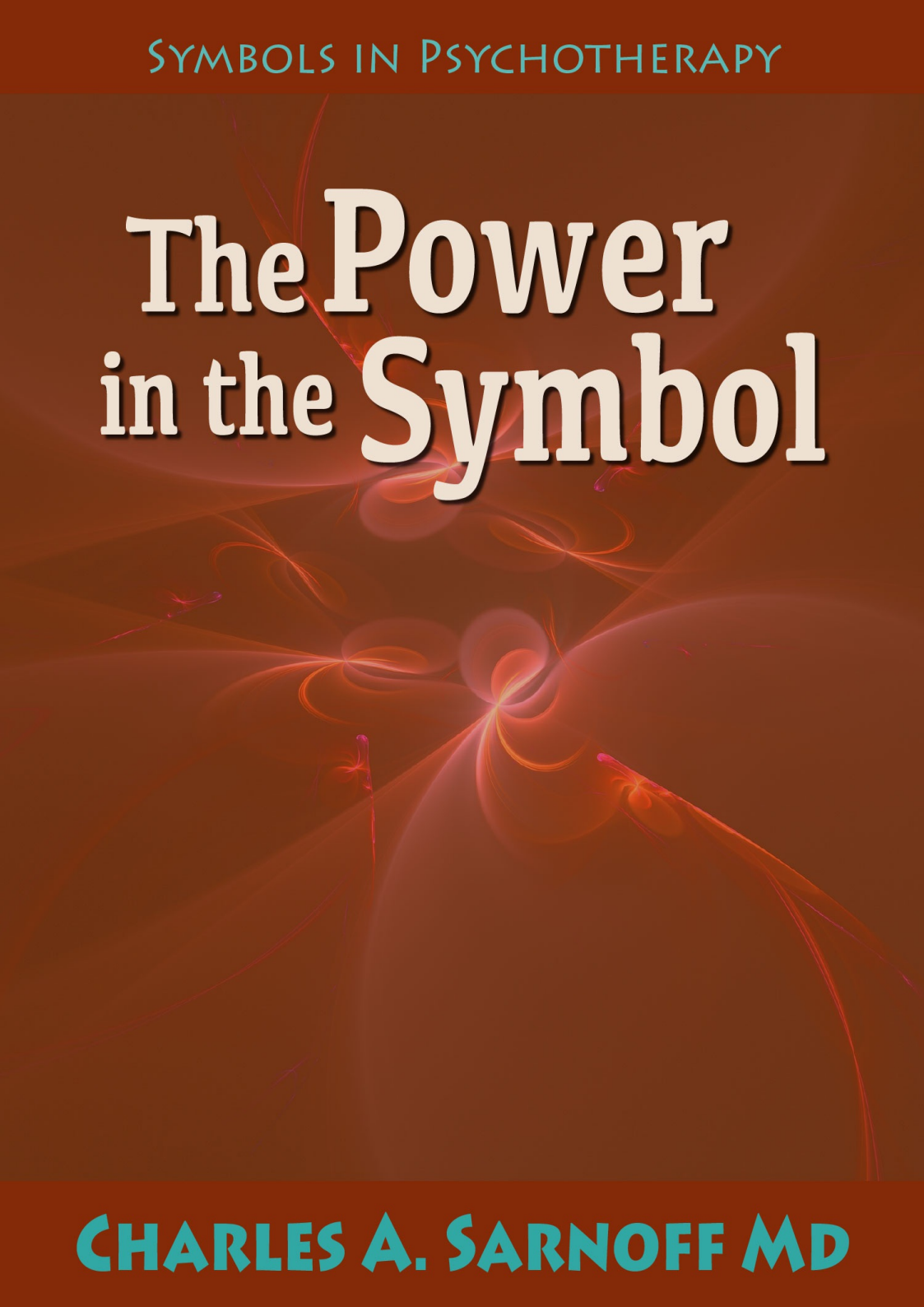


SYMBOLS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

The Power in the Symbol

The background of the cover is a dark, rich brown color. Overlaid on this are several glowing, ethereal shapes in shades of orange and red. These shapes resemble stylized, flowing lines or perhaps abstract representations of symbols, with some appearing as bright, multi-pointed starbursts or spirals. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and depth, suggesting the complex and often hidden nature of symbols in psychotherapy.

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THE POWER IN THE SYMBOL

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From

THE POWER IN THE SYMBOL

INTRODUCTION

In the classical view of transcendent symbol formation, the symbols described are believed to be beyond man's mind's creative reach and to have innate power to generate reactions in men. The symbols involved are thought to be independent of human mental processes, capable of disappearing for millennia and then able to reinsert themselves into human awareness after long periods of absence. They are assigned to a stream of consciousness, which is distinct from that of man and whose time domain transcends the boundaries of many lifetimes. Transcendent symbols are represented to have an universal spiritual power that evokes affects and motivates actions in men. They are the weapons of gods.

In the most extreme deistic views, transcendent symbols have an innate vitality that gives them the power to shape the reactions and beings of men. The minds and muscles of men serve solely as agents for those symbols, which represent the iron wills of their gods. Freedberg (1989) has offered a quote from the *"Journey of Man towards God"*, by St. Bonaventure in support of this view to the effect that "All created things of the sensible world lead the mind of the contemplator and the wise man to eternal God. They are divinely given signs set before us for the purpose of seeing God." (P 165) Freedberg also notes St. Bonaventure's brief summary of medieval symbolic theories. "omnis creatura est signum, cum ducat in deum" P 470 (Every creature is a sign, which leads to God). The acolytes of Platonic dualism expand without limit the world of transcendent symbolic forms. Their conclusions in relation to transcendent symbols find God's presence in mighty mountains as well as in the fall of a sparrow. In Christian theology, at times pictures have been considered to have transubstantial power, at times this power was denied. Wars have been fought over this issue. Poulsen (2002) notes that in Catholic usage and belief, "... meaning was linked to the actual physical pictures—in contrast to the Lutheran, where the meaning was rather linked to the human intellect." (P 79)

Freedberg (1989) has focused on the interaction between transcendent symbolic forms and the innate or infused reactions that shape the mind's response to them. He notes that such seemingly

recurrent (P xix) images are "... endowed with qualities and forces that seem to transcend the everyday . . ." (Intro P xxiii) and have "... compelling power to arouse emotions and to evoke strong effects and responses . . ." (See front flap of the cover of Freedberg (1989). He describes the power in the image as the resultant of an interaction between the symbol and the prepared mind. The response that is activated by "... the power of images ... arises from inherence . . ." It is that which "... gives (power symbols) their miraculous and miracle working qualities . . ." (P 423) Freedberg links the power of the image to inherent or infused responses to symbolic aspects of objects. These responses are in memory prior to the perception of the object in context.

The research world, which is identified by their use of the scientific method, works within a lesser scope. They recognize a thin zone, at the margin between the world of symbolic forms and the reactions of the mind that provides the infrastructure for the existence of transcendent symbols. Here they study the reactions of the mind that support the phenomenon of apparent power in manifest symbolic forms. They are not committed at the outset to find a place for deities in the generation of power symbols. They, with some exceptions (v.i.) place emphasis on the reaction of the mind to symbols, in contradistinction to Freedberg who studied the power of the symbolic object to activate the mind's response. Scientifically inclined students limit their study to evolved interactions between internal mental responses and affects that signal external danger in response to a symbol.

A Spectrum of Opinion about the Power of Symbols

The outcomes of research into power symbolism have been hobbled by the preconceptions of its practitioners. There is a complementary series of expectations that shapes their results. The series begins at a near dualistic deistic pole with full power on the part of the symbol to create and induce reactions independent of elements in memory associated with an image. It ends at a far monistic pole with a limited ability on the part of the image to activate preexisting strong learned responses in memory.

Bernbaum (1992) in his study of mountain symbolism places emphasis on the capacity of images to generate sweeps of emotion and infuse responses. He takes a view on the extreme dualistic deistic pole of the spectrum when he sees innate in "... mountains their extraordinary power to awaken the sense of the sacred." (P IX) "Of all the features of the landscape, mountains most dramatically . . ." he notes, "...

inspire a sense of awe in the presence of forces capable of annihilating us in an instant." Bernbaum (1992) emphasizes the sweep of emotions generated by an image as the element that qualifies it to be a manifest power symbol.

Some brain scientists have made observations about symbolic forms that suggest that symbols have an intrinsic power. Damasio (1999) for instance has noted that "... certain images are tightly associated with certain options for motor response." (P 183) Werner and Kaplan (1963) describe non-static characteristics of the potential symbol as the activators of responses of the mind. They highlight "Dynamic-Vectoral characteristics, physiognomic qualities, rhythms ...", which "... Are inherent in the objects and events of our perceptual experience as much as do the geometric-technical properties." (P 20) These scientists recognize activating factors in symbols that enhance the potential of an object to produce a response in an observer. The authors link these potentials for activation to transcendent universal responses of the mind. They note that "It is characteristic of organismic schematization of events in terms of expressive features that the same dynamic-physiognomic qualities may be perceived in a variety of objects and actions-phenomena which are markedly different from a pragmatic-technical standpoint. It is this *transcendence of expressive qualities* (italics theirs), that is their amenability to materialize in disparate things and happenings..." (P 21) Freedberg (1989) attributed man's attraction to the use of such symbols to the human "... propensity and need to search for anything that might help us to make organic, anthropomorphic, or merely lively sense out of what otherwise might seem a large, puzzling, all too mysterious a block." (P 454)

The Role of Paratactic Cognition in the Development of Power Symbols

In the pure scientific monistic approach to power symbols the capacity of manifest objects to stir awe and activate symbolic responses depends on the brain's capacity to respond. This is at the core of the power in images. In support of this concept, Werner and Kaplan (1963) postulated that the cognitive underpinnings that support brain based responses to external objects and images, which serve as power symbols, are derived from the innate residual responses of primitive thinking. An example of such primitive thinking would be the paratactic cognition present in the child who is organizing perceptions into concepts in the process of learning to express himself in words. Paratactic cognitive organization is based on recognition of events as related because they are "co-occurrent or in sequence" when first

encountered. (P 171) Such newly apperceived relationships between external events are independent of prior experience. This is an early form of abstract thinking, which leaves residues in memory. These in turn produce linguistic expressions that describe relationships of events. “. . . the use of paratactic patterns that correspond closely to the apprehended relationships of events . . .” (P 171) is an inherently distorting early childhood cognition that is part of a protosymbolic cognitive style (See paratactic constructions, Werner 1963 P 182). This protosymbol introduces post hoc ergo propter hoc causality (After this, therefore because of this.), which is shaped during its creation by a cognition that organizes perceptions according to temporal relationship. Jung (1964) described such symbolic forms briefly as positively produced manifest forms, which are generated from memory elements. (P 38) Werner (1963) offers a similar observation saying, the appearance of such protosymbolic interpretations of perceptions precedes simple symbols created out of traces derived from concrete perceptual experience and “arbitrary” combinations based on prior agreement. (P 17) These observations imply that there are objects in the natural world, which generate a universal response when they are perceived symbolically, because they are partners in remembered symbolic linkages that were formed from associations based on temporal contiguity at first and prior contacts. The existence in the mind of memories of prior universal human experiences, linked to affect laden elements through paratactic (time linked) cognition, supports the existence of interpretations and responses to symbols that are universal. This observation could be used to explain affect strong symbolized reactions to an image, where there is a lack of prior education as to its meaning.

Jung (1964) also related the power of images to responses in the observer derived from preexisting influences. (P 47) He differed from Werner in that Jung placed emphasis on antique sources for symbols arising from the unconscious. These he felt were inherited for “. . . the images that dreams contain cannot possibly be explained in terms of memory.” (P 38) To Jung these were inherent givens, while Freud saw them as “archaic remnants” of human experiences, surviving in the mind from ages long ago. These universally shared preexisting memory traces, if affect linked, imbue the unconscious with an affect power to produce a powerful new image. The image is interpreted to be the real source of its own existence. As a result a new “reality” is generated in which similar images are interpreted to be manifest transcendent power symbols.

The Characteristics of Objects and Images that Recommend Themselves as Manifest Power Symbols

Manifest power images are symbols that appear to activate the same responses in everyone. They are experienced as external transcendent symbols. Evoked internal dynamic responses to them reflect recognition of superficial similarity links involving temporal sequences as well as abstract similarities to strongly affect linked latent contents. Werner and Kaplan (1963) added to this a less obvious similarity. They describe "The transcendence of expressive qualities, the manifestation of the "same" expressive-dynamic features in objects that are otherwise dissimilar." (P 20) These similarities are used to establish connections between representations and that, of which they will be interpreted to be representations. Symbolic linkages in this case are established through suggestive expressive-dynamic features in common rather than similarities of sequencing or form in the appearance of the image.

Werner and Kaplan (1963) assigned power to the image to actuate responses to the characteristics of objects whose form or dynamic expression suggests themselves as potential symbolic vehicles. As such they are suitable to be "... exploited for the representation ..." of "... the (actual or potential) expressiveness of objects, ... the experience of expressive features in things seen and heard." (P 19) "The nonrepresentational construing of *objects as expressive* (their italics) is basic..." It permits an object to be transmuted into a "... mirror of a given objective world ..." (P 20) which is transformed by fantasy. This bestowing of the power of the referent onto the manifest image mutates the symbol so that it takes on the qualities of the referent. When fantasy in the mind dominates awareness, reality loses priority. When cryptic manifest symbols are recruited to express power inherent in its referents, conscious perception detects forces that cannot be explained without the creation of a myth. Werner has tried to keep the explanatory myths at a minimum. He has extended the characteristics of the linkages that are used in symbol formation in order to explain the power of images. At the same time he has pruned out dualism and repression as factors. In his view linkages are made through physical similarities, intrinsic (abstract) similarities, paratactic cognition that links entities through temporal connections, and expressive-dynamic features whose similarities in action produce a transcendence based on expressive qualities. He excludes symbol sources from extra-human cognitions, inborn memory elements, and the dynamic processes, which involve latent contents (referents) that have been transmuted into manifest cryptic symbols through denial, displacement, and countertransference. One can see from his approach why it is so difficult for serious scholars to agree on the theory of symbolism.

Power Symbols and Memory Panels

Freedberg (1989) noted that “When we see an image, we strive to constitute it according to some graspable form with which we are already visually acquainted . . .” (P 281). We try to identify it by comparing it with images that we already know. Affinity groupings of known images make up a memory panel. Comparison of new perceptions to remembered images or contents of a memory panel, some of which contain symbolic distortions, is an initial step in interpreting the meaning and power of newly perceived objects and images.

A potential fault in this mechanism for identifying perceptions can occur when as a result of their form, images give rise to illusions of reality when they activate and use for comparison superficially similar but intrinsically unrelated panel elements. A superficial similarity between the newly perceived image and the remembered form contained in the panel releases a sense of reality in support of the illusion that the image represents the form and its power.

Release Phenomena

Power symbols effect humans. Animals confront similar stimuli. In humans memory panels are involved in the comparisons used for recognizing danger signals. In subhuman species such recognitions are automatic and innate. Watson (2000) refers to such reactions to such stimuli in animals, which need not be taught, as release phenomena.(P 45) These are under genetic control in lower animals. The genetic character of this phenomenon can be seen for instance when newborn snakes follow the scent of “ . . . the usual prey of (the species.) . . .” (P 29) Release phenomena appear to be the ethological precursors of power symbols and general danger clues in humans. They are the underpinnings of the ability to activate recognition of situations of peril in living organisms. They persist in humans in the reflex responses that are transmitted through the colliculi. Automatic response to releasers differs from the reflective recognition of danger inputs that occurs in higher animals such as elephants, the great apes and humans. The latter creatures require time for making a decision before a response is possible. Compare the fly’s immediate reaction to a shadow with the slower response of a lead elephant. The latter studies an intruder before acting. Of interest in this regard is the immediate response of affect and a motor avoidance to any perceived pattern that cannot be matched to memory trace panels by higher level

mammals.

Responses to Awe and the Sense of the Sublime

One type of manifest natural symbol that has power over the observer is the overpowering potential manifest symbol, such as a great waterfall that generates a response of awe. This was described by the first century A.D. Greek philosopher, Longinus. He described a sense of the sublime, which is generated in response to images that create awe far in excess of the limits of credibility. (P 177) In reports of these phenomena, reaction strength is altered when affect intensity triggers the conversion of awe into a sense of the sublime. This is achieved through hyperbolic reporting and through reducing the sensed reality of the experience. The latter is achieved through transforming the experience from three dimensions of reality within a time frame that promises progression, into two dimensions in paint in a stalled moment in time. Starobinski (1982) in describing landscape paintings noted that “sublime” images are created through transforming a reality image into paint. As a result the threatening nature of the image is reduced. This process removes the viewer from the immediacy of the reality represented. The safe distance that is produced gives a sublime sense of power to the viewer in dealing with awesome reality images. Starobinski here echoes Kant’s (1790) comment that confronting something awesome either in distant nature or in paintings “ . . . gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature.”(P 101) Stress becomes tolerable (P 114) through displacement of its reality to comfortably removed situations and representations.

The creation of sublime awe is a mechanism used by man to counter the power of images. Burke (1757/1968) summed up the role of this invocation of the sublime in the following, “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful . . .” (P 40).¹

The processing of dangerous realities in perception and memory into sublime images is achieved through the symbolizing mechanisms of the mind. Internal responses to reality become sublime and reassuring when they are transformed into a symbol through which fierce reality and memory are converted into safe substitutes.

Early in the life of the mind the mastery of discomfiting perceptions was achieved through substitution and distancing. Distance created through displacement offers comforts in the mind. As abstraction and displacement become stronger, manifest symbolic forms become powerful enough to deliver the impression that there are ways of thought through which we can find, in the words of Kant (1790) "... in our mind a superiority to nature ..." (P 101) Humans gain dominion over awe and fear affects by creating images that cause extremes of sensation. Since they serve the mind's sense of being in control, they are recognized to be tools with potential to provide a feeling of mastery. They handle the threatening passivity imposed on men by true reality by generating a new symbolized reality. In this reality one can play an active role through symbols and dreams, which master danger through distancing. This is done through displacement to the point that fearful awe is transmuted into the sublime. Such symbolizations free the personality from the bonds of anxiety so that one becomes able to engage in conflict free pursuits.

The creation of sublime symbolic images utilizes the mechanism of repression supported by displacement. Repressive exclusion from consciousness removes awe. Displacement changes the "set" and supports a sense of power and a prideful self-image that makes it possible to deal with the adamant strengths of nature and painful memories of unalterable past experiences. Displacement defuses the power of perception to overwhelm and of memory to threaten as it converts affect from a sense of horror to a sense of the sublime.

The Power Symbols of Sexual Arousal

Freedberg (1998) explored sexual arousal potential inherent in the image as one of the sensory inputs that generate awe (P 281). Others are a powerful waterfall, pain, danger and the almightiness of nature. Visual configurations that generate erotic desire complete the triad of affects of response to power in the image. These are "awe, terror, and desire". (P 433) Freedberg sees stimulation of desire to be a passive symbolization. This occurs when there is "... fetishism that turns the picture into something that is threatening to his libido." (P 419) Such "... stirrings of fear, or sexual arousal, (can be) so strong that they threaten to arouse us to visible behavior." (P 282) Freedberg illustrates a visual image that incites to love with a quote from the Mozart's Magic Flute. Tamino, the young hero, describes a portrait as "bewitchingly beautiful" (P 337). Freedberg adds that "a history of art that stands back from the natural

symptoms of response merely toys with the small change of intellectualism.” (P 282)

Contemporary Studies in Transcendent Symbolism

Freedberg an art historian, and Sperber, an anthropologist, are students of symbolism, who focus their attentions on those symbols (transcendent) which one meets easily in works of art and the myths of their subjects. Freedberg (1998) describes representations with all the characteristics of psychoanalytic symbols on P 17. He does not identify such symbols by name. Instead he describes symbolic forms in which “dense iconographic (cryptic?) readings . . . obscure the analysis of responses. They also enable the repression of feelings that pictures . . . may . . . evoke.” Though they are not named as such, the dynamics of the counteractives implied in psychoanalytic symbol formation are included in his sentence, “The visual image on the page . . . forces a synthesis that obliterates abstraction and the logic of differentiation.” (P 188) Symbol formation is reinforced when the system preconscious is yoked to visual representations causing derivatives of the id to be locked out (repressed).

Freedberg’s researches and theories focus on “transcendent” symbols. This close attention to the study of the transcendent symbolic form is not without merit. It offers important insights into the power of images to release the innate and learned response patterns and mechanisms of the ego and personality, that are described in more detail by Sperber (1975) as “reconstructed by means of traces left by previous acts of construction. (P 141) and by Langer (1976) as “. . . the function of *symbolic transformation* (italics her’s) . . . a high form of nervous response, characteristic of man alone amongst the animals. (P xiv) Freedberg (1998) identifies power symbol activated responses as reactions with sources in prior acquired or induced memory content. The latter is used to “. . . establish the relevance of new information.” (P 121) He places these “traces” in panels of encyclopaedic knowledge, which he calls “evocational fields”. (P 121, 135, 138) Of the latter he describes two types, personal experience and cultural.

Sperber’s (1975) conclusion that symbolic meanings are based on “previous acts of construction” (P 141) is close to the conclusions of Freedberg. It supports the concepts of Jones and Werner. It does not support the transcendent concept that symbols present a universal expression of the spiritual realm and that “. . . symbols might be interpreted according to a code that humans share, without being aware of it”

(P 34) His idea of “previous acts of construction” clashes with Jung’s and Freud’s idea of universal symbols with a constant innate relationship between symbols and referents. Sperber leaves no room for Andrae’s views (1933—see Unit 1) or St. Bonaventure’s description of transcendent symbols as living entities, which persist through time in a stream of consciousness with a locus independent of the brain.

Freedberg’s findings (1998) therefore do not support a dualistic view of transcendence. All responses to symbols are derived from the recorded experiences of individual lives. Responses to symbols are contained in acquired memory panels with the exception of the power symbols that activate awe, terror, and desire. The latter responses are not based on transcendent power in the image. They are triggers that activate universal inherited mental mechanisms.

Universal Inherited Mental Mechanisms Create Universal Symbols.

Freedberg (1989) resolved the problem of source of power in inputs that generate awe, terror or desire when he noted that although the content of responses to power symbols may come from induction and experience “... the basic principles of the ‘symbolic mechanism’... are not induced from experience but are on the contrary part of the innate that makes experience possible.” (P 79 and Fn 83 on P XII). Personal psychological capabilities invest images with the power to activate responses and to seem real and lively. Through them empathy is roused in us. They give humans a way to recollect fragile reminders that serve as map like panels for orientation to new inputs. Innate response structures and mechanisms are coupled with the meaning elements activated by the symbol to produce recognitions and actions in the observer. A key element in the innate structure is the ability to form countercauses through which (Freedberg P 187) sense perception yokes the imagination locking out the wandering of awareness implied when the reality perceptions that guarantee the primarily autonomous functions of the ego are lost.

Humor and Memory Trace Panels

There has been a drift in the theories of transcendent symbolism from the concept of symbols with absolute power in which manifest objects are seen to be avatars of gods, with the power to deliver meaning and invest the observer with reactions independent of his experience, physiology, and innate

giveness, to the concept of symbols with the power to release, activate, or block innate internal preset patterns of response within the brain. Either mechanism could explain logically the appearance of universal symbol content. The latter process is favored by Freedberg. Study of this process offers insight into the process of interaction between external stimuli and memory content in the establishment or identification of symbolized memory traces to represent new perceptions. Classically this has been described in terms of a search for a fixed memory panel with cognitive content elements that match perception and contribute to its interpretation or failing this, the creation of a new memory panel. This classical concept does not leave room for repression or displacement in the search for meaning. Nor does it explain humor or false links leading to illusions of reality. Ninio's (2001) work on illusions suggests that inputs generate a diffuse scanning of many memory panel traces (including trace panels that support the illusion of reality) in a search for prior memories of experience that could provide explanatory matches and endow a perception with familiarity and a sense of reality.

Clinically such a false perception of a symbol is seen in paranoid delusions. In this situation, a sense of reality is attributed to a perception, which can be related to a memory trace on the basis of a superficial characteristic. This jump over logical boundaries between concepts is called a predicate identification. An example would be the man who felt that all men with red neckties are his persecutors. The spill over effect seen here is a developmental terminal derivative of the process of synaesthesia. Through this mechanism errors in identification and word finding as well as the nature of humor can be better understood. By way of explanation for the latter, let us analyze a joke.

To start, the joke teller (hereunder referred to as J.T.) challenges and engages a listener (hereunder referred to as L) by asking him to search for answers to a riddle in his fields of memory. Each latter element of the riddle draws the listener away from memory panels in which the answer will eventually be found under the control of the joke teller and to set up surprise in the listener.

J.T. "I'd like to ask you a riddle."

L. "Go ahead"

[The following first line is presented.]

J.T. "If the voice of a man cries out in the wilderness . . ."

[The concept presented in the first line of the joke activates a search that spreads a broad focus of the mind's attention to superficially related entities based on individual words in the riddle. These include the motto on the shield of Dartmouth College "Vox in Deserta Clamatis", Christ in the wilderness, and the cry of a lost child.

The second line when presented focuses the search back toward excluded traces that relate to personal interaction. It is:]

J.T. "and there is no woman to hear it?"

[The search has now been narrowed to traces that deal with the relationship between men and women, especially in regard to comfort and motherly care, and to tenderness. This is presented in the context of the first line. This has reduced the possibility of thought of an aggressive interaction which though possible now has a lowered priority. Therefore the third (punch) line, which follows, offers a surprising and unpredicted possibility.]

J.T. (Punch line) "Is he still wrong?"

L. "laughter"

It is apparent that the J.T. has manipulated the process of trace and panel search in order to set up a surprise for L., who experiences a release of tension when he realizes that he has been misled away from the surprise containing panel which holds the key to the punchline.

Summary

Images can be perceived as being identical to that which they represent. This can give images of certain entities the power of its referent to impress and cause a feeling of awe, terror, and sexual arousal. This effect can be attenuated as a result a successful search for substitute representations with less valence for attracting affect. Such modification of the image alters the totality of the response to the experience. For instance sublime symbolic images, which have been displaced to another medium for representation, comfort by interposing a sense of distance and control between the sublime manifest image and the awesome perception that it represents.

The closer the image comes to the referent the more real becomes the sense of the symbol until it's experienced as having the power of the referent in reality to create an affect. This gives experiential support to the animistic experience of the presence of a will or spirit in the existential totality of

empowered symbols. For instance a great tree or active volcano can be interpreted to contain a powerful spirit. The sense of reality associated with these experiences strengthens the impact of symbols to the point that they are experienced as real. Such characteristics recommend these symbols for use universally. The belief of Platonic Dualists that there are symbols with lives and powers that influence the reactions and the mind of man are strengthened by the existence of such power symbols. Scientific observations that identify symbol characteristics, which activate human reaction and memory universally, can add to this impression. If looked at more closely however, one can see that these releaser signals, (i.e. inputs that inspire awe, terror, and desire), activate primitive cognition (paratactic and physiognomic) or activate recognition based on fantasies derived from universal human experiences. A venue for the residence of universal symbolic forms, which is independent of the brain, is a matter of dualistic belief. It is not a product of monistic scientific observation.

Notes

[1](#) For a more extensive treatment of symbols, awe and the sublime see Chapter 4.