

## Images of Freud

### Icon-Work

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#### **Abstract**

Not many cultural critics or other academic figures become so well known in the general public that one can argue that their physical image (whether based on photographs, films, portraits and caricatures) has become iconic, along with a wide-spread dissemination of their intellectual ideas. This however is undoubtedly the case with the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), whose image is still immediately recognizable to a majority of the population of at least Europe and North America. Freud's ideas (albeit in popularized form) also travel with ease in current public discourses, ranging from cartoons, jokes and other forms of comedy to serious essays, fictions and films; a phenomenon which reflects the extent to which 'Freudian' ideas are incorporated in the dominant Western middle-class culture of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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Broadly speaking, these representations of Freud and renditions of his ideas are rich 'cultural texts', encompassing images, commercial products and advertisements for them, etc. – as well as more

traditional types of objects of academic study, such as books and films. Cultural texts travel together indiscriminately of genre, medium and mode, as the tenets of New Historicism<sup>1</sup> teach us, allowing readers or consumers of cultural texts to create operational mini-canons for each reader's own use. Cultural texts, of course, also constitute the backbone of each reader's cultural competence, or cultural capital, as Bourdieu would term it.

The present article's approach to such, often image-heavy, cultural texts is to read them symptomatically as signs of a cultural dissemination of knowledge (in this case of Sigmund Freud and his thoughts and writings). The process of cultural dissemination of famous figures and their doings and texts can suitably be termed as icon-work (borrowing of course from Freud's own notion of 'work' in connection with dreams or mourning<sup>2</sup>), and this article argues that icon-work can be either adversarial or collaborative (or a mixture of the two) vis-à-vis the greater public's knowledge of the figure in question and his position in the general iconosphere<sup>3</sup>.

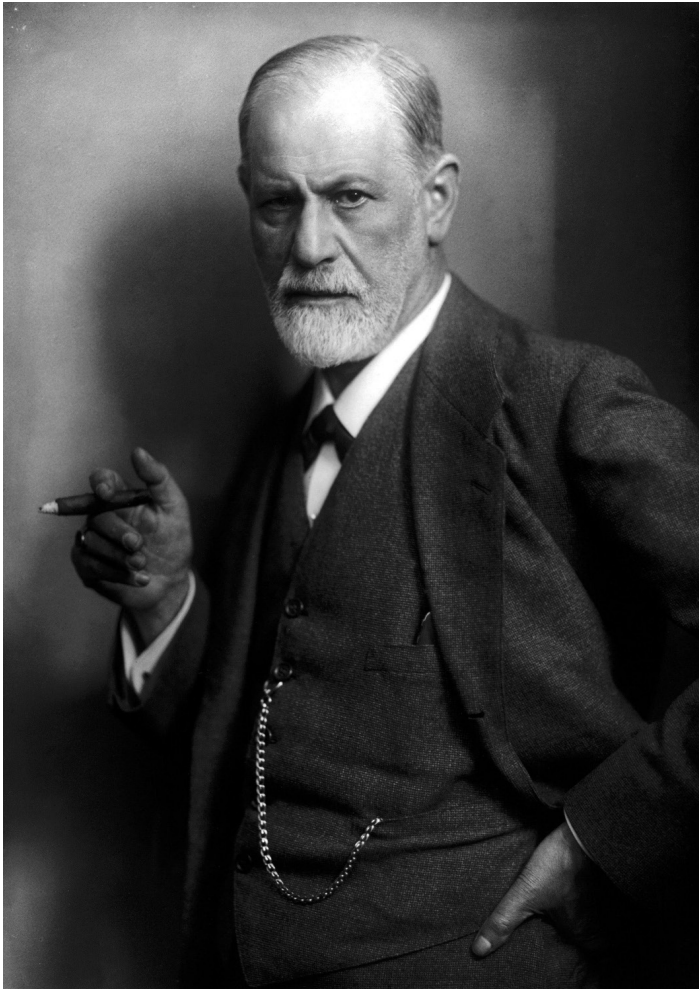
The icon-work strategies are closely related to some well-known aspects of literary and cultural theory, which will become evident as we go along, and which encompass, from cultural studies, Guy Debord's notion of *détournement*<sup>4</sup> and Jonathan Culler's of *recuperation*<sup>5</sup>; and from literary studies, Linda Hutcheon's notion of *satire* and its double in postmodern theory as the blank form of parody, or *pastiche*. In sum, icon-work should be regarded as an often oppositional, always user-driven way of altering, re-framing or re-mixing, and re-purposing existing images and texts in order to make them politically or aesthetically pertinent for the icon-worker's own identity project(s).

Icon-work in the case of Freudian images is indeed exceptionally common, and the aim of the present article is therefore not to present an exhaustive study of all such material (as tens of thousand manipulated Freudian images can easily be located through a simple Internet search), nor even to be representative in a statistical sense. Rather the icons are selected with a view to containing and displaying the main forms of icon-work strategies stipulated in the definition of the concept itself above, and the selection is further deliberately designed to show the trans-medial nature of iconicity in the post-modern world, as well as ways in which icon-work exactly contributes to the hybridity of the cultural texts in contemporary circulation.

The article will first take a look at some of the humorous images we find of Freud in popular culture, where he has long had iconic status, both in terms of his own physical likeness and in terms of stereotyped versions of his main ideas. To complement this analysis we shall contrast the popular image of Freud with the use of him in recent fiction by E.L. Doctorow and John Irving, showing how historiographic metafiction, and postmodern pastiche, both defined by critic Linda Hutcheon as subversive literary and cultural strategies<sup>6</sup>, have put Freud to work both as a clown and a stern cultural critic, relying on the use and abuse of biographical facts of Freud's real life to still create comical effects.

The first main claim here is that the dissemination of knowledge of Freud is to a large extent image-driven, as most contemporary icon-work is. Freud is rendered into a visual gestalt so as to travel more effortlessly between media – thereby gaining greater cultural currency than he could through mere words and text. The first five examples are clear manifestations of this trend, being images in every aspect of the meaning of that word. The two literary examples may at first sight seem to run counter to this claim, but the two novels in question were international bestsellers and have in fact also both gained even greater cultural currency through having been adapted into relatively successful, high budget films<sup>7</sup>.

The second main claim must be that the dissemination of Freud in the iconosphere relies on curiously Freudian categories: jokes, slips and misnomers, dream matter, repression and doubles. In other words, the aim is to illustrate that an image of Freud also tends to be a Freudian image – a fact which may at first glance seem trivial, but which is not universally true of the images of other, similarly famous icons, such as Hitler or Jesus Christ. This Freudian particularity is explained as a form of second-order *détournement* and recuperation of Freud, through the unconscious of the icon-workers. This naturally does not mean that the icon-workers in question are unconscious of their project when producing a joke-image of Freud – icon-work is by and large a conscious act of labour and production, as established in the above paragraphs. However, the icon-work examined below shows that the process of manipulating Freud is never fully and purely conscious, but has a latent element of unconscious influence, or transfer, from Freudian ideas embedded in it.



As our first example of the dissemination of Freud as icon we shall discuss Nick Dewar's drawing of Sigmund and his cigar (found on Dewar's website at this URL: <http://www.nickdewar.com/pictures/painted/image13.jpg>). This image relies on a certain amount of cultural knowledge of Freudian ideas and of the physical likeness of the psychologist, even to the extent of recognition of Max Halberstam's famous 1921 photo which the drawing is based on [Image 1; Max Halberstadt [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons; [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ASigmund\\_Freud\\_LIFE.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ASigmund_Freud_LIFE.jpg)]. All icon-work relies on the twin strategies of reduction of complexity, which we can conveniently term stylization, as well as a certain element of transgression (of conventions or normality)<sup>8</sup>. In the case of Dewar's image we note the simplification of Freud's body: very large head, hand holding cigar (more on that anon) and suited body. We will in fact soon discover that Freud rarely travels in the iconosphere without wearing a full three-

piece suit, and wielding a large cigar. In terms of facial features, we see a pensive, somewhat sad look, and the important features of his full beard and rather less than full head of hair. He is every bit the early 20th C., European (specifically Jewish) intellectual. In terms of the cigar, we note that the more important signification of the cigar lies in the image formed by its smoke. Evidently, the cartoon here makes reference to the possibly apocryphal but nevertheless widely known aphorism attributed to Freud: "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar", but aims to 'derail' (as an act of *détournement*) the message: A cigar may be just a cigar, but even a cigar has a subconscious desire. Of course, the cigar is 'really' just a metonymy for Freud himself, a stand-in as it were for a minor part of Freud's body. When Freud

thinks with his 'cigar' the result is the stereotypical, nude woman, her back partially turned towards the viewer, winking at him (and us) with a come-hither look, inviting us to follow her wherever she is going (to the boudoir, no doubt). The intellectual head is thus *détournée* by the presence of the female form and the temptation to follow the sex drive, illustrating the conflict of the superego and the id, resulting from repression<sup>9</sup>. The icon-work done here is mildly adversarial, second-guessing and postulating Freud's own repressed sexual fantasies.

The next image is an example of a joke (as the first also was, of course), but this time with a twist, which can be analyzed as an example of catachresis (broadly speaking the rhetoric figure of misprision, but here more specifically in the sense of the literal understanding of something that is intended to be metaphorical). The image in question is the curious case of the Freudian slip. This product was advertised on eBay, and it is literally what the name says it is: a slip, as in an undergarment, tastefully presented on its hanger in a garden environment. To further demonstrate that this is indeed the authentic Freudian slip, a close-up image, printed on the fabric, is presented below, showing Freud in a transfer of a well-known image of the psychologist (taken in The Hague by Henry Verby in 1920, available at <http://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3c17978>) – again in public costume, including three-piece suit, hat and cigar. In terms of icon-work one would have to place this image/object among the collaborative kind – the joke is mild and not at the psychologist's expense in any way – only the vague association with the slip as lingerie or night garment with some sexual invitation might tarnish the reputation of Freud ever so slightly. The more interesting aspect of the slip in question is that as a joke it actually performs a slip of meaning from the metaphor of the slip of the tongue<sup>10</sup> to the concrete, literal presence of a slip with Freud's picture on it. This is a deliberately performed, slippery catachresis, and the laugh it produces is of a collaborative nature: we laugh with and not at Freud.

Two more products merit brief mention. The watermelon flavored *Sigmund Freud Head Pops* (viewable here: [http://www.pop-gadget.net/2007/07/suck\\_on\\_this\\_si\\_1.php](http://www.pop-gadget.net/2007/07/suck_on_this_si_1.php)), which come with the caption: "Sometimes a lollipop is just a lollipop," are an ambiguous example in terms of icon-work, posing the somewhat risqué ques-



tion of what a lollipop might be when it is NOT just a lollipop. If indeed it is ever a phallic symbol, as the caption seems to indicate by saying that it is not<sup>11</sup>, we are thus invited to give Freud head, not once, but eighteen times when we purchase this product. If not, then one might also wonder what the economy of drives is in the case of us sucking the flavor out of Freud's watermelony head. The product's icon-work cannot in all conscience be termed collaborative, but is not a case of complete *détournement* either, as nothing of the essence of Freud or his public image is at stake here. The stylization of Freud to pure head, here, is an extreme example of the reduction/stylization of a figure which icon-work can sometimes produce.

The next pop-culture example is the action figure version of Freud depicted here (<http://nerdapproved.com/bizarre-gadgets/sky-diving-sigmund-freud-with-brain-chute/>), "Sky-Diving Freud." Freud here comes accessorized, much as we have come to expect it from the previous example: three-piece suit, cigar (somewhat oversized, and wielded in an oddly weapon-like manner) – however he also comes complete with a brain-themed parachute, which is certainly a novel twist. Freud, the impeccable Victorian commando soldier, is ready to use his brain to parachute into any trouble area, quell any hysteria, trauma or other disorder with his combat cigar, after which one of his flying vehicles (whether balloon, blimp or propeller) will take him back to base to regroup (this figure being but one of a whole troop of psychologist action men, also including Jung). We clearly have a collaborative example here, in fact an example of a recuperation of Freud for a different culture, one that, conditioned by Hollywood and its worship of Schwarzeneggers, Stallones and Dolph Lundgrens, prefers a quick masculine fix to any crisis. However, the misappropriation of the intellectual Freud into the realm of the brain-dead action hero carries with it a cultural critique, not so much of Freud, but of the reductive Hollywood culture and its attendant merchandizing and the effect thereof on impressionable young minds. Freud as a fantasy warrior still does not escape the entanglement of wish fulfillment that Freud himself explained as one of the important functions of daydreaming<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, we have the strangely labeled "Pictures of your mother" pin-hole camera (available here: <http://www.corbis.readymech.com/en/camera/?camera=2>) that one can buy and assemble, and then use to – presumably – take all sorts of pictures, not just ones of

maternal figures. The camera purportedly actually works, but also makes a nice display of a conversation piece in itself. The decoration of the camera uses Halberstam's photo (as did "Sky Diving Freud"), but only parts of it: the head, severed entirely, and the hand holding the cigar (no castration anxiety here!). Further, the head is doubled and folded back on itself, producing an odd three-eyed, two-nosed and two-mouthed Freud gazing out on us like a deity from the Hindu pantheon – an image which is then redoubled and projected also upside-down at the bottom end of the camera. This monstrous, twisted Freud, which seems to promise to see and tell all (unless, of course, his mouth double-talks) in the revealing images the camera can take, is wilder than any Freud image we have encountered so far. It seems to recuperate Freud's ability to see below the surface of phenomena (something which a camera is also supposed to do, but only in the hands of a very accomplished photographer – the 'artist as analyst/analyst as artist'-myth is evoked here), but the danger of the photo saying too much is also palpable here, as the too numerous orifices of Freud threaten to produce too many penetrating slips – perhaps especially if we attempt to produce those images of Mother (harking back to Freud's essay "Negation" (Freud, 1925), which starts with the patient anecdote of a dream image about which the analysand then quickly adds, "It's not my Mother" (p. 325)), only to deny what they really reveal of our voyeuristic desires vis-à-vis her.

These relatively lighthearted examples of popular, image-driven cultural texts have illustrated the range of icon-work possible in the case of Freud, from collaborative work that hardly performs *détournement* at all to critical satirical or parodic work. For darker aspects of the Freudian legacy in European thought, we need to turn to literary representations of him, and it is also here we find the best example of what Culler terms "recuperation" of his image.

We now shift focus to two literary examples, one which uses Freud for the purpose of a satirical, cultural critique of America in the early part of the 20th C. (in other words a collaborative *détournement*), and another which uses Freud (or actually his distorted double in a typically postmodern form of parody<sup>13</sup>) as a recuperative lens to compare America with Europe's legacy of anti-Semitism. E.L. Doctorow's tour de force of a historiographic novel, *Ragtime* from 1975, uses numerous historical figures in the margins of its story of a

bourgeois American family in the first decade of the 20th C., encountering in unexpected ways characters representing other races and cultures, which forces its members to change their perceptions and behavior as America also begins to change into a more multicultural society. Among the very diverse historical figures used, are Harry Houdini and J.P. Morgan (who are both important commentators via the omniscient narrator's access to their thoughts and opinions), but also many old-world Europeans, including Emma Goldmann, Sigmund Freud and an unnamed Jewish immigrant known only by his child's name for him, Tateh (i.e., Daddy). Freud and Tateh become each other's negative double in the narrative, contrasted by their attitudes to America and their strategies vis-à-vis the new world's noisy, teeming streets and parlors.

Freud is only present in the novel in a short interlude describing his visit in 1909 to lecture in New York. Most of this episode is based on historically and biographically accurate facts about this visit which in fact did take place. First, Freud is cushioned by his hosts and co-travelers, who take him to environments selected to remind him as much as possible of old Vienna, but gradually he cannot escape exposure to the popular entertainments and street life of New York, represented by the movies, an entertainment park and several restaurants. Of these Freud only likes the movie (thinking: "At least ... it is silent" (p. 35)), but throughout he is plagued by the need to urinate and the inability to find appropriate public facilities to relieve himself in. Things come to a head during a visit to Niagara Falls where a guide patronizingly says to the company: "Let the old fellow go first." (p. 36) "The great doctor, age fifty-three, decided at this moment that he had had enough of America. With his disciples he sailed back to Germany on the *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*. [...] He said to Ernest Jones, America is a mistake, a gigantic mistake." (p. 36) Freud uses his privileged status to opt out of the American madness of youth worship; retreating to the old Empire, which ironically will turn virulently anti-Semitic a few years later and forcibly eject Freud out of his safe study, casting aspersions on his intellectual legacy. However, it is, paradoxically, in the gigantic American mistake that Freud's ideas will truly take root and grow. In contrast, Tateh has no way back because of his poverty and previous experience of persecution. Mandated to remain in New York, he must rely on his own



resources, including the invention of a primitive form of animation, based on the old craft of silhouette cutting – a particularly Jewish tradition. Later Tateh is able to make his fortune by selling this idea to the animated film studios of all places, thus securing the fulfillment of his American dream. The Jew who allows himself to be integrated thus has Doctorow's sympathy, unlike the un-assimilable Freud who goes back to the past and tradition that will reject him and attempt to kill him and all he stands for. Freud is thus represented as a *détournée* figure of the past, whereas his ideas take on a life of their own which help shape the future of the so-called American century.

Another historical novel, which picks up where Doctorow left off, is John Irving's second bestseller (following *The World According to Garp* (1978)), *The Hotel New Hampshire* from 1981. Not only is this a more recent novel, but its historical scope also begins three decades later than *Ragtime*, namely in the particularly charged year of 1939. Set first on American soil, the turmoil of the impending WW II is still far off; yet uncomfortably near for the young protagonists, Win Berry and his wife to be, Mary. Much as in *Ragtime* it is a visit from old-world Europe which serves as an unpleasant reminder that all is not well with the world. Again the visitor comes in the shape of a Freud-figure, albeit one that is "not *that* Freud, of course; it was the year when *that* Freud died. This Freud was a Viennese Jew with a limp and an unpronounceable name, who in the summers since he had been working at the Arbuthnot [...] had earned the name Freud for his abilities to soothe the distress of the staff and guests alike; he was an entertainer, and since he came from Vienna and was a Jew, "Freud" seemed only natural to some of the odd foreign wits at the Arbuthnot-by-the-Sea." (12-13) Applying the real Freud's essay "Negation" to the narrator's discourse, it seems clear that this entertainer who is NOT that Freud, but certainly A Freud, is very much in reality THAT Freud after all, or at least a strangely uncanny Freudian double of THAT Freud – and, it is worth noting, one who has returned as a jester figure, siding not with privilege and power, but with the common man (this is brought home in a slapstick scene where Freud dresses up as a doctor and operates on a visiting German anti-Semitic bourgeois).

As the *Ragtime* Freud did, Irving's Freud also returns to his native land – only this time it is in the middle of the Holocaust that

the entertainer and bear-trainer Freud dares to return to reclaim his heritage, leaving his Indian motorcycle and motley old bear behind as a gift and a livelihood for the young couple he meets that last summer in America. After the War he miraculously returns to the novel and offers them another gift, a genuine Viennese hotel – which in 1957 saves the by now numerous Berry family from bankruptcy. Going to Vienna, however, is not free from costing the family dearly. In a strangely Freudian economy, the unlikely survival of Freud himself is ‘paid for’ by the death of Mary Berry and one of her children in a plane crash. This misfortune is but one of many which befall the family, but throughout their ordeals they persevere, not least inspired by the example of Freud, who, while blinded by medical experiments in the KZ camp he was interred in during the War, never seems to despair or shirk away from any challenge – up to and including sacrificing his own life to foil a terrorist bomb attack. The Freud of *The Hotel New Hampshire* is thus a role model for the American protagonists who learn from him to cope with rape, grief and loss (and, incidentally, to enjoy happy, trauma-free sibling incest). This figure is therefore a recuperation of the real Freud as a healer, and a figure perhaps not too far removed from the action hero version of Sigmund we encountered earlier. The satire in Irving is certainly collaborative vis-à-vis Freud, unlike the adversarial satire of Doctorow.

Briefly, by way of conclusion: the dissemination of Freud in the iconosphere attests to the cultural need for a figure such as him. In lieu of the traditional function of icons and the religious saints they conventionally represent, we have a new pantheon of cultural saints, which we allow ourselves to occasionally poke fun of, and which we prefer should embody an element of transgression, as saints have always done, but which we nevertheless surround by – especially in the context of Freud – a strangely apt aura of totemic value and cultural taboos. Whether *détournée* or recuperated, the Freuds of the images analyzed above show the continuous need, especially in an American context, of a figure such as him. In sum, the images analyzed show the range of icon-work possible on a pervasive corpus of cultural texts such as Freud’s two bodies (his physical likeness and his works). Jokingly named candy alert us to aspects of our own oral needs, whereas Dewar’s caricature alludes to a darker subtext of Freud’s own addiction to orally induced stimulus through cigars

and their attendant smoke. The pin-hole camera contains a meta-comment on the ubiquitous drive to produce images and the potential voyeurism every photographer should consider his or her part in. The literary examples contain the most radical manipulations of Freud's image, but attest to how even intertextuality can be explained as a form of icon-work in cases such as these. The recuperation of Freud performed by Irving and his readers is satirical, but collaborative in reminding us of Freud's intellectual heroism in the face of adversity from totalitarian thinking and the desire of complete mind control. Freud may well be dead, but through icon-work he lives on as a cultural text under constant development.

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### Endnotes

- 1 See Veese, 1993:3
- 2 For dream-work, see the chapter entitled "The Dream-Work" in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1913b), where he further identifies two types of labor performed by the dreamer: "the work of condensation" and "the work of displacement", the latter connected to the work of wish-fulfillment. For Freud on the work of mourning, see his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (Freud, 1917)
- 3 A term casually introduced by Polish architecture critic Jan Bialostocki in an unpublished series of lectures, the best explanation of the term's potential use in the discipline of imagology and by extension in cultural text studies pertaining to icon-work and the decoding of cultural iconology is found in Johnson, 2005: "[T]he iconosphere connotes [...] a mapped world of possibilities from a particular period which has been realized in material form: whether it be in paper, parchment, wood, silk, canvas, clay, stone, plastic, film, or even digitized and encrypted in binary code. Shored up against the irrecoverable horizons of knowledge which were available to past minds, the iconosphere of a period consists of the traces that have survived, in whatever form, from individuals of that passing world." (Johnson, 2005: 52-53) In the optics of the present article, we are examining the textual traces of Sigmund Freud from the 1980s to our contemporary world of 2014.
- 4 Often defined as "turning expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself", cf. Holt 2010:252. This practice is thus aligned with the signification practices involved in postmodern parody (see note v), as well as in (predominantly adversarial) icon-work. The article uses the notion of *détournement* as a critique of Freud in an ideological sense.
- 5 Culler defines recuperation as a form of 'salvage' work performed by the reader of (primarily difficult) texts, cf. Culler, 1975. Recuperation is therefore best seen as a sub-type of collaborative icon-work in cultural iconology usages.

- 6 Hutcheon summarizes the salient features of postmodern fiction in the following capsule definition: "Parody—often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality — is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders." (Hutcheon 1989b:93). This aligns the phenomenon of parody closely with both of the types of icon-work we are operating with: parody can be both mildly adversarial and collaborative at the same time in a postmodern text. Elsewhere Hutcheon singles out a literary work's participation in the genre of historiographic metafiction as a necessary precondition for it to be properly labeled 'postmodern': "The term postmodernism, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it 'historiographic metafiction.'" (Hutcheon, 1989a:3)
- 7 *Ragtime* was filmed under the direction of Miloš Forman in 1981, and *The Hotel New Hampshire* in 1984 under the direction of Tony Richardson. The former film (nominated for 8 Academy Awards) grossed 11 million USD, and the latter grossed in excess of 5 million USD at the US box office, having been shot at a budget of 7,5 million USD.
- 8 See the theorization of these terms in the CFA provided for this volume.
- 9 A dynamic frequently discussed by Freud, but very clearly formulated in his 1933 essay, "The Dissection of the Psychical Personality", from *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXII (1932-1936)*.
- 10 Freud himself argues that the tongue doesn't in fact 'slip' when the brain produces the mispronunciation of a word ('parapraxis'), or makes it say more than the conscious mind intended to. See Freud, 1901, 69-113.
- 11 Cf. Freud, 1925 ("Negation").
- 12 Cf. Freud, 1913a
- 13 Cf. Hutcheon, 1989b: "[T]hrough a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference." (93)