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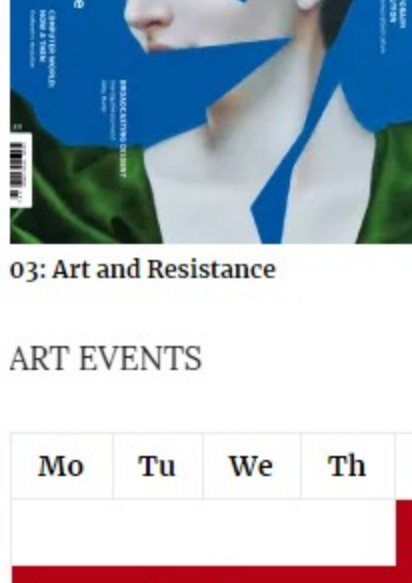
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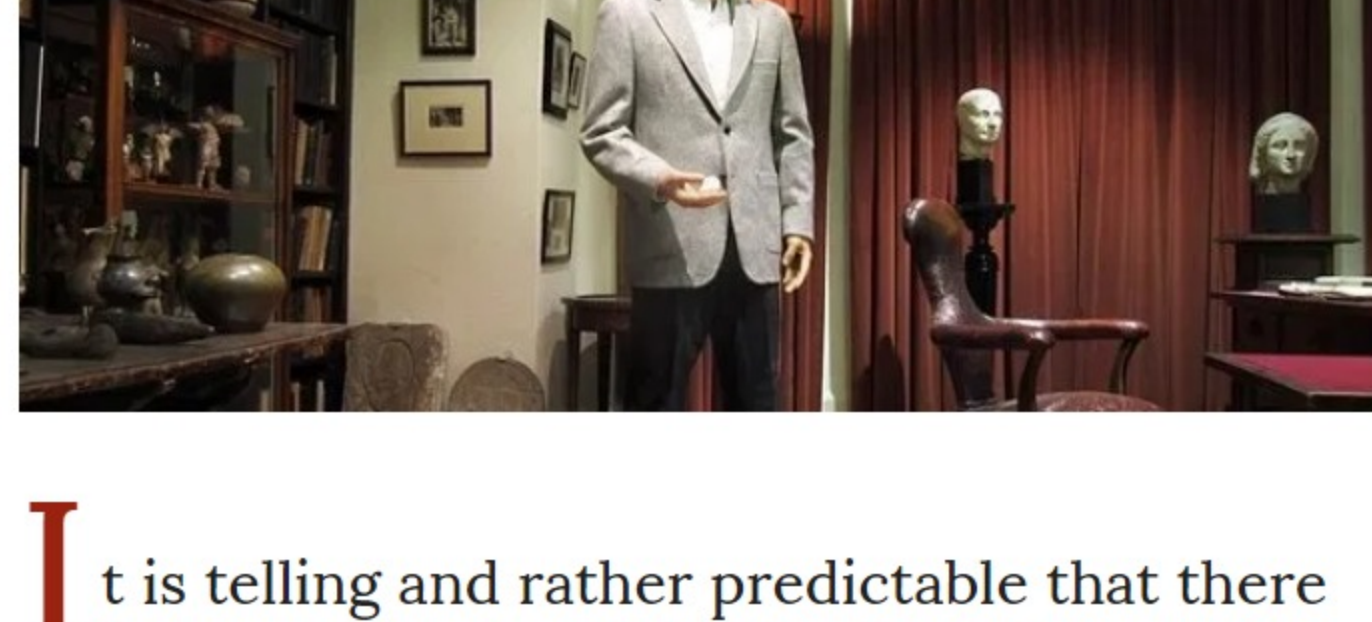
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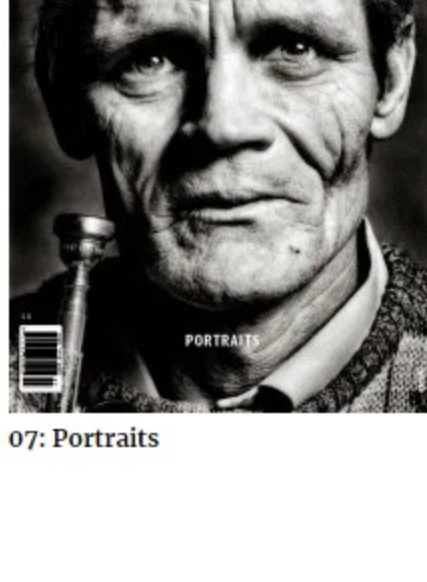
(Turk) (Must) (Do) (Better) A Critical Review of Wittgenstein's Dream

CAN WE SAFELY DISMISS FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS WITH THE LANCET OF IRONY OR DOES THE ATTEMPT FAIL? GAVIN TURK AT THE FREUD MUSEUM

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LATEST ISSUE



97: Portraits

It is telling and rather predictable that there is more actual criticism in the online comments following the mainstream reviews of *Wittgenstein's Dream* than there is in the actual reviews, which for the most part stick to milk blooded enthusiasm or dry description of Turk and Putnam's show at the Freud museum (Putnam is the curator).

Before discussing the predictably smug gesture of a show offered here by Turk we might like to consider why this isn't? Surely the function of criticism is to serve as more than merely a highbrow advert for art shows whose product is considered too good to be associated with radio and television interruptions and, rather, to take some interest in the public taste.

At best then, the reviews represent an apathy of critics towards the audience and the cultivation of taste and, at worst, a hobbling of the critics by a culture largely suspicious and affronted by strong words and vivid imagery, preferring instead the 'everything's great' approach of holiday brochures.

This is probably for one of three reasons. The first is that Turk is a commercial success, a bankable name and as such, commands an automatic respect as a member of the much written about YBAs. He is a living breathing member of the London Art world, so why would you subject this influential figure to the kind of criticism which might see you out of favour with any number of his supporters or contacts?



Especially when writing a perfunctory review of a small art show in a museum. Why not just give it the standard short back and sides treatment and crank out another standard piece of clutter for the magazines, newspapers and online outlets? This bankable quality is surely also how Putnam and Turk managed to pass their ideas by the academics, professionals and trustees who sit on the selection panel of the Freud museum, hoping his name will bring in the punters and missing that they have been mugged into allowing a trite man to make a slight at their namesake, much like a conservative MP or charity-minded celeb being interviewed by Ali G and coming off like a doddering old-timer played for laughs by the prankster.

The second reason is more depressing, since we must all take some responsibility for it. It concerns values that I'm guessing, but only in our culture at large. I would say 'hegemonic', but for the fear that anyone reading would switch off at the hint of serious academic language (I'm joking, but only a little). I'm referring here to the quality which guaranteed the success of all the YBA's, that quality which they embody (save a few) from the Chapmans to Hirst, and certainly Turk. That of self-referential irony. In what sense does this quality work for Turk?

Firstly it's very difficult to criticise, since there is a kind of veil drawn over the content by the 'in jokes' and lack of engagement on the part of the artist, which in a sense thrives on any attempt to attack it. For example, Turk's work is about authenticity and inauthenticity and the myth of the artist, so stating that he is an inauthentic,apid, pitiful yuppie in the diluted mode of Warhol or Jeff Koons complete with obligatory hipster charity concerns would be pointless, since Turk would simply smirk, throw his arms around a chum and say 'Well isn't it interesting that my work has raised these questions?' and you are lost. Here I would remind all such pranksters of the famous quote from the sci-fi writer and essayist Kurt Vonnegut, from his 1961 novel *Mother Night*:

"We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be."

He then added a little jeopandy by going on to say 'when you're dead you're dead'. For the most part the critics of this kind of work, and of Turk, appear conservative. Often because they are, and this is poison for them. They are immediately dismissed as antiquated or worse, phillistine, so they back off so as not to seem too uncool.

We may just be lucky enough to throw off this yoke and reconsider our habitual sympathies. After all, the YBA's and Turk are no longer underdogs or chancers, they are established figures of the canon, constantly showing work and making a tidy profit from it. Turk is also an influencer of the next generation in his role as a professor at Bath University, (how fascinating that a man interested in inauthenticity would accept an 'honorary doctorate' - perhaps he holds the post of professor ironically).

In the opening of this piece I suggested that vivid imagery may be unpalatable for the reading audience, but let's suspend this timid concern and attempt what Orwell might have called a useful visualisation. There exists a large African slug which, when attacked, does not fight back, but rather secretes copious amounts of thick slime. This defence mechanism catches the slug's assailants, usually ants, first unsettling their intentions then drowning them entirely in its juices. The sight of the pulsating slug pumping like an exposed heart and the ants struggling against the milky-coloured slime is a good simile of what I'm struggling to make clear. The slug is the YBA ironist, the slime is the irony, and the up-scuttled ants, well they are us.

An extra layer of melancholy comes over me as I discover the ants have found a way to overcome the slug, whereas we, as yet, have not found a way to overcome our thrall to irony and ironic distance.

The third reason is the issue of taste itself. The very notion that taste should be cultivated might strike us as entirely conservative or, worse, totally delusional in our supposedly post-ideological times. We might, like Ananda Pellerin writing of the show in *Time Out*, find Freud 'bourgeois', and be ready to dismiss taste as an antiquated tribal quality. Pellerin even has space in her tiny piece to show disdain for the 'obligatory therapy couch', as if Freud himself was thinking of branding and merchandise when he threw a rug over a chair to help the mentally ill people sit comfortably!

However afeared we are of the potential elitist or hierarchical risks of embracing taste, it is this process; cultivation, experience, repetition, analysis and comparison, which allows us to create value and construct an identity which is not circumscribed by fashion. Evoking Nietzsche (another *faux pas* for the pandering writer) might be useful here:

"One must shed the bad taste of wanting to agree with many. "Good" is no longer good when one's neighbour mouths it. And how should there be a "common good"! The term contradicts itself: whatever can be common always has little value. In the end it must be as it is and always has been: great things remain for the great, abysses for the profound, nuances and shudders for the refined, and, in brief, all that is rare for the rare."

Beyond Good and Evil

Nietzsche is concerned here with taking responsibility for self-cultivation in the wake of grand narratives like religion or national identity, and does his bit for the community by supporting this idea for his readers. He perhaps puts it more succinctly in *Twilight of the Idols*

"My formula for happiness: a Yes, a No, a straight line, a goal."

He is worried that without a heavy and parental style set of values pressing down on us that we might struggle to live meaningful lives. In this sense Turk is working against Nietzsche and Freud in championing the smiling persona of the low ironist, who can't put anything above their own vain pretense. In short, without taste (which all critics should be concerned with) we stop attaching meaningful emotions, or indeed intellectual observations, to art and culture. After all, why would we? It would make us absurd or naive.

What is at stake is the kind of 'psychic transformation' that Andre Breton and the surrealists were interested in, for all their faults they did get this much right: they believed in creating opportunities for the transformation or becoming, or (dare we say it?) cultivation of their audience and Freud was the thinker that they used to raise the stakes in their practice, not, as it is reported in *The Guardian* by Jonathon Jones, in the mode of 'worship'. In fact, Breton went out of his way to berate Freud in a clumsy (and mistaken) argument over omitted citations, and Freud criticised the surrealists' intended use of the unconscious. The relationship was hardly one of worship. That Jones can claim it as such, as a well-educated arts journalist, is simply due to his complacency and his readers' indifference. After all, who cares enough to check if he's right?

The surrealists took psychoanalysis seriously, exploring the ideas with mixed results in their practices. Against this open transformative gesture Turk plays his own ace in the hole in the form of the philosopher Wittgenstein, student of Bertrand Russell and teacher at Cambridge. Now the scene is set we can subject Wittgenstein's *Dream* to the criticism due a show where so much is at stake.

Review

Wittgenstein is not easily dismissable and is said to be the philosopher of artists and poets. However, it was my impression that his presence was evoked here much more as a student of Bertrand Russell, as a proponent of logic, and as an influence on analytical philosophy through his insistence on empirical evidence as opposed to metaphysics. All that interesting stuff about freedom and truth. What Wittgenstein would make of his rather suspect likeness contemplating an egg in Freud's old front room is anybody's guess; it's almost as if his entire body of thought is reduced to a footnote in the criticism of Freud's ideas, and it's strange to think that Turk drawing on Wittgenstein and arresting him in wax may be doing more damage to him than t o Freud.

[s, N(C)]'(n) (= [n, z, N(C)]) (2015) (right)

The egg is in part meant to reference such objects in surrealist painting, and so we begin with the in pertinent comment and witty titles that characterise much of the output of a generation that took Duchamp too seriously. In fact, most of what's on display could be said to be titles with titles (not even Hirst has cottoned on to that wheeze). Most obviously in this vein are the neon signs which state; Super Ego, Ego, Id. For example, Id is entitled 'that' and Ego is entitled 'I'.

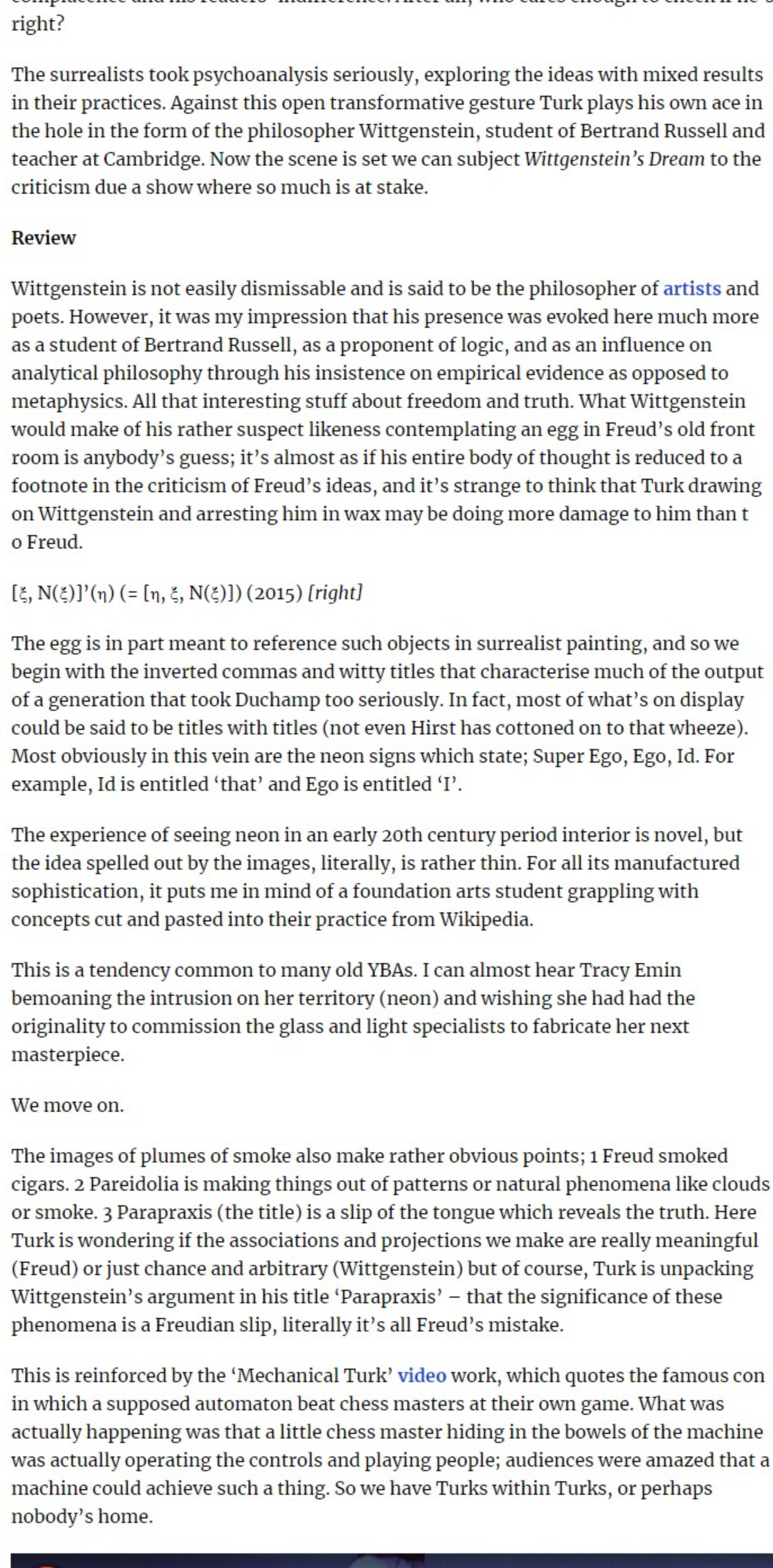
The experience of seeing neon in an early 20th century period interior is novel, but the idea spelled out by the images, literally, is rather thin. For all its manufactured sophistication, it puts me in mind of a drawing from Arts student grappling with concepts cut and paste into their practice from Wikipedia.

This is a tendency common to many old YBAs. I can almost hear Tracy Emin bemoaning the intrusion on her territory (toon) and wishing she had had the originality to commission the glass and light specialists to fabricate her next masterpiece.

We move on.

The images of plumes of smoke also make rather obvious points; 1 Freud smoked cigars. 2 Paradoxia is making things out of patterns or natural phenomena like clouds or smoke. 3 Parapraxis (the title) is a slip of the tongue which reveals the truth. Here Turk is wondering if the associations and projections we make are really meaningful (Freud) or just chance and arbitrary (Wittgenstein) but of course, Turk is unpacking Wittgenstein's argument in his title 'Parapraxis' - that the significance of these phenomena is a Freudian slip, literally it's all Freud's mistake.

This is reinforced by the 'Mechanical Turk' video work, which quotes the famous con in which a supposed automaton beat chess masters at their own game. What was actually happening was that a little chess master hiding in the bowels of the machine was actually operating the controls and playing people; audiences were amazed that a machine could achieve such a thing. So we have Turks within Turks, or perhaps nobody's home.



I must admit I did pause here, considering the historic associations and thinking of the character Rachel from *Blade Runner* with her existential angst about having fake memories and not being real. I began in spite of myself to warm to Turk's intervention, there is even a famous scene of Rachel smoking, which brought back the images of the plumes of smoke from 'Parapraxis'. However, what made Rachel an intriguing character was ambiguity, and the projectability of *Blade Runner's* themes and characters demanded interpretation, not reading. This allows Rachel to live in the imagination, forever questioning her humanity. Will she live? Is DeKard real?, and so on.

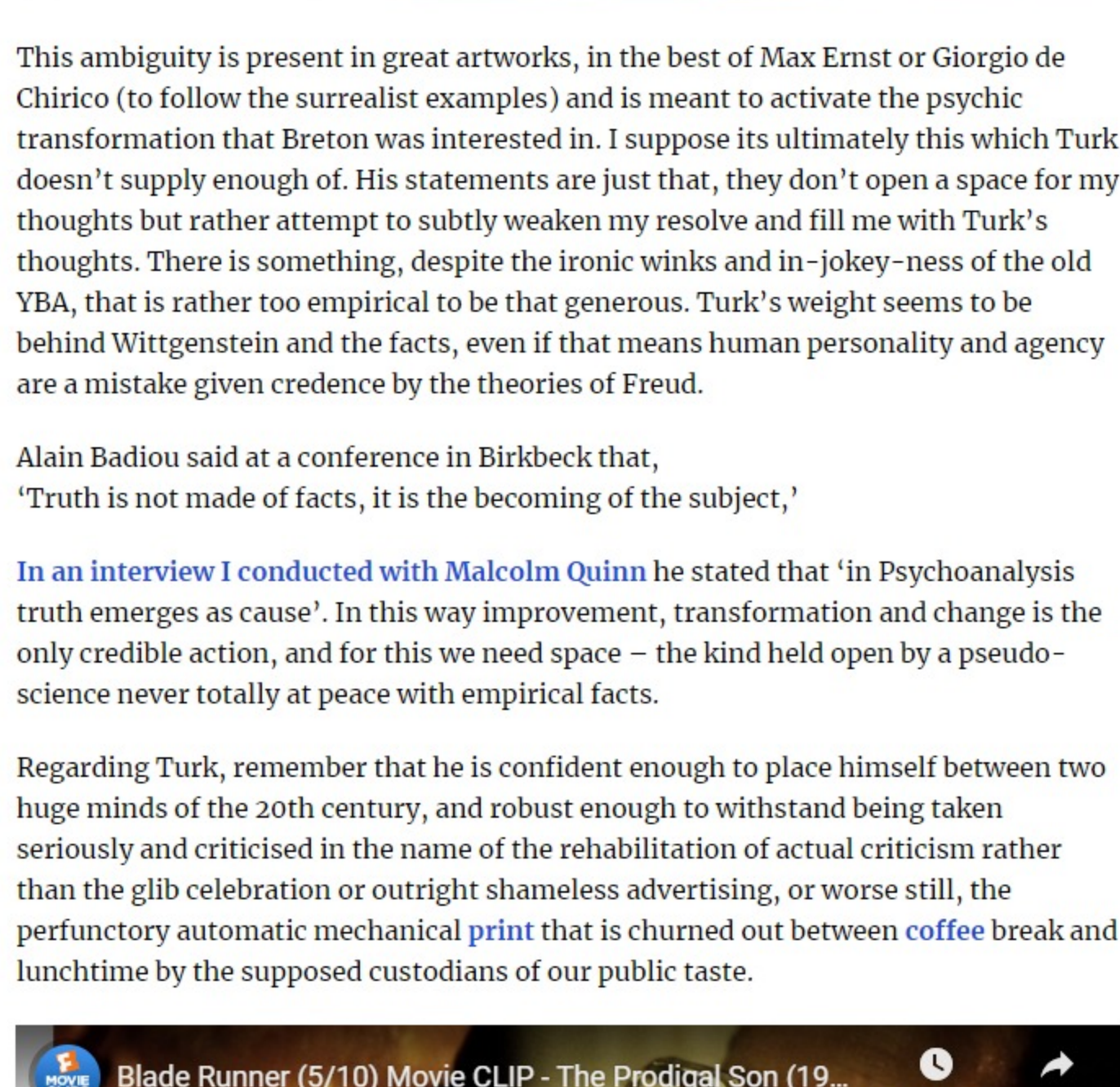


This ambiguity is present in great artworks, in the best of Max Ernst or Giorgio de Chirico (to follow the surrealist examples) and is meant to activate the psychic transformation that Breton was interested in. I suppose its ultimately this which Turk doesn't supply enough of. His statements are just that, they don't open a space for my thoughts but rather attempt to subtly weaken my resolve and fill me with Turk's thoughts. There is something, despite the ironic winks and in-joke-ness of the old YBA, that is rather too empirical to be that generous. Turk's weight seems to be behind Wittgenstein and the facts, even if that means human personality and agency are a mistake given credence by the theories of Freud.

Alain Badjou said at a conference in Birkbeck that, "Truth is not made of facts, it is the becoming of the subject,"

In an interview I conducted with Malcolm Quinn he stated that 'in Psychoanalysis truth emerges as cause'. In this way improvement, transformation and change is the only credible action, and for this we need space - the kind held open by a pseudo-science never totally at peace with empirical facts.

Regarding Turk, remember that he is confident enough to place himself between two huge minds of the 20th century, and robust enough to withstand being taken seriously and criticised in the name of the rehabilitation of actual criticism rather than the glib celebration or outright shameless advertising, or worse still, the perfunctory automatic mechanical print that is churned out between coffee break and lunchtime by the supposed custodians of our public taste.



My final thought upon leaving the museum is that if Turk imagines Wittgenstein putting psychoanalysis in its place with *Blade and* a dash of Turk brand irony, then I imagine Roy Batty (the angry superman in *Blade Runner*) cursing Turk's wax head to remind him of the seriousness of the stakes. Remember, Gavin, 'when you're dead, you're dead'.

Wittgenstein's Dream, Freud Museum, 26 November 2015 - 7 February 2016

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About Michael Eden · 77 Articles
 Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east, his artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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