

Mimicry, Ekphrasis, Construction «Reading» in Freudian Psychoanalysis

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1. In his influential essay *Freud, Morelli, and Sherlock Holmes* the historian Carlo Ginzburg relates Freudian psychoanalysis to a cultural paradigm that he regards as, on the one hand, an anthropological invariant – think of *λέγειν*, «reading» in ancient Greek as collecting and assembling things – but that, on the other hand, reaches full fruition only in the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century (Ginzburg [1980]). This «symptomatic or divinatory paradigm» links the reconstruction of a lost past to the *reading* of traces or symptoms this past has left behind. In the following text I will try to examine the specific form the symptomatic paradigm has taken in Freudian psychoanalysis. «Past» here means the past of a traumatic event or of repressed sexual phantasies from early childhood that can no longer be remembered by the individual and have passed into a radical oblivion Freud calls «the unconscious». In Freud's account, «traces» are the various neurotic symptoms, distorted effects of the repressed material that keep on haunting the patient. The metaphor of «reading» is crucial in psychoanalysis, for it has methodological consequences. In order to read, there must be a text. So the material for psychoanalytical interpretation has to be understood, has to be formatted *as text* in the first place. Thus, in Freudian psychoanalysis, both dreams and the repressed visual images from the past dreams make use of, are regarded as camouflaged arguments and propositions. The form of perceptual impressions is merely the outer guise of an underlying syntactical structure which has come to mimic the appearance and the contingencies of the empirical world in order to dissimulate the basic machinic nature of both trauma and desire Jacques Lacan famously termed «the automaton» in his seminar on *The Four Foundational Concepts of Psychoanalysis* held in 1964 (Lacan [1964]: 53-64).

But let us start with a slightly different type of unconscious material: Freud's *On the Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. This study from 1901 introduces a taxonomy of parapraxes or «Fehlleistungen», everyday errors in speaking, writing, remembering, performing actions or – reading. According to Freud, these errors attest to a repressed, unconscious element in the neurotic's mind that shows itself only negatively in the disturbance of an otherwise familiar cognitive or practical performance. Errors of speaking or «slips of the tongue» are the most common ones, but Freud also gives a wide range of examples of misreadings. Let me quote one of these, drawing – as so often in his writings around 1900 – from Freud's own personal experience:

There is one misreading which I find irritating and laughable and to which I am prone whenever I walk through the streets of a strange town on my holidays. On these occasions I read every shop sign that resembles the word in any way as «Antiquities». This betrays the questing spirit of the collector (Freud [1901]: 110).

It not only betrays the spirit of Freud the avid collector of antique statuettes and figurines, but also the spirit of Freud the psychoanalyst, who used to compare the unconscious with the ruins of ancient Rome and the work of the psychoanalyst with that of an archeologist digging through the various strata of an excavation site to finally uncover a repressed desire or a traumatic memory that serves to explain the often confusing array of symptoms the patient shows on the outside. But what is more, the very method of Freud's psychoanalytical excavation work is that of a misreading, as I will elaborate in the following sections of this essay, albeit not an inadvertent neurotic misreading, but a systematic one.

2. It is a common procedure in Freudian psychoanalysis to treat symptoms as images in the broad sense of the word. A symptom is something that shows itself to the doctor's gaze, that can be observed and recorded, even photographed, as Jean-Martin Charcot famously did in his clinic (see Didi-Huberman [2003]). In his landmark study *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1899, Freud famously extends the concept of «symptom» to the patients' dreams, which he considers to be the disguised and distorted fulfillments of an unconscious desire of both sexual and regressive character. For Freud, dreams are experienced as a sequence of perceptual images by the dreamer, they are «hallucinated», as he says.

When it comes to the interpretation of dreams, the analyst is confronted with a particular difficulty: unlike bodily symptoms, parapraxes or peculiarities in behavior, he cannot observe them directly. It is only belatedly, through the patient's verbal account,

that he gets hold of her dreams. Freud takes the verbal dream reports that are uttered by his patients during an analytical session to relate to the actual dreams in a similar way an ekphrasis or minute literary description relates to a painting. In the early *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), partly coauthored by Josef Breuer, he even attributes a healing effect to the spelling out of hysteric imaginations:

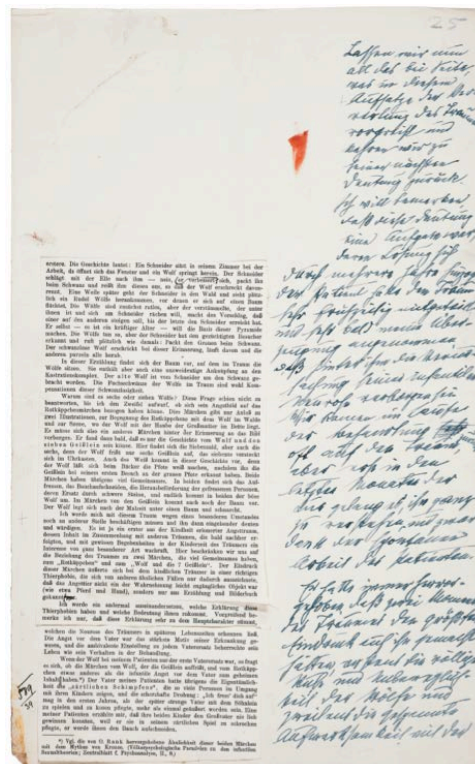
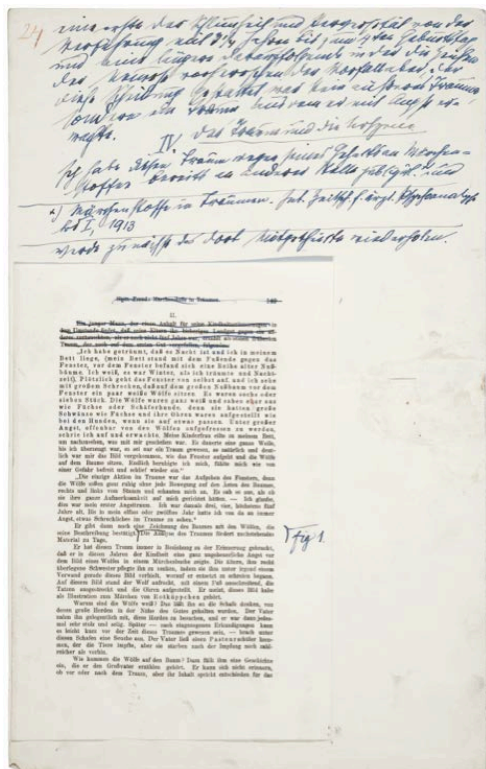
When memories return in the form of pictures our task is in general easier than when they return as thoughts. Hysterical patients, who are as a rule of a «visual» type, do not make such difficulties for the analyst as those with obsessions. Once a picture has emerged from the patient's memory, we may hear him say that it becomes fragmentary and obscure in proportion as he proceeds with his description of it. *The patient is, as it were, getting rid of it by turning it into words* (Freud, Breuer [1895]: 280).

Likewise, what is interpreted by the psychoanalyst are not the dreams themselves, the dreams as they are experienced or «hallucinated» by the dreamer, but their transpositions into language. The verbal dream reports however are characterized by a certain instability. They may change every time they are narrated. They may be forgotten or misremembered by the analyst or by the patient. To constitute the basis of a systematic interpretation, as it is undertaken in a published case study, for example, the verbal discourse has to be stabilized, has to be brought into a constant, canonic form – a form on the basis of which every new version of a dream report may be identified as a variant and ever so small differences may be tracked down and – be interpreted. This is achieved by having the patient to write down the report of a significant dream word by word: «As regards texts of dreams to which I attach importance, I get the patient to conserve them in written form after the narration of the dream», Freud says in the *Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psycho-Analysis* (Freud [1912]: 113; translation adapted by the author).

Thus a so-called «dream text» is constituted, every word, every letter, every punctuation mark of which might have a hermeneutic significance for the analyst, that is, may be regarded as a symptom. The importance Freud attaches to the production of a stable, canonic dream text can be seen from his practice of cutting out dream texts from his own publications and pasting them into his developing manuscripts, should he need them in the course of an argument. This can be exemplified by two pages from the manuscript of Freud's case study *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, probably written at the end of 1914, now in the Library of Congress in Washington (Fig. 1)¹.

¹ For a reconstruction of Freud's writing process, see Klammer (2013).

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In short: The analyst does not observe the patient's dream images directly, but rather he «reads» them. The psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams amounts to an art of reading, a reading, however, that reads between the lines, that does not take the written dream text at face value. Rather, it regards the dream text as the distorted form of another, unconscious text that has been censored by acts of repression and disfigured by various mechanisms of defense. It is this fundamental, unconscious text that has to be rebuilt and reconstructed. The dream text on the other hand is treated by the psychoanalyst as if it was the result of a parapraxis, the product of a series of neurotic miswritings, which can only be undone by a careful analytical «misreading», so to speak. Systematically misreading this text is to treat its specific organization as a form of falsehood, as a mere and incomplete mimicry of grammatical and syntactical correctness expressing a chain of causal events in its rightful sequence – Freud calls this mimicry «secondary elaboration» in *The Interpretation of Dreams* –, as a mere camouflage for a hidden order into which the distorted text can be translated by a set of discrete, finite operations.

Let me give an example of what I mean by «misreading» here. The hallucinated image of a somewhat monstrous human olfactory organ in a dream can be reported by the

awoken individual as a «nose» and accordingly recorded in text. This «nose», however, may be read by experienced analysts not as a noun, but rather as the verb «knows» in the sense of «he knows, he is aware of». The example is taken from a book by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1986: 55) called *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* in the English translation. It may also serve to illustrate the functioning of a specific mechanism of defense – «condensation» – which attaches different meanings or signifieds to one and the same signifier. At the same time, the example shows how the psychological mechanisms of defense may operate via a mimicry of direct visual perception, whereas in truth the experienced optical impression is just a sensorial effect of an unconscious machinery of desire working according to the laws of a language. To put it in Lacanian terms: This machinery is driven by a fundamental lack of the signified.

The Wolf Man used to be one of Freud's patients. A Russian nobleman from Odessa, Sergius Pankejeff, as he was legally known, was in Freud's treatment in Vienna from 1910 to 1914. Freud's most important case study – *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, published in 1918 – is dedicated to him. In the eighth chapter a dream of the Wolf Man is recounted: «I had a dream», he said, «of a man tearing off the wings of a wasp» (Freud [1914a]: 94). Clearly, a scene of violence and castration. A «wasp», the nasty stinging insect, in German language is called a «Wespe». But Pankejeff, who was otherwise fluent in German, had actually left out the «W», pronouncing it «Espe», only to exclaim seconds later: «But that is me!». Sergius Pankejeff had noticed that «Es-pe» were his very own initials: «S.P.», «Sergius Pankejeff». Here the task of hermeneutic misreading of a dream text was performed by the patient himself, in live action during the course of an analytical session. Once again, an unconscious linguistic content mimics a visual image. And once again, the image is dismantled, reduced to its original form by the analysis².

In the *Studies on Hysteria*, published four years earlier than the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud compares the complex of repressed thoughts, fantasies and imaginations agglomerated around an unconscious memory or desire not only to a text, but to a whole archive whose files are sorted in chronological order:

These files form a quite general feature of every analysis and their contents always emerge in a chronological order [...]. The freshest and newest experience in the file appears first, as an outer cover, and last of all comes the experience with which the series in fact began (Freud [1895]: 288).

² A detailed account of Freud's epistemological procedures on the basis of his pivotal case study on the Wolf Man is given in Klammer (2013).

As a good librarian or archivist, the psychoanalyst has to read through all the files and their various papers to arrive at the last, the fundamental text that spells out the core of the neurosis explaining its genesis and its particular guise in the patient at hand.

3. Let us now come back to the dream images as the dreamer experiences them. We have already stated that Freud characterizes them as hallucinated perceptual images. In the sixth chapter of the *Interpretation of Dreams*, however, he takes a different approach and advises his readers to regard them as already containing within themselves a textual constituent, that is, to regard them as *rebuses*. As is known, rebuses are printed or drawn riddles that contain both pictures and snippets of text. The letter «h» followed by the picture of a human ear, for instance, may be resolved as «to hear, to listen», but equally as the adverbial «here», indicating «this place here». Orthographical correctness is not a factor in rebuses, on the contrary, typically they require creative misreading to be solved at all.

Changing the status of dreams from hallucinated perceptions to rebuses is a far-reaching decision. How can we account for it? Well, we should take it in formal, methodological terms rather than in ontological ones. It seems to me, that this move brings to light a fundamental Freudian bias, namely that interpretation in general and psychoanalytic interpretation in particular can only be the interpretation of texts, can only be achieved through modes of reading, rather than modes of looking.

So if you are dealing with images or pictures – as psychoanalysis does or as art history does – you have to stop treating them as «dense» systems – to use Nelson Goodman's term –, each and every visual aspect of which can be a bearer of significance. Rather, you have to treat them as discrete or «digital» systems that are composed of certain finite and separate elements combined according to a set of rules or «grammar»³. In short, you have to treat the images as texts or, at least, as analogous to texts, in order to be able to read them correctly, or to interpret them at all. In that regard, both the concept of the dream images as rebuses and the notion of the dream text as the stabilized, quotable, repeatable result of an ekphrasis are indispensable premises in Freudian psychoanalysis. In both cases the decomposition of the dream image, its substitution by a readable text proves essential. The model of the rebus lays bare the essentially mimetic function of psychological defense: a denaturalized mimicry

³ On the differences between «dense» analog and «discrete» digital systems of signs, see Goodman (1968): 127-173.

of perception that hardly conceals the mechanism of its own making, incorporating pictorial and linguistic elements alike.

To try to interpret dream images *qua images*, to treat them as «pictorial compositions», not to convert them into text has been the major error of his predecessors, Freud says. They all fell for their mimetic function, so to speak, taking their visual form at face value. Here is a quote from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, from the beginning of chapter six:

But obviously we can only form a proper judgment of the rebus if we put aside criticisms such as these of the whole composition and its parts and if, instead, we try to replace each separate element by a syllable or word that can be represented by that element in some way or other. The words which are put together in this way are no longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance. A dream is a picture puzzle of this sort and our predecessors in the field of dream interpretation have made the mistake of treating the rebus as a pictorial composition: and as such it has seemed to them nonsensical and worthless (Freud [1900]: 278; my italics).

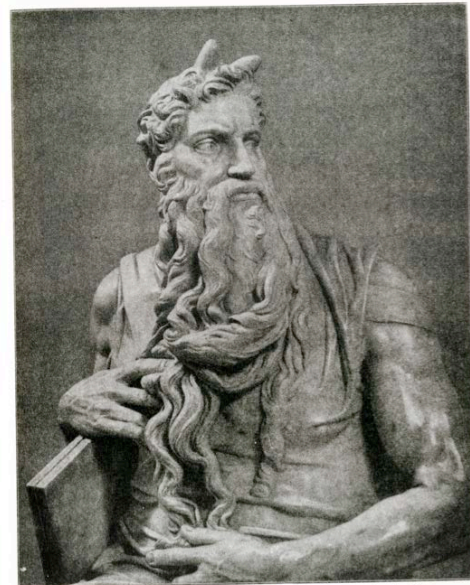
The psychoanalyst, Freud tells us, has «to *read* these characters [not] according to their pictorial value [but] according to their symbolic relation» (Freud [1900]: 277; translation adapted by the author). Thus, he can treat the dream images as the «translation» (Freud [1900]: 277) – albeit distorted by various mechanisms of defense – of a latent, unconscious text. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* this text is called «dream-thoughts» or «*Traumgedanken*».

To summarize the complicated processes of mimicry, transcription and reading that constitutes the dreams and their interpretation in psychoanalysis: the unconscious text of the dream-thoughts – relating an unconscious desire or a repressed memory – mimics visual images in the act of dreaming. These perceptual images somewhat distort the underlying text submitting it to characteristic transformations, partly because of the censorship of repression, partly because the «means of representation» or «*Darstellungsmittel*» are different in images and in texts, as Freud notes. During the analytical session the patient translates the perceptual images that made up his dream into verbal discourse, «describing» them in an act of ekphrasis to his therapist. The therapist then stabilizes the verbal dream report in the form of a dream text. He has it written down and gives it a canonic form by publishing it in case studies and using it in lectures. The therapist is not betrayed by the perceptual camouflage. He knows that he must not take the dream text as the accurate description of an actual impression on the dreamer, but that he has to regard it as a complicated set of parapraxes or miswritings that can only be undone by careful acts of systematic misreading. Transforming, for

example, the image or signified of the word «nose» – something you would expect to find in a human face – into the proposition: «He knows».

For sure, all of these notions of «reading», «translating», «text», «image», «rebus» Freud uses with artifice and rigor are metaphorical ones. And this is out of necessity, for psychoanalysis is dealing with mental and affective processes that cannot be observed directly by the therapist, but can only be *inferred* from *symptoms*. That is why, Freud himself occasionally uses the apter term «construction» instead of «reconstruction» when talking about the unconscious «text» of the dream-thoughts. From this does not follow, however, that Freud's metaphors of «reading» are just made up or arbitrarily used. They have practical consequences, as they structure the whole enterprise of psychoanalysis both as a cure and as a science. They serve to establish a *consistent model* of the specific past linked to the unconscious, a model that helps to explain both the genesis and actual form of a patient's symptoms and set the conditions for their removal.

4. I would like to end this article with a sidestep to Freud's aesthetics and turn attention to his essay *The Moses of Michelangelo*. The title refers to a marble statue the artist conceived for the monumental grave of Pope Julius II (Fig. 2). It was sculpted around 1514 and is situated in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome. This statue had elicited a wide range of art historical interpretations, none of which seemed convincing to Freud, when he set about to write his own essay, which was published anonymously in the journal *Imago* in 1914⁴. What struck Freud about the statue were two things: first, the position of Moses' right hand that is curiously involved with various streaks of



Mit Genehmigung des Verlags Robert Langewiesche aus dem Band 'Michelangelo: der Sammlung 'Blau' Bieder',

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his beard, and second, the orientation of the Tables of the Law on which the prophet rests his right wrist. These tables are turned upside down.

⁴ For a more recent art historical interpretation, see Verspohl (2004).

The method Freud uses to analyze the statue bears remarkable similarities to his hermeneutic «reading» of dream images. As with the dream images, the amateur art historian Freud tries to regard the statue as a text, made up of significant traces or symptoms whose careful reading allows for a correct interpretation of the artwork. Two main features in the essay attest to this: On the one hand, Freud does not seem to look at the statue itself, but rather he seems to look at it through the lens of the art historical literature that has been written about it up to his day. Most of the essay consists in a compilation, comparison and an almost philological reading of these accounts. It is through the method of comparative reading – and, in a way, creative misreading – that Freud shapes his own interpretation of the statue. On the other hand, he singles out certain discrete elements, certain «details», on which he hinges his interpretation, like the position of the statue's right hand and the upside-downness of the Tables of the Law.

In Freud's Moses-essay, the Italian physician Giovanni Morelli figures as the inventor of this «method of details». Under the pseudonym of Ivan Lermolieff, Morelli had demonstrated in the second half of the nineteenth century that the attribution of paintings to certain painters can be effectuated by paying attention not to the whole picture, but to the way minor details are painted. According to Morelli, attention should be diverted from the general impression and main characteristics of a picture, laying stress instead on minor features, like the specific drawing of a fingernail, of an earlobe, of halos and such unconsidered trifles which the copyist neglects to imitate and yet which every artist executes in his own characteristic way (see Freud [1914b]: 222).

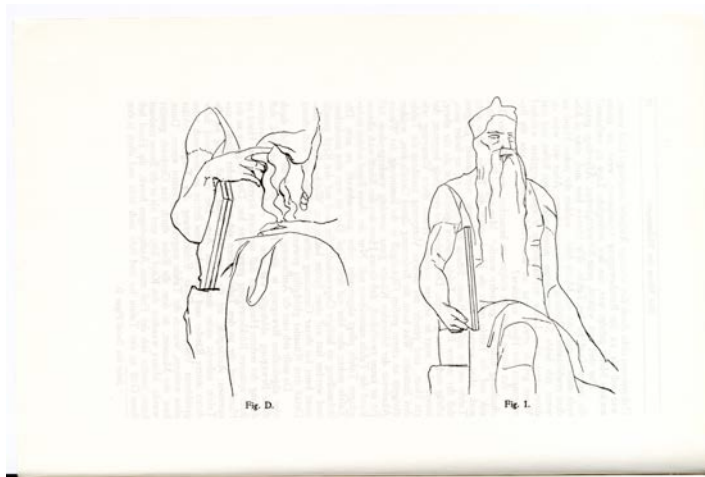
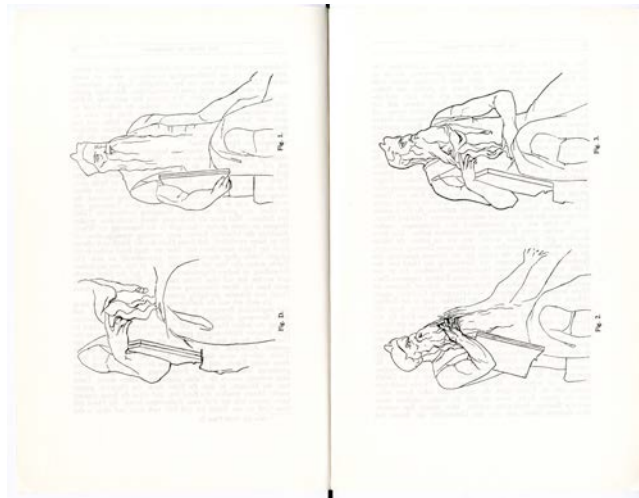
As in Freud's own technique of interpreting dream images, the pictures are discomposed by Morelli and broken up into a set of signs, of symptoms, of indexes. But how does Freud read Michelangelo's statue then? He reads it as an allegory of self-restraint, of mastering one's violent temper. Freud explains the current form of the statue as the result of an agitated movement, which for the spectator lies in the past and cannot be perceived directly. A movement that would have resulted in the destruction of the Tables of the Law had the prophet not composed himself. In Freud's interpretation, the Moses of Michelangelo differs significantly from its biblical model, who gets angry at the sight of the golden calf after descending from Mount Sinai and smashes the Tables of the Law the Lord has dictated him.

Four drawings were published together with Freud's essay (Fig. 3-5). Freud had them made by an artist according to his instructions. Seemingly similar to Eadweard Muybridge's photographic renderings of the phases of animal locomotion, the drawings «Fig. 1» to «Fig. 3» – «Fig. D» is a detail of «Fig. 3» – are representations of the different

stages of movement the prophet's body must have undergone, according to Freud⁵. It is easy to notice that «Fig. 3» corresponds to the actual statue. In the first picture Moses rests, in the second one he is overwhelmed by his emotions at the unexpected sight of the golden calf. He grabs his beard in sudden rage and the tables slip from the grip of his hand. In the last one he manages to compose himself. He lets go of the beard, the tables have been turned upside down, but they have not fallen.

What is interesting – and somewhat singular in Freud's oeuvre – is the specific reconstruction of a past through images, and not through a text. But do the drawings really stand for themselves? Are they not simple illustrations, carried out under Freud's direction, according to his «script», so to speak? Do they really «show» movement or are they just there to indicate certain positions – of the right hand, of the Tables of the Law – and the changes in these positions? The answer is all too clear, as my chain of questions has been rhetorical. The drawings decompose Michelangelo's statue, isolate it from its context, remove it from the play of light and color inside the church, fix its visual appearance to just one single point of view. They reduce it to the status of a diagram. Equally, they do not render motion like chronophotography or the old, celluloid-based cinematic film stock do – as a mechanically generated series of arbitrary photographic cuts in the space-time-continuum. Rather, they render static positions and imply certain transformations between them. In this regard, the drawings assume the same function as the rebus in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. They denounce the sensual wealth of the immediate appearance of the statue as an aesthetic cloth, a perceptual camouflage of a basic diagrammatic structure. Even though they are about the speculative reconstruction of a highly affective bodily movement, in these graphics time has ceased to exist. In them, psychoanalytical interpretation seems to have absorbed a defining trait of the unconscious in an abysmal act of mimicry: the «timelessness» of the primary process.

⁵ It has to be noted, however, that the drawings do not represent the phases of a movement that has actually taken place as in Muybridge. Rather, they are reconstructions of an absolutely lost, hypothetical past, which is exactly the epistemological task psychoanalysis sets itself as a cure. In this regard, Horst Bredekamp is mistaken, when he conceives of the drawings as a kind of «Gedankenfilm», a film in the mind of Freud, represented with the help of a draughtsman. There has never been actual movement in the statue, nor does Freud seek to enliven the latter by way of the drawings. It is all about fixed positions and the transformations that occur between them (see Bredekamp [2009]: 69-78).



Captions

Figure 1a: Sigmund Freud: «Aus der Geschichte einer infantilen Neurose», manuscript, Washington: Library of Congress, Sigmund Freud Papers, Box OV 7, page 24. Source: Library of Congress.

Figure 1b: Sigmund Freud: «Aus der Geschichte einer infantilen Neurose», manuscript, Washington: Library of Congress, Sigmund Freud Papers, Box OV 7, page 25. Source: Library of Congress.

Figure 2: Michelangelo: *Moses*, ca. 1513-15, statue from the tomb of Pope Julius II, marble, Rome: Basilica di San Pietro in Vincoli. Source: Sigmund Freud: «Der Moses des Michelangelo», “Imago”, 3/1, February 2014, pp. 15–36, photographic supplement between pages 16 and 17. Source: the author.

Figure 3: Sigmund Freud: «Der Moses des Michelangelo», “Imago”, 3/1, February 2014, pages 28 and 29. Source: the author.

Figure 4: Sigmund Freud: «Der Moses des Michelangelo», “Imago”, 3/1, February 2014, page 28, rotated. Source: the author.

Figure 5: Sigmund Freud: «Der Moses des Michelangelo», “Imago”, 3/1, February 2014, page 29, rotated. Source: the author.

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