# *Culture and the Unconscious*

*Edited by*
*Caroline Bainbridge, Susannah Radstone,*
*Michael Rustin, Candida Yates*

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*and*

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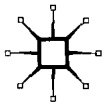



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**Michael Rustin** is a Professor of Sociology at the University of East London, and a Visiting Professor at the Tavistock Clinic. He is author of *The Good Society and the Inner World: Psychoanalysis, Culture, Politics* and *Reason and Unreason: Psychoanalysis, Science and Politics*; and, with

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# Contents

# Introduction

*Michael Rustin*

## Culture and the unconscious: framing the debate

We should not be surprised that the role of 'the unconscious' in culture is a wild and unruly one. After all, Freud described the unconscious as the locus of primary mental process, of desires, fantasies and wish-fulfilments, where the reality principle and the laws of logic do not rule. Where unconscious desires make themselves evident to us, they do so in disguise, in dreams, in symptoms, through the body, by displacements and condensations of meaning. The unconscious makes its presence known in a process of evasion and escape from repression and censorship. It is thus, of its nature, disruptive of everyday and established ways of thinking, both in the lives of individuals and in societies. Developments in psychoanalytic theory and practice since Freud, and the more complex picture of psychic defences that has been developed in the work of later psychoanalysts such as Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan and Wilfred Bion, have not brought into question this fundamentally unsettling and disturbing quality of unconscious mental life.

In the series of conferences that have given rise to this volume, we have focused on, and brought together, different ways of thinking about the relations between Culture and the Unconscious. We had observed that creative artists – the primary producers of modern culture; academics – its more formal analysts; and psychoanalytic clinicians – who have made the unconscious the basis of a therapeutic practice went about their work on this subject in quite different ways.

The clinical tradition of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapy, especially in Britain, has remained strongly focused on consulting-room practice, on understanding and relieving the psychic pain of patients and clients, and has only intermittently and cautiously tried to follow

*the unconscious in its manifestations in the wider culture and society.* This therapeutic choice has had its undoubted benefits in the sensitivity and rigour of psychoanalytic thinking and technique. But it also limited the influence of psychoanalytic ideas and insights outside the specialist field of mental health, even in areas of human relations where it has potentially a great deal to offer as a mode of understanding and practice.

In the academy, on the other hand, there have been many brilliant developments of psychoanalytic insights as ways of understanding cultural forms; for example, in art and art history, in literary criticism, and in cultural studies and cinema. But the academics doing this work have often been somewhat remote from the clinical practice where most primary psychoanalytic insights have developed, and it is also difficult to see a coherent tradition or paradigm in this work, it instead having a rather discontinuous and episodic character. The fact that in most countries, not least the United Kingdom, professional education in psychoanalysis has taken place outside the universities, and was until recently largely cold-shouldered as a field by them, has enforced a separation between clinical and academic discourses concerned with 'the unconscious' which has been overcome mostly through the initiatives of individuals working in the spaces between disciplines.

Artists and writers have approached the unconscious in a different way, neither mainly from clinical practice nor through the mediations of academic thinking about psychoanalysis, but rather through their own efforts to register the disruptive and disturbing aspects of unconscious mental life in their experience and creative practice. This is in no way a new or recent phenomenon. It is obvious that great artists, from the Greek tragedians onwards, have in many ways preceded and anticipated the insights of psychoanalysts about unconscious desires and fantasies and their consequences, although artists' ways of representing such matters are not those of theorists, critics or therapists. But it seems the social disorganization and recomposition which gave rise to 'modernism' in Western culture – the rejection of established forms of representation and narrative, the response to subjective experiences of discontinuity, fragmentation, disintegration, extreme anxiety around the beginning of the twentieth century – brought the idea of the unconscious particularly to the fore. (Two essays in this book, by Veronika Fuechtner and Karl Figlio, focus on the intense relationship between psychoanalysis, still in its infancy, and literary culture in this period.) Psychoanalysis gave a name and mode of investigation of 'the unconscious' at just the time when the idea of many sources of disturbance and disruption beneath the surface of life, and the need to explore and represent them, were giving rise

to various forms of modernism in the arts. Some cultural movements – surrealism is the most obvious – explicitly borrowed from the ideas of psychoanalysis in creating new forms of expression, but there have been countless less direct parallels and encounters between psychoanalytic modes of understanding and those of writers and artists through this entire period.

Creative artists may feel they are responding to the unregulated nature of the unconscious itself in being reluctant to theorize or codify what they do. There is in any case a broader and not very healthy split in our society between those who do imaginative work, including the education and training provided for them, and those who learn to analyse and criticize it in schools and universities. The gap between academic discussion of psychoanalysis, and imaginative engagement with the phenomena of the unconscious mind, is only part of a larger distance between academic criticism and creative production in many fields of contemporary cultural practice.

Our purpose in preparing these conferences, and this book, has been to bring these different ways of approaching the unconscious dimensions of culture into dialogue with one another. We wanted to advance academic understanding of how psychoanalysis and cultural practices informed each other. The first part of our book, 'Psychoanalysis and Culture: Historical and Theoretical Encounters', is mostly devoted to this purpose. We wanted also to engage with artists and with works of art, to explore how creative work has been informed by attention to unconscious mental processes. In particular, we wanted to explore the way that both the arts and psychoanalysis have both offered responses to traumatic experiences, and have sought to bring about understanding and development in response to these through their symbolization. This is the main theme of the second part of the volume, 'Culture and Trauma as Working Through.' Third, we sought to engage clinical practitioners, both psychoanalysts and child psychotherapists, in reflection on works of art and their production, with the aim of showing how clinical sensitivity to expressions of inner states of mind could be of relevance to artists and cultural critics, and that they could also learn from their particular methods. The discussion at the conference between Nicholas Wright, the author of a play about Van Gogh, *Vincent in Brixton*, the psychiatrist Henry Walton and a child psychotherapist Marguerite Reid, whose clinical experience with bereaved mothers throws light on Van Gogh's early life, was a moving example of the insights such exchanges can bring. This section of the book is called 'View from the Clinic'.

Although the three parts of this book do have this distinct framing in terms of our three starting points of the academy, the work of art and the clinic, it is a mark of the value of the dialogue that their contributions often converge and overlap. Academic writers here make insightful use of clinical ideas in discussing particular works of art and the broader issues they raise. Psychoanalytic clinicians examine the criteria for making aesthetic judgements, or offering psychoanalytic interpretations of writers' states of mind. Works of art are shown to speak powerfully about the painful psychic realities known also to clinicians. These essays discuss many different art forms – poetry, novels, films, plays, fine art, rock music and opera, for example – and draw on a range of psychoanalytic traditions – those of Freud, Klein, Bion, Winnicott and Lacan – to do so.

We do not attempt to present, in this book, a well-ordered or 'textbook analysis' of the relations between 'culture and the unconscious'. The manifestations of the unconscious in culture resist codification, even apart from the differences of disciplinary approach which were our starting point. But we believe the essays of this volume show how fertile the engagement of psychoanalysis with the productions of culture can be, especially if one accepts that artists, clinicians and academics will each bring insights of value to the exploration of these issues.

# Part 1
# Psychoanalysis and Culture: Historical and Theoretical Encounters

# Introduction

*Susannah Radstone*

Psychoanalysis has sometimes been accused of being ahistorical – for drawing upon a set of concepts, including the Oedipus complex and castration, for instance, that appear to take little account of historical or cultural variation. Yet, ironically, the centrality of these concepts, as well as its more generalised concerns with the vicissitudes of childhood have also rendered psychoanalysis vulnerable to the charge that it pays too much attention to the past. Alongside such critiques, the attention paid by psychoanalysis to the specificities of patients' free associations has also led to the suggestion that it is inextricably tied to an individualist perspective. Taken together, the essays that comprise this section open up each of these assumptions to fresh discussion. These chapters discuss the history of psychoanalysis, placing its developing understandings of the inner world within wider histories of science, culture and the arts. This history reveals not only the historical dynamism of psychoanalysis but also the continual breaching of the conceptual boundaries between the inner and outer worlds, subjectivity and objectivity, and particularly, the individual and the social. The chapters in this section draw out subtle and complex relations between psychoanalysis as an ever-changing body of theories and ideas, and its encounters, over the years, with a range of proximate and less obviously related fields of culture and ideas and propose new or revised relations between psychoanalysis and culture for the future.

Veronika Fuechtner's study of Alfred Döblin and the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute reveals the cross-fertilizations that took place between psychoanalysis and the writers and artists of the Weimar Republic. Indeed, she demonstrates that during this time, in Berlin, at least, figures such as Döblin – a novelist *and* a psychiatrist – embodied this very mix of ideas. Fuechtner argues that the network of thinkers around the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute produced a milieu that was unique in its time.