its ambiguities and vagueness generate new forms of secrecy and leave things deliberately unresolved. See, for instance, Hertz’s reading of the Dora case (1985, 122–43), and Deleuze’s and Guattari’s (2021 [1972]) remarks on the ‘veiling’ of psychoanalytic insight through Greek mythology and theatre.

⁵ Hélène Cixous, too, speaks of a “*plaisir que provoque la lecture du texte freudien*” (1972, 200) with regard to *The Uncanny*: this pleasure, she argues, arises above all from the text’s “*sauvage*” (1972, 199) dimension—its defiance of systematization—and, as Cixous herself continues in figurative language, from its uncertain, ‘groping’, and hesitant (“*Hésitation*”) movement forward (1972, 199).

and Eve (Perniola 1989; Böhme 1997; Barcan 2004; Immisch 2022), and links it with the metaphor of textiles, which has been used to identify poetry as ‘fabric’ since Greco-Roman Antiquity (Greber 2002; Oster 2002; Steiner 2006 among others). While this network of metaphors appears in numerous of Freud’s writings, I will follow it here by drawing on *Die Traumdeutung* (1899/1900), *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (1905), and selected writings on cultural theory as examples to show that psychoanalysis possesses a programmatic literary dimension and that in Freud’s writings aesthetic reflection can be found beyond traditional sites of poetic thought.⁶

Interpretation of Dreams and Naked Truth

While research has pointed out that archaeology is the central metaphor Freud uses as a model for psychoanalysis (Hake 1993, 149–50; Lindner 2013, 234; Benthien, Böhme and Stephan 2011), nudity and revelation appear as another important metaphor for the new discipline from *Die Traumdeutung* onwards. The revolutionary idea of Freud’s treatise on dreams consists in the hypothesis that dreams are wish fulfillments and can therefore be interpreted, have a meaning that can be decoded, as Freud suggests through the metaphor of nakedness: “Der Traum ist die (verkleidete) Erfüllung eines (unterdrückten, verdrängten) Wunsches”, as Freud summarizes the crucial argument of his book (Freud 1961, 166). Freud assumes that humans are constantly subjected to censorship, and in everyday life, in literature, or in any situation where interpretation is necessary, ultimately, are only confronted with opaque surfaces behind which secret inner drives and desires, unknown to ourselves, are concealed. To uncover this censored and “verhüllte Sinnigkeit des Traumes” (Freud 1961, 63), Freud transfers the separation of form and content (signifier and signified), familiar from semiotics and modeled on the linguistic sign (cf. Kammer 2017), to the nocturnal fantasies: In fact, he assumes a manifest dream content (the remembered dream after waking up) and a latent dream thought (the ‘meaning’ of the dream), the “Traumgedanken, welche erst die Analyse aufdeckt” (Freud 1961, 196). According to Freud, dreams appear confusing and obscure because the nocturnal dream work covers the latent thought in a “Traumverkleidung” (Freud 1961, 520), and psychoanalysis aims to uncover this masked aspect of the dream; he therefore assumes different mechanisms of dream work, the most prominent of which are *Verdichtung* (condensation) and *Verschiebung* (displacement) (Goebel 2017, 33–4).⁷ In this

⁶ The article thus follows current tendencies in literary studies and research on aesthetics to search for other places of aesthetic thought (Gerok-Reiter and Robert 2022, 22).

⁷ *Verdichtung* (condensation) consists in the fact that each element in the dream appears to be determined several times, i.e. it can process different and multiple relationships and semantizations; hence, *Verdichtung* creates “etwas im Denkszusammenhange Verbundenes”, as Freud puts it in the study on jokes (Freud 1948, 81). *Verschiebung* (displacement), on the contrary, refers to the censorship-related displacement of the wish

respect, Freud's treatise appears at first sight as an unveiling of a naked truth about dreams, whereby the metaphorization of the cognitive process is not just a metaphor. By purporting to reveal the naked truth about dreams, i.e. by 'interpreting' them, Freud arrives at the ubiquity of the sexual and the naked, when he describes seemingly arbitrary objects as genitals: He interprets knives and daggers, i.e. elongated items, as penises, while container-like objects appear as "Frauenleib" (Freud 1961, 359).⁸ Therefore, the point of psychoanalysis is that the metaphor of naked truth refers both to the concrete, actual naked body—shaping human drives and instinctual life—and to a mode of epistemological unveiling. This double meaning helps to explain why Freud is counted among the 'school of suspicion' (see above), as he critically assumes the repressed and forbidden—namely nakedness—to lie beneath a phenomenal world that is thus considered mere disguise. From this vantage point, the deep entrenchment of psychoanalysis within the 19th-century history of the body emerges clearly,⁹ revealing how nakedness operates as a signifier of absence, while the practices of veiling—especially that of the female body—attain a pronounced peak of cultural and symbolic significance (cf. Carol 2008).

However, the text of *Die Traumdeutung* is by no means confined to an epistemology of revelation. Rather, Freud—who conceptually separates the signifier from the signified in his theory of dreams—also reflects this heuristic division in his own writing, weaving a kind of textual poetics into the very fabric of the treatise. In fact, Freud's *Traumdeutung* is written in a manner "innerhalb derer die Grenzen zwischen Wissenschaft und Literatur verschwimmen" (Geisenhanslücke 2018, 1051; cf. Goebel 2017, 27–39), just as he considers "his figurative language as a means of lending color to what is otherwise imperceptible" (Hertz 1985, 101). This is evidenced not only by the numerous textile metaphors anchoring the text in literary history since Greco-Roman antiquity, but also by Freud's reflection on narrativity and narrative suspense. Just as he compares his medical histories to novellas (see above), Freud also considers the psychoanalytical interpretation of dreams to be a poetic process, as his reading of the Oedipus myth (in Sophocles) shows: "Die Handlung des Stückes besteht nun in nichts anderem als in der schrittweise gesteigerten und kunstvoll verzögerten Enthüllung – der Arbeit einer Psychoanalyse vergleichbar –, daß Ödipus selbst der Mörder des Laios, aber auch der Sohn des Ermordeten und der Jokaste ist" (Freud 1961, 268). Here, it becomes clear that the correlation between nudity and veiling operates not only on the

onto other, seemingly uninvolved persons and objects, i.e. a dislocation onto something else. Cf. Goebel 2017, 33–4.

⁸ "[A]lle länglichen und scharfen Waffen: Messer, Dolche, Piken, wollen das männliche Glied vertreten. [...] – Dosen, Schachteln, Kästen, Schränke, Öfen entsprechen dem Frauenleib, aber auch Höhlen, Schiffe und alle Arten von Gefäßen" (Freud 1961, 359).

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of Freud's figurations of nudity and their contextualization within the European literary and cultural history of nudity, see my dissertation Immisch di Padua 2026 (forthcoming).

discursive level of cultural history—where it is linked to the notion of naked truth and the concept of human drives—but also shapes the text itself. Psychoanalysis, it seems, does not simply reveal a naked truth, but does so artfully and with a heightened aesthetic sensibility. Freud’s scientific exposition, through its use of literary techniques, thus generates an aesthetic surplus that exceeds the mere transmission of knowledge. Indeed, this explicit characterization of psychoanalysis as an art corresponds to the poetic style of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. It is precisely this arc of tension—or the ‘tragedy of a progressive revelation’—that the manuscript itself enacts: Freud begins by weaving a dense and opaque fabric, explaining in detail that dreams had not been deciphered in earlier research and that the very question of their systematic interpretability had remained unasked (chap. 1–4). This culminates in the assessment that the dream is something entirely veiled, distorted. But then the narrative gradually shifts, revealing some ‘truth’ about the dream—an unveiling that also marks the founding gesture of psychoanalysis. In the final chapter, this is integrated into a broader theory of the drives. At the same time, however, the text is repeatedly complicated by anecdotes, brief narratives, and digressions (cf. Harst 2022). It does not simply build toward a linear act of progressive revelation—akin to a striptease—but rather invites transversal readings: readings that move back and forth through the text and, in Barthes’s terms, might be described as anti-Oedipal,¹⁰ placing emphasis not on the final result of revelation but on the interplay of concealment and disclosure.

This performative quality¹¹—where the very form of the text enacts the dynamic of veiling and unveiling, offering a specific mode of embodied experience—is intensified by the literary and poetic inserts interwoven throughout the treatise: Freud not only mobilizes a wide range of textile metaphors and techniques of narrative suspense, as we have seen, but also embeds his arguments within a dense web of literary references and mythological allusions. Deleuze and Guattari famously criticized this mythological staffage of psychoanalysis, arguing that it reveals nothing but instead

¹⁰ In *Le plaisir du texte*, Roland Barthes conceptualizes texts as a ‘fabric’ to highlight the hermeneutic act of ‘unveiling’ meaning. In a typically poststructuralist manner, however, Barthes posits the ubiquity of texture, asserting that there is no external space—and consequently no ‘naked truth’ behind the fabric. Accordingly, Barthes’s interest in acts of reading lies less in the pursuit of a final ‘bare truth’ than in its staging within the text. True *jouissance* (ecstasy) arises in the fleeting flashes and interruptions (*intermittences*), whereas the striving for a final revelation yields only *plaisir* (pleasure). From this contrast, Barthes (1973, 18) derives two distinct modes of reading, an Oedipal and an anti-Oedipal one: “Ce n’est pas là le plaisir du strip-tease corporel ou du suspense narratif. Dans l’un et l’autre cas, pas de déchirure, pas de bords : un dévoilement progressif : toute l’excitation se réfugie dans l’espoir de voir le sexe (rêve de collégien) ou de connaître la fin de l’histoire (satisfaction romanesque). Paradoxalement (puisqu’il est de consommation massive), c’est un plaisir bien plus intellectuel que l’autre : plaisir oedipéen (dénuder, savoir, connaître l’origine et la fin), s’il est vrai que tout récit (tout dévoilement de la vérité) est une mise en scène du Père (absent, caché ou hypostasié) – ce qui expliquerait la solidarité des formes narratives, des structures familiales et des interdictions de nudité, toutes rassemblées, chez nous, dans le mythe de Noé recouvert par ses fils”. Cf. Immisch 2019, 89–94.

¹¹ On performativity in Freud cf. Kofman 1974 and Hertz 1985.

enshrouds the discourse of the dream in Greek theater (Deleuze and Guattari 2021 [1972]). However, when one considers the poetic strategies Freud employs, it becomes evident that *The Interpretation of Dreams* is deliberately crafted not merely to disclose some new insight (a naked truth), but also to produce pleasure and enjoyment—through its playful oscillation between concealment and revelation. As a result, reading *The Interpretation of Dreams* appears not only as an ‘interesting’—if not outright pleasurable—embodied experience, but, by extension, presents psychoanalysis itself (which Freud is ultimately seeking to introduce and legitimize) as a mode of engagement that responds to human desire—including, for instance, the desire for nakedness—in an affirmative and attuned way.

From Dreaming to Joking: *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*

Freud’s study of jokes (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*), published in 1905, explicitly references *The Interpretation of Dreams*, written a few years earlier;¹² in this respect, Freud characterizes it as a “Seitensprung” of his famous book on dreams:

Mein Buch über den ‘Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten’ ist direkt ein Seitensprung von der ‘Traumdeutung’ her. Der einzige Freund [Wilhelm Fließ], der damals an meinen Arbeiten Anteil nahm, hatte mir bemerkt, daß meine Traumdeutungen häufig einen ‘witzigen’ Eindruck machten. Um diesen Eindruck aufzuklären, nahm ich die Untersuchung der Witze vor und fand, das Wesen des Witzes liege in seinen technischen Mitteln, diese seien aber dieselben wie die Arbeitsweisen der ‘Traumarbeit,’ also Verdichtung, Verschiebung, Darstellung durch das Gegenteil, durch ein Kleinstes usw. (Freud 1955, 91; cf. Fleming 2017, 479).

The joke study is thus a justification and defense of *Die Traumdeutung* a posteriori, expanding the object of inquiry. Like dreams, jokes are rooted in the unconscious (Fleming 2017, 479); however, they also extend beyond it, as jokes—unlike dreams—function in waking life and within everyday communication. Freud himself understands this shift as a transfer of psychoanalytic principles from the psychic domain to the aesthetic realm in the narrower sense: “Von der Anwendung analytischen Denkens auf ästhetische Themata hat mein Buch über den ‘Witz’ ein erstes Beispiel gegeben” (Freud 1949, 78; Pietzcker 2013, 121). By approaching the phenomenon of laughter from an

¹² Interestingly, Freud’s study on jokes has received less attention in research, although it explicitly addresses an aesthetic phenomenon. Cf. among others Kofman 1986; Birus 1990; Kolb 1992; Pietzcker 2013; Köhler 2015, Fleming 2017; Pietzcker 2019.

aesthetic and literary perspective, Freud now explicitly foregrounds affect and pleasure as central to his inquiry. If *The Interpretation of Dreams* is shaped by the hypothesis that dreams constitute a compromise between desire and reality, Freud extends this idea in his theory of jokes—transferring it from an individual, solitary context to social constellations (Pietzcker 2013, 119).¹³ Much like the dream experienced by the dreamer, jokes offer both the joke-teller and the listener a sensation of pleasure that is otherwise prohibited or censored under normative social conditions. While the dream may take on enigmatic forms—accessible only to trained interpreters such as psychoanalysts—the joke must remain immediately intelligible in order to function, as it necessarily involves at least two participants. As the quotation above indicates, Freud posits a transformation process in which a latent ‘joke-thought’ is converted into its manifest expression, mirroring the workings of dream formation. It is precisely this process of transformation that marks the epistemological site where figurations and metaphors of nudity play a significant role in Freud’s theory of jokes. On the one hand, Freud mobilizes revelation as a metaphor for the act of cognition, insofar as psychoanalysis unveils the hidden mechanisms behind the joke, since “von den psychischen Vorgängen beim Witze ist uns gerade jenes Stück verhüllt, welches wir der Traumarbeit vergleichen dürfen, der Vorgang der Witzbildung bei der ersten Person” (Freud 1948, 189).¹⁴ On the other hand, he again de-metaphorizes concealment and nudity in order to point to nakedness and sexuality (in a concrete, non-metaphorical sense) as the moving element of jokes. Along these lines, the joke “ermöglicht die Befriedigung eines Triebes (des lüsternen und feindseligen) gegen ein im Wege stehendes Hindernis, er umgeht dieses Hindernis und schöpft somit Lust aus einer durch das Hindernis unzugänglich gewordenen Lustquelle” (Freud 1948, 110). While clothing constitutes the obstacle that renders the body inaccessible in reality, the linguistic disguise of the joke—its rhetorical façade (“Fassade”, Freud 1948, 116, 170–1, 200, 207, 231)—constitutes the barrier separating those involved from the pleasure that would otherwise be censored or socially prohibited: “Der Gedanke sucht die Witzverkleidung, weil er durch sie sich unserer Aufmerksamkeit empfiehlt, uns bedeutsamer, wertvoller erscheinen kann, vor allem aber, weil dieses Kleid unsere Kritik besticht und verwirrt” (Freud 1948, 148). This need to cover up

¹³ Fleming emphasizes this aspect in particular and assumes a ‘contract’: The joke „setzt somit per definitionem eine geteilte soziale Welt und einen stillschweigenden sozialen Vertrag zwischen Erzählendem und Zuhörendem voraus. Im Witz vermengen sich Ästhetik und Sozialität, Genuss und Gemeinschaft“ (Fleming 2017, 480).

¹⁴ Without going into detail, it can be seen that Freud classifies the production of jokes, according to the dream, through different techniques, above all condensation and displacement, thereby arriving at different types of jokes, particularly word jokes (“Wortwitze”) and thought jokes (“Gedankenwitze”, Freud 1948, 42). The taxonomy of jokes is thus also similar to that of dreams; since we are only interested here in the epistemology of jokes and less in their classification, we will refrain from going into this dimension of the study in greater depth at this point. Cf. Köhler 2015, 129–35 for an overview of Freud’s categories.

arises from social taboos: “Das im Wege stehende Hindernis ist eigentlich nichts anderes als die der höheren Bildungs- und Gesellschaftsstufe entsprechend gesteigerte Unfähigkeit des Weibes, das unverhüllte Sexuelle zu ertragen. [...] Die Macht, welche dem Weibe und in geringerem Maße auch dem Manne den Genuß der unverhüllten Obszönität erschwert oder unmöglich macht, heißen wir die ‘Verdrängung’ [...]” (Freud 1948, 110). In this way, Freud succeeds in connecting a seemingly unsuspecting element of everyday experience to his doctrine of repression. The so-called tendentious joke, which aims at obscenity and which Freud calls “Zote”, is paradigmatic here: “Die beabsichtigte Hervorhebung sexueller Tatsachen und Verhältnisse durch die Rede” (Freud 1948, 105). According to Freud, this type of joke aims to provoke or arouse the interlocutor by focusing on sexual matters; within the heteronormative sexual order prevalent around 1900, the *Zote* was thus typically told by men and “an das Weib gerichtet und einem Verführungsversuch gleichzusetzen” (Freud 1948, 106).¹⁵ This is why such jokes do not simply reveal *something*, but the actual body to the point of nudity:

Die Zote ist wie eine Entblößung der sexuell differenten Person, an die sie gerichtet ist. Durch das Aussprechen der obszönen Worte zwingt sie die angegriffene Person zur Vorstellung der betreffenden Körperteiles oder der Verrichtung und zeigt ihr, daß der Angreifer selbst sich solches vorstellt. Es nicht zu bezweifeln, daß die Lust, das Sexuelle entblößt zu sehen, das ursprüngliche Motiv der Zote ist. (Freud 1948, 106)

Freud’s remarks illustrate that the joke, much like clothing, counteracts social censorship and repression by enabling the imaginary completion of what remains socially unavailable. In this way, the joke represents for Freud a hypostasis of the original desire to see the naked body: “Die Neigung, das Geschlechtsbesondere entblößt zu schauen, ist eine der ursprünglichen Komponenten unserer Libido. Sie ist selbst vielleicht bereits eine Ersetzung, geht auf eine als primär zu supponierende Lust, das Sexuelle zu berühren, zurück” (Freud 1948, 107). This sequence—substituting touching with looking, and looking with speech—thus positions the joke as a direct mechanism of disclosure within human instinctual life, unveiling the intellectual practices of joking as driven by sexual impulses.

¹⁵ Cf. Freud 1948, 109: “Durch die zotige Rede des Ersten wird das Weib vor diesem Dritten entblößt, der nun als Zuhörer – durch die mühelose Befriedigung seiner eigenen Libido – bestochen wird. [...] Beachtenswert ist aber auch, daß bei diesem komplizierten Vorgang, der so viele Charaktere des tendenziösen Witzes an sich trägt, an die Zote selbst keiner der formellen Ansprüche, welche den Witz kennzeichnen, gestellt wird. Die unverhüllte Nudität auszusprechen bereitet dem Ersten Vergnügen und macht den Dritten lachen”.

Freud's analysis results in far-reaching similarities between dreams and jokes, as both can be revealed, both provide pleasure as expressions of wish fulfillment, and both function as a masking of an original, primordial nudity. Nevertheless, important differences remain. If, like the dream, the joke conceals something, it remains transparent and comprehensible, preserving the "Sinn [...] wie er sich aus einem guten Witz mit Sicherheit erraten lässt" (Freud 1948, 22). Unlike the dream, the joke negotiates the relationship between concealment and revelation more carefully, as it must remain intelligible in order to achieve its effect: if the joke becomes too opaque, it ceases to be recognized as such. In this respect, Freud underscores the inherent ambiguity of the joke (Freud 1948, 35), while maintaining that it manages revelation in the interest of comprehensibility. The joke, therefore, constitutes a bidirectional form of communication—unconsciously encoded, yet consciously decoded: "Ein vorbewußter Gedanke wird für einen Moment der unbewußten Bearbeitung überlassen, und deren Ergebnis alsbald von der bewußten Wahrnehmung erfaßt" (Freud 1948, 189). This is precisely why, according to Freud, a joke—unlike a dream—cannot be detached from its form. Once translated into another linguistic form, it ceases to be a joke:

Bei Freud operiert der Witz weder auf einer romantischen Metaebene, noch ist er durch ein Modell von Oberfläche und Tiefe zu erfassen, in dem (literarische, rhetorische, poetische) Form eine Idee verschleiern würde, die letztendlich durch Entfernen der ästhetischen Verkleidung entblößt werden könnte. Vielmehr verdankt sich die Effizienz – die ganze lustvolle Kraft des Witzes – dem Wechselspiel von Verkleidung und gedanklichem Inhalt: Dies ist die substanzielle, ästhetische Dimension des Witzes. (Fleming 2017, 484)

The joke thus always oscillates between concealment and revelation or concealment and unveiling and in this respect is evocative of the socially repressed nakedness in everyday life.

By suggesting—both here and in *The Interpretation of Dreams*—a mode of reading structured around practices of concealment and revelation, Freud performs a conceptualization of reality analysis that is accessible to all through psychoanalysis, enabling a mode of reading the everyday world. From this perspective, the central (but implicit) claim of Freud's study of jokes is that psychoanalytic thinking is not a specialized discipline reserved for a select few, but rather offers valuable and illuminating insights for concrete life. The seemingly abstract and complex techniques of analysis, Freud implies, ultimately function as strategies for navigating everyday experience—particularly in dealing with ambiguity or in circling around the question of whether language, as a form of 'veiling', can be seen through.

Nakedness in Freud's Culture Theory

Freud's study of jokes was written at the same time as the *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, which appeared in 1905, too. The working phases were so closely interwoven that Freud had the manuscripts lying next to each other on two tables so that he could literally jump back and forth between the two texts (Jones 1984, 25; Köhler 2015, 128), thereby practically demonstrating the reading mode that had been abstractly suggested in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. It is therefore hardly surprising that the two texts share overlaps and similarities. One such convergence lies in Freud's conceptualization of nudity—as already developed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*—as a figure of absence:

Die mit der Kultur fortschreitende Verhüllung des Körpers hält die sexuelle Neugierde wach, welche danach strebt, sich das Sexualobjekt durch Enthüllung der verborgenen Teile zu ergänzen, die aber ins Künstlerische abgelenkt ('sublimiert') werden kann, wenn man ihr Interesse von den Genitalien weg auf die Körperbildung im ganzen zu lenken vermag. Ein Verweilen bei diesem intermediären Sexualziel des sexuell betonten Schauens kommt in gewissem Grade den meisten Normalen zu, ja es gibt ihnen die Möglichkeit einen gewissen Betrag ihrer Libido auf höhere künstlerische Ziele zu richten. (Freud 1968a, 55–56)

On the one hand, this reveals a level of discourse and cultural history in which Freud posits a “progressive veiling”—that is, he infers, ex negativo, a prehistoric, original state of nudity. Freud had theorized this dimension since *The Interpretation of Dreams* and continued to develop it throughout his later writings on cultural theory. Even in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (*Civilization and Its Discontents*, 1930), Freud employs the figure of nudity to outline the transition from nature to culture at this conceptual level:

Das Zurücktreten der Geruchsreize scheint aber selbst Folge der Abwendung des Menschen von der Erde, des Entschlusses zum aufrechten Gang, der nun die bisher gedeckten Genitalien sichtbar und schutzbedürftig macht und so das Schämen hervorruft. Am Beginne des verhängnisvollen Kulturprozesses stünde also die Aufrichtung des Menschen. Die Verkettung läuft von hier aus über die Entwertung der Geruchsreize und die Isolierung der Periode zum Übergewicht der Gesichtsreize, Sichtbarwerden der

Genitalien, weiter zur Kontinuität der Sexualerregung, Gründung der Familie und damit zur Schwelle der menschlichen Kultur. (Freud 1968b, 459)

These broad evolutionist sketches demonstrate that nudity, according to Freud, signifies a pre-cultural stage closely linked to intense sensuality. At the same time, they provide the backdrop against which the theory of jokes—and its relation to the ‘other’ of culture—must be understood. To tell a joke, then, means to momentarily bypass the constraints of culture and evoke a connection to the lost natural state of nudity (albeit without disrupting the texture of language itself).

On the other hand, Freud links this macro level with concrete aesthetic and textual questions by interpreting art as a deviation from nudity, while simultaneously arguing that nudity is supplemented and realized through the imagination. It is precisely the cognitive and imaginative capacities of humans—those qualities that define them as *zoon logon echon* or *animal rationale* (Böhme 1997, 218–9) and which have repeatedly been employed throughout history to draw this problematic distinction between humans and animals—that, according to Freud, revolve around the primordial stage and the drive for the naked body.¹⁶ In this sense in particular, the imagination is not an operator of separation, but rather establishes continuities with pre-cultural humankind; just like jokes, it bears witness to the “Bedürfnis der Menschen, Lust aus ihren Denkvorgängen zu gewinnen” (Freud 1948, 138).

Conclusion

Based on this insight into the economy of pleasure within thinking processes, Freud succeeds in discovering the everyday: Methodologically, we can thus summarize that Freud’s enduring innovation lies less in founding psychoanalysis per se than in extending hermeneutic interpretative techniques (‘critique’) to everyday phenomena. In this way, not only the literary text but also the ordinary is ‘revealed’: Not just great truths are uncovered, but also banalities such as dreams and jokes, such as the “Witzproduktionen [...], die wir in unsere Unterhaltung einzuflechten gewöhnt sind” (Freud 1948, 85). This confers meaning upon them and grants them semiotic dignity. Simultaneously, the conviction that dreams and jokes operate according to aesthetic principles suggests that everyday life itself is aesthetically structured. In this regard, Freud can be understood as a forerunner of cultural studies. At the same time, it becomes evident that Freud’s reflections often engage with cultural rather than purely psychological phenomena, and therefore do not

¹⁶ Such divides between nature and culture are certainly obsolete today, cf. Descola 2005; with regard to the European literary and cultural history of nudity, cf. Immisch 2022.

possess the universal validity they sometimes claim (Frosh 2014), but instead bear an epistemic situatedness within their specific (European) historical and cultural contexts.

Regarding the literary and cultural history of nudity, Freud situates nudity on a macro-historical level in prehistoric times. At the same time, however, he demonstrates the instability of these temporal distinctions, showing that the naked body establishes continuities between notions of pre-cultural temporality and civilized modernity. On a textual and aesthetic plane, Freud employs metaphors and figurations of nudity to embed his theoretical insights within the poetic texture of his writings. These metaphors are not merely vehicles for conveying knowledge—about the psyche, dreams, or jokes—but also serve to evoke aesthetic pleasure. In doing so, they enact and embody Freud's central theses that the dichotomies of pre-modern versus modern, nature versus culture, and unconscious versus conscious are ultimately constructs.

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