

Dress Designs of Our Passions

Dr. Jan Campbell

We cannot know the unconscious in any straightforward way because it is repressed and thus unknowable. As Freud often acknowledged, the unconscious never *is*; it is not something waiting deep down in our psyche, ready to be uncovered by the right analytic interpretation or dream. Rather, it waits and lurks as a potential for different forms of expression, dangerously residing behind and in quest for the forms that will give a shape to our desires and allow them to travel and communicate. To experience our passions we must have forms through which they can be carried, borne and represented, and our first forms are arguably the most incestuous or familiar but also the most unknowable; uncanny because they are so intense. Our passionate affects come dressed and undressed in familiar and unfamiliar clothes; those comfortable Oedipal slippers, uncannily styled, as the forms into which we need to step in order to express and fit what we feel.

In *Freudian Passions* I argue that something has to be added to Freud's model of repression to make sense of how our passions move in the transference and communicate.¹ Our repressed unconscious passions are unbearable, and so unavailable to life and experience, and it is through the unconscious communication with another that these passions can find forms in an answering and telepathic response. Unconscious telepathy, in other words, which begins with the mother, happens as our first non-human interaction with objects in the world; non-human, because for the baby and the mother, this early telepathic forming and informing of the passionate attunement between them is before the baby has any sense of a psychological ego or self. Telepathy and the unconscious forms to which it gives rise are what we return to, in therapy and in life, as a way to sublimate the ferocity of our most intense and unbearable affects that have been repressed.

Telepathy was in a sense Freud's dream, one he was determined to keep secret. When Sandór Ferenczi, Freud's much loved colleague wants to offer his experiments in telepathy as public proof of psychoanalysis, Freud tells him authoritatively 'Don't do it'. Continuing, Freud advises Ferenczi that the only new thing that he could add to the existing literature would be the 'personal influence that must radiate from it. By it you would be throwing a bomb into the psychoanalytical house which would be certain to explode. Surely we agree in not wanting to hasten this perhaps unavoidable disturbance in or development'.² Freud had misgivings about making public his beliefs in telepathy. These reservations were fuelled by entreaties from Ernest Jones that psychoanalysis must eschew any relation with telepathy if it is to be accepted without prejudice. 'In your private political opinions you might be a Bolshevist,' he tells Freud, but that is no reason to halt the spread of psychoanalysis by telling people. Freud replies that of telepathy he is convinced and it has been the great experiment of his life, but if anyone asks, Jones can tell them that his conversion is 'my private affair like my Jewishness, my passion for smoking and many other things, and that the theme of telepathy is in essence alien to psychoanalysis.'

But if Freud publicly disavowed his private belief in telepathy, it was through his friendship and work with Ferenczi that telepathy worked its influence on psychoanalysis. Freud and Ferenczi loved each other. If Ferenczi's love was more openly transmitted,

Freud's was arguably more secretive and repressed. Their telepathic transferences, the thoughts and feelings, hidden at times and then shared and transported between them mirrored the inescapable links between psychoanalysis and telepathy, and between a repressed and unrepressed unconscious. And yet the telepathic and non-psychological objects of Freud's desires, his smelly cigars, his beloved dogs or his Jewish ancestry are his most personal and non-personal forms that take him back not only to his mother but also to the wider world of cultural forms in which Freud and his early Oedipal loves were situated. If telepathy sublimates our early repressed passions it can only do this through the wider cultural objects and forms carried by the mother (but not just the mother) that begin and continue to surround us.

The telepathic forms that give a dress sense or style to our passions are the unconscious rhythms that move our passions and sublimate them in relation the corresponding or non-corresponding forms that exist within us and outside as objects in the world. Besides the neurotic desires we repress and the perverse ones we express, are the circuitous and proliferating desires and spaces of the ego, that can come into being provided they have a dress design and shape through which they can travel and communicate.

In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe strives to uncover what lies beneath the painter Mr Pauncefort's view, the green and grey pictures 'with lemon coloured sailing boats and pink women on the beach'.³ The fashion of Mr Pauncefort, not unlike Mrs Ramsay, is for 'pale, elegant and semi-transparent' art. If Mrs Ramsay's rose flowered beauty is there for all to see and admire, it only goes so deep. She only *appears* beautiful. Mrs Ramsay captures the rosy appearance of love, but not the dark and double side that is part of its essence. Mrs Ramsay is wilfully unaware of love's ambivalence. As Lily realises, in order to really make art and life sublime you have to look beneath the fashion for pastel, or rose tinted colours. For 'beneath the colour there was a shape'.⁴



Sharon Kivland's work is sublime in Lily Briscoe's aesthetic sense, showing the uncanny hiding of the ferocity of our desire, along with the evocative dress designs, through which our ego makes its unconscious into art and shapes. In an alluring but discomposing photograph from *Du cou au genou*, 2011, Kivland gives us the anonymous female form, the maternal form. A torso cut off at the head with enough of the protruding neck muscle and suggestion of hair to know this woman has her head turned to what? She is in movement, and the dress that both corsets and waves around her body provides the movement to the body and its desires. The white curves of this dress, the way it fits close but reveals the female form through the pleats and folds of the material puts in play both the rhythm and the unconscious desires of this woman's body: together they make up her body/ego. Is this, then, her passion? On the one hand, art as the ideal and impersonal female form, and on the other, unmodified passion. Always threatening to dissolve into the non-personal 'itness' of the id-like torso perhaps, until it ripples into and is carried by the dress shapes of her ego that form and inform that ever moving but always enigmatic response.

In the varied Freudian passions of Kivland's works we see beneath the colour to the

unconscious artistry of shapes. In *Mes vedettes* we have film stars with their curling red lips and hideous, shining teeth, matched by the vampiric white lights in their eyes, as if the faded forms of these stars, of Gloria and Belinda, can never catch up, or be a misfitting match to the ferocious colour and shape of those wild white eyes and teeth – those painted-on wolf lips. Through her riveting images Kivland tells us not the story of psychoanalytic desires but its colours and unconscious shapes through images of female forms, and their paints and designs, corsets, and dresses. Her works are always seductive and sublime, and yet ugly, beguiling, and unsettling. Like the ego, they hold and hold back the repressed menace of the repressed along with the many fashions and styles of the ego that communicate through fashion, lingerie, and dress. In a series of delicate and intricate drawings of bras, girdles, and corsets Kivland shows us how forms for the female body are the non-psychological objects that also beckon and invite our passionate reading of them as future elaborations of desire: bold, seductive, temperate, and sadistically confining.

In *Kneelength*, dated skirts finish at the knee to reveal the dancing balance and movement of bare women's legs below, and in *Les ceintures* it is the trousered female legs that dance. In *Kneelength* it is the travel we make to the hem that only reveals at the knee the beautiful legs in sway below the skirt ... and in *Les ceintures* it is the clothed and trousered legs; images cut off and ending for us not down but up, with sexily belted torsos that are beautifully gyrating. These trousers and belts are seductive as the objects and forms that grace female desire and keep it moving. And yet in *Les ceintures* we see hands on hips: hips stuck forward assertively and provocatively ready for sex, dance, or a gunfight. This is a masculine assertion or form of female desire which contrasts with the demure, thick skirts of wool, suede, and tweedy materials covering the upper legs and thighs in *Kneelength*. These skirts domestically confine and weigh down in more feminine terms the power of those dancing legs. Paradoxically it is the masculine trousers and forms of *Les ceintures* that really transports passion and brings the female body and its desires into life, whereas in *Kneelength* it is the feminine demureness of the dress that not merely covers female desire but halts it.

Kneelength and *Les ceintures* give us the sublime female form through the clothes that make its desire move to tell us. And yet these images are never simply benign – they are always uncannily amputated: truncated limbs and midriffs, as disturbing as they are alluring. With desire there is always something brutally missing, and in these works we glimpse both the enduring promise and the aggressive endings to the sexually different forms of our inclination and lusts.

At the heart of Freud's model of the unconscious is the repressed – those passions which are unknowable and unbearable to experience. Yet it is through the unconscious telepathy, a receptive unconscious, that those repressed passions can be put into motion and carried by the transference. The living forms of a receptive telepathic encounter with the early non-psychological world are the forms that carry and sublimate the primary relation to the mother. Passions between mother and child are accompanied by a living form where the mother returns the baby's hungry love with her own particular idiom or from attached. This mutual forming and informing of the maternal world is how passions are given new shapes by the ego to inhabit. And so forms and dreams and what we call the unconscious are outside before we internalise them as a psychological world. Historically, art has been given a sick press by psychoanalysis in that it has been seen as little more than a substitute for the neurotic symptom. Yet symptoms, like our passions, are always in search of the responsive forms that will elaborate the repressed into new spaces of desires.

In Kivland's works we see these passions in search of responding forms in differing ways, through the repressed and the communicative expression of what she makes and what she makes us feel and see. We can see the unconscious passions and forms of her work as an expression of the repressed, and the transference of that repressed, into the living forms of a female/maternal body that create new shapes for the ego through the rhythm of her dress designs. It is through the unconscious communication and experience of Kivland's bewitching, arresting images and dress forms that we respond with our desire in giving them life.

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NOTES

1. Jan Campbell, *Freudian Passions: Psychoanalysis, Form and Literature*, London: Karnac Books, 2013.
2. Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi, Letters Vol 3, letter 1007 March 20, 1925 in *The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi. Vol 3 1920–1933*, edited by Ernst Falzeder and Eva Brabant, trans. by Peter T. Hoffer, intro. by Judith Dupont, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
3. Virginia Woolf, [1927] *To The Lighthouse*, Introduction by Hermione Lee, London: Penguin Books, 1992, p. 17.
4. Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, p. 23.