



On the (im)possibility to return and repeat: reflections from art psychotherapy

Über die (Un-)Möglichkeit von Rückkehr und Wiederholung:
Reflexionen aus der Kunstpsychotherapie

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Tracing return and repetition at the core of our contemporary cultural, political and social being, this paper examines these concepts in relation to modern philosophy, psychoanalysis, art and art therapy. It contrasts various philosophical positions with the psychoanalytic understanding of repetition as a manifestation and return of unconscious conflicts and trauma. The presentation also scrutinises how artists have repeatedly revisited materials, forms, content and processes in their work. As spectators, we have learned to use these repetitions as reference points to recognise work and artist at a glance, to the point where written information may not be necessary to attribute a work of art to its maker.

As in the visual arts, repetition is regularly observed in art therapy practice and has prompted reflection, interpretation, and theory formation. However, providing case examples from their practice with children and young people in psychiatry and special education, the presenters apply a closer, critical look at how applicable the concepts of repetition and return are in relation to art and art therapy.

The paper argues that although psychoanalysis and psychodynamic psychotherapy primarily follow Freud's (1914) original idea of remembering, repeating and working through, applying these verbal procedures indiscriminately in art therapy may actually impede the artistic process and its capacity to transform psychic experiences in the service of healing. And although a superficial glance at recurring visual phenomena in patients' artwork might seem repetitive, these repetitions never produce identical images; instead, they display subtle differences, variations and developments and are integral to patients' artistic and healing processes.



In art therapy, the paper concludes, the interplay of evolving variations on a theme generates formal and aesthetic insights that prelude and supersede verbally grounded understandings. As Odysseus returned to Ithaca in disguise, artworks return their knowledge to the artist in their distinct, discreet and varied ways.

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Biographies

Uwe Herrmann, PG Dip AT, MA, PhD, trained in fine art and graduated with an MA in Art Psychotherapy from Goldsmiths College, University of London, where he also completed his PhD. He has practised for over thirty years at the State Training Institute for the Blind in Hannover, Germany. Since 2000, he has taught as a visiting professor on the MA Art Therapy programme at Weissensee University of Art, Berlin, where he was appointed course leader in 2024. Uwe has published and lectured widely on art therapy in Germany, many countries of the European Union, the UK and South Korea.

Claudia Stein completed an MA in Visual Communication Design and graduated with an MA in Art Therapy from Weissensee University of Art Berlin in 2015. She has worked extensively in child and adolescent psychiatric clinics, and in 2024 joined the art therapy department at the State Training Centre for the Blind in Hannover, Germany. Claudia also works as a supervisor on the MA Art Therapy programme at Weissensee University of Art Berlin.

Recent Publications

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