Sublimation, Art and Psychoanalysis: Kevin Jones

Sublimation is a concept central to psychoanalytic theories about art that traverses the body, the psyche and the social. Freud wrote of sublimation in the context of the production of art, but the concept could theoretically apply to other activities such as work or leisure (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1980) Rycroft makes the link to alchemical processes (Rycroft 1995).

Sublimation was the work of Eros, which through its tendency toward the creation of ever greater unites in the service of life, diverted and released aggressive and libidinal energies toward new non-sexual aims and objects of higher social value, providing an avenue for the expression of threatening or unacceptable desires without the need for repression. (Freud 1991a). Artists worked on the raw material of their own unconscious conflicts through the art materials which allowed the audience to identify with these unconscious conflicts embodied in the artwork and rendered in culturally acceptable symbolic form (Freud, 1991b). The links between sublimation, the role of the ego and super-ego in the internalisation of cultural values and the renunciation of drive gratification were central to the Freudian view of cultural and social development (Freud, 1991c, 1991d).

Although Freud linked artist, audience and society his theory remained ambivalently located in an a-historical realm, somewhere between sublimation or symptom (Adams, 2003). Despite his valuing of art and his appreciation of the human collective effort of culture, the aesthetic is sometimes reduced to an expression of repressed instinctual conflict, tending toward an illusory wish-fulfilling fantasy aimed at avoiding reality. Kris responded to this impasse and developed the idea of artistic sublimation as a mature form of defence, which neutralised potentially dangerous drive energies and made them available to the ego. The artist, through a 'regression in the service of the ego', enabled the aesthetic illusion from which neutralised unconscious energies could create socially valued objects. Kris rethought art as an important aspect of the ego's adaptation to the environment (Kris, 1953).

Where Freud had emphasised the sexual drives and the decisive importance of the father in the formation of cultural ideals (Freud, 1923), Klein emphasised sublimation as a transformation of infantile anxieties relating to the mother, the death drive and the fear of losing the good maternal object (Klein, 1986). Segal developed sublimation as an aspect of the depressive position and reparation, which involved a giving up of phantasy and was always accompanied by the mourning of a loss. Sublimation allowed the creation of a new object, which restored the lost object in unconscious phantasy and brought something new into the world. She emphasised the importance of the reality sense for the artist in relation to their use of art materials and the ability to tolerate anxiety and conflict in successful sublimation (Segal, 1991). In her emphasis on the role of Thanatos, the death instinct in art

and creativity, Segal opens a link between sublimation and aesthetic theories of the sublime (Segal, 1952). Stokes and Meltzer (1963) developed the link between successful sublimation and fantasies in relation to bodily processes, sibling relationships in the family and social context.

Winnicott, thought that while Freud's theory of sublimation bridged the relationship between inner and outer reality, it did not provide a space in the mind in which cultural experience took place. For Winnicott cultural experience develops from the movement between the play area between mother and infant and 'the 'Potential Space' between the individual and the environment (Winnicott, 1993; Edwards, D. 2004). The development of an illusory third area of experience, neither inner nor outer, was crucial to the development of a boundaried sense of self and without which the production of art objects through the transformation of drive in sublimation could not take place. Milner and Winnicott were able to develop these ideas to revalue the importance of the role of illusion in art and to explore the links between the analytically framed play space of therapy and the socially framed play space of art and its institutions (Case and Dalley 1992, Milner 1950).

Bollas linked the role of mother as a transformational object to the role of the art object in aesthetic experience, while Wright explored the role of form, line and colour as objects in the search for a responsive maternal object. Reintroducing the potentialities of pleasure into the re-evaluation of sublimation Adam Phillips, writing about children, proposed sublimation as a 're-description…in the service of delight' (Phillips, 1998).

The move away from reductive psychoanalytic accounts of sublimation based in pathology also developed in French Psychoanalytic theory. Lacan thought that the loss of the forbidden object of incestuous desire, the mother, opened up a space of unbearable lack within the child (Lacan, 1992). This space was felt as 'the thing', a formless void around which the drives would circulate. Sublimation placed objects in relation to a fantasy about the lost object of desire, raising 'the object to the dignity of the thing' rather than transforming drive energy or providing a substitute for aggressive and sexual gratification (Ziziek, 1989). Lacan emphasised the importance of the social relation in sublimation but rejected any idea that through sublimation the psychoanalyst should encourage 'adaptation to the environment' (Lacan, 1992). He linked the sublimation of the drive to the ethics of analytic practice in its relation to desire.

Laplanche and Pontalis describe the links between sublimation as an analogy with a chemical process and to the art historical and philosophical concepts of the sublime (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1980). Stanton develops the chemical definition of sublimation being the sudden transformation of a gas into a solid without an intermediate transitional state to describe how

sublimation might produce feelings of awe, pleasure and terror in the individual. Stanton discusses the importance of these moments in relation to both modern art and clinical work. (Stanton, 1997).

Kristeva similarly emphasises the centrality of sublimation in her theory of 'psychical significance'. Taking up the relationship between the Eros and Thanatos Kristeva describes the release of negativity at the heart of sublimation as an integral part of the development of subjectivity, art and creativity (Kristeva, 2000). She also relocates the importance of the maternal dimension in cultural production through sublimation.

Laplanche described sublimation an essential element of psychoanalytic theory that nevertheless remains incoherent and undeveloped (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1980) and later noted the obsolescence of sublimation as a psychoanalytic concept within psychoanalytic writings and clinical trainings (Laplanche, 2002-3). Sublimation seems to circle a number of problem that will not be squared within psychoanalytic theory in relation to the drive and to history: the supposed weakness of the feminine super-ego meaning women are not as able to become involved in cultural production (Freud, 1991c); essentialist theories of sexuality and the drive within the nuclear monogamous family (Freud, 1991d; Klein, 1986; Winnicott, 1993) and the political location of different cultural artistic traditions and practices (Freud 1991c, 1991d; Klein 1986). While French traditions in psychoanalysis share some of these theoretical problems, they also offer a more culturally and historically located attempt to describe sublimation. Where Freud's original account emphasised the links between sublimation and the dis-ease at the heart of cultural development, contemporary psychoanalytic accounts of sublimation suggest the role of pleasure and terror in the transformation of both the individual and the social in the service of delight.

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See also: Sublimation theories in art therapy