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Introduction to Picture Interpretation According to C. G. Jung. (2005). By Theodor Abt. Zurich Living Human Heritage Publications.

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Book Reviews

INTRODUCTION TO PICTURE
INTERPRETATION ACCORDING TO C. G.
JUNG. (2005). BY THEODOR ABT.
ZURICH LIVING HUMAN HERITAGE
PUBLICATIONS.

Reviewed by Willow Young

Several years ago, after reading *Introduction to Picture Interpretation* by Theodor Abt, I began to use Abt's methodology with analysands as we explored their dreams, pictures, and works in clay. Patients felt the process brought them into a vibrant and meaningful world within themselves. They became less ego-centrally involved in their healing and more responsive and attentive to the objective unconscious within. I wondered if a reading of Abt would be useful in helping students of psychology to understand the objective psyche and found that it did so. I use this book in my teaching at Pacifica Graduate Institute. Year after year the students express their enthusiastic appreciation. They love the book, as it initially helps them establish an objective relationship with the typological functions of consciousness. Analysands and students use the book to answer the following questions: Can we separate ourselves from the world of the image and all it evokes in us to evolve an objective perspective? How do we take into account the tumult of

our subjective experience that is constellated by the image as it takes up residence in our thoughts and emotions, perhaps touching us deeply in places we hardly know? As we project our inner landscape onto that of the painting, how do we sort the experience of the "picture" from the painting itself? How do we "listen in" to the image, enabling our consciousness to come into relation with the unconscious as it is represented in the image?

In the Foreword to his masterfully excellent and modestly titled *Introduction to Picture Interpretation According to C. G. Jung* (2005), Theodor Abt writes: "This book is an attempt to show how to illuminate a picture with its own light" (p. x). The book serves as a guide to exploring the images as they emerge from the unconscious, expressing the inner world of psyche in general and specifically representing what is constellated in the unconscious at a given moment in time.

Abt, a Swiss-born and -trained Jungian analyst (1975), a professor at the ETH, and a member of the board of the Research and Training Center for Depth Psychology According to C. G. Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz, brings his long devotion to the reality of the objective psyche and his highly developed research to each of his books.

In *Introduction to Picture Interpretation*, Abt guides the reader toward the art of creating consciousness through engagement with an image. He provides valuable resources for the dreamer, the analysand, and the analyst. In Chapter 2, Abt articulates his proposed method and invites the reader to "read" a picture without any information other than age and gender. As we contemplate the picture in the retort of its frame, we allow for "the picture to reveal its hidden meaning out

of itself.” Following this receptive observation, we take action by engaging the picture in a dialogue initiated by questions we pose, as viewers, to the picture. As an agent in the process, a psychological ethic compels us to be aware of the impact of individual typological dispositions and complexes. Abt invites a primarily subjective and inwardly oriented circumambulation of the image utilizing the typological functions of ego consciousness as articulated by C. G. Jung—first, including the attitudes of introversion and extraversion, and second, by posing questions we might ask as we activate each of the psychic functions of sensation, feeling, thinking, and intuition.

To this process, Abt adds an alchemical pattern inspired by Maria the Hebrew: “Turn the earth into water and the water into air and the air into fire, then you would reach the wisdom” (p. 46). He attributes the four functions of consciousness to the four elements that add an “increase in the subtleness from earth to water to air to fire” (p. 46). As we focus on the image, we begin with the tangible solid earth as it corresponds to the sensate function and move toward the liquefaction, the fluidity of the feeling function. From there we progress toward vaporization and the distinctions made possible by the thinking function, and finally, we encounter the spark of intuition and its subtle insights. By this process and through our activated interest, we may arrive at a hypothesis about what the picture might be saying and what was constellated in the unconscious of the painter in the moment of creation. Abt then exhorts us to allow our curiosity to generate a counterhypothesis—to become aware of the opposite of our assumption, to let the unconscious *inform* our assumptions. As we go around the image again, we ask the picture “whether there is any support for the hypothesis or the counterhypothesis we formed through the lens of each of the four functions” (p. 49).

Ever faithful to the reality and primacy of psyche, Abt reviews the shadow realm of picture interpretation and reminds us to “turn to the picture and ask it whether our own point of view is correct” (p. 53). He is intent upon respecting “*the picture [or image] in its own right*” (p. 54). “With our respectful work, the life-giving *lumen-naturae* or the *immanent meaning* of the picture will become visible, God willing” (p. 54). Students who used this method to explore a dream image were surprised by the transformative experience that followed the differentiated and arduous walkabout. They reported feeling moved as they experienced each aspect of the image, seemingly *reassembled* with deepened meaning. One student, struggling to view a picture through the lens of her fourth (inferior or unconscious) function, realized the import of the individuation journey and experienced a new valuing of the task to make “the darkness conscious” (Jung, 1967, p. 265).

Once we have circumambulated the image, using the lens of typology, how might we continue the work of interpreting pictures? Abt gives detailed guidelines. Over half of the book comprises the third chapter, “Tools for Interpretation.” It includes the art of research as one makes associations and amplifications, and explores the archetypal symbolism of space, color, and number, “as they give important hints for understanding the archetypal and transpersonal dimension of the image” (p. 59). The continued circumambulation with the refined knowledge related to color, number, and space further enables one to listen to what the image has to say on its own. In this way, according to Abt, the “necessary associations” and amplifications build a meaningful bridge from the unconscious to consciousness. Closely related to the unconscious with a grounded relationship to the *matter* of consciousness, Abt provides tools with which to explore the material and formal aspects of a picture. He helps

us develop a refined sense and respect for the way a picture is organized on the page, its proportion and movement, its quality of location and spatial perspective, each of which carries archetypal energy and meaning. In keeping with the first half of the book, Abt's procedures involve the consideration and observation of the opposites; to see what is missing becomes as important as it is to see what is present. Abt inverts images, for example, as a way to explore the energetics of perspective, movement, and space or to reverse an order to better perceive a pattern. Both the tension and complementarity of opposites bring a clarifying quality to the intensive work of picture interpretation.

In his focus on color symbolism, Abt amplifies the primary colors of red, yellow, and blue and the mixed colors of orange, violet, and green as he draws upon the "archetypal experience that comes from contact with nature" (p. 88). The relation of color as it emerges in nature is restored to its primary origin. I was moved by Abt's deep appreciation for the rich symbolism of the color brown, carrying, as it does, the alchemy of the earth. To this Abt adds the study of mythological motifs and the research of the natural sciences. In this way he is true to Jung's arc of scientific research articulated in *Symbols of Transformation*, Volume 5 in *The Collected Works*, and expanded upon in Vol. 9i, *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*. Underlying and informing Abt's detailed Tools for Interpretation is his research into the work of Muhammed Ibn Umail, Zosimos, other great masters of alchemy, and the main origin of alchemy: the Pharaonic books of the afterlife.

In the chapter entitled "Number Symbolism," Abt proceeds from the undifferentiated unity and wholeness contained in the number 1 to amplify the numbers through 17. A student who was using the chapter as she worked with a dream on numbers, stated, "I experienced the dawn of consciousness as I read the chapter.

It was as if I was present for a birth of awareness from unconscious to conscious. It was a most moving experience" (Lyons, 2012, p. 5).

Abt integrates the thinking of C. G. Jung and that of Marie-Louise von Franz in the following paragraphs:

Along with the two comes doubt (from Latin *dubius* = dual), splits, opposites and quarrels, as the two poles have to remain apart by tension in order not to merge back again into the one.

In dreams we observe that motifs of two identical things have to do with *border (or liminal) phenomena*. These are contents which have just arrived at the border between consciousness and the unconscious. "When a content comes up and touches the threshold of consciousness it is cut into two parts, into a one and the other. The one is the aspect that I can state, while the other remains in the unconscious." The relation of the number two with phenomena at the fringe of consciousness also becomes visible in the fact that in nearly all cultures and religions of the world, two identical demons or divine figures represent the symbolic guardians of the entrance to the beyond.

In order to become conscious of something, we have to discriminate, to "cut apart." This is why a content which appears at the fringe of consciousness is immediately cut apart by the light of discrimination (p. 120).

A colleague shared that he experiences something similar when hiking in the dark. "My headlamp cuts a fine line of distinction between the light of the beam and the surrounding darkness. In these moments I become aware of the vastness of the unconscious and the comparatively narrow range of consciousness" (personal communication, Rigo Saenz, November 2007). However, Abt clearly demonstrates the potential of consciousness, as symbolized by the differentiated numbers and

their corresponding aspects of consciousness. He concludes his amplification of the number 17 with a quote from the Arabic alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan: “Know that everything on earth—I mean in the world of becoming and of perishing—will not pass beyond the seventeen power-units” (as cited in Abt, 2005, p. 165).

Part III of the book concludes with a summary of criteria that may indicate a weak ego structure in a patient and hence the possibility for the development of a latent psychosis. This section reveals the opposite urge in the unconscious discussed previously—that of the move toward differentiated consciousness—and focuses briefly on the potential dissolution of the ego and its immersion in the unconscious.

In his final considerations in Chapter 4, Abt reminds the reader of the long lineage of alchemy as a corresponding symbol for the making of consciousness as detailed in this fine small book. He states that the circumambulation and resulting amplifications of the image can be “applied successfully to the interpretation of dreams, fairy tales and myths” (p. 175) as well as to the interpretation of pictures. When I was first given this book a number of years ago, I dreamt that I was standing with my office mate and colleague around a small round wooden table in our office. He introduced me to Theo Abt, who had joined us in the room. Abt opened his jacket and, reaching into an inner pocket, pulled forth a beautiful red rose and handed it to me. I noticed that the sturdy stem bore many growth nodules and said, “This will grow very well here.”

So it is with Abt’s *Introduction to Picture Interpretation*; as the rose and its stem, planted in the ground of one’s intent to understand the deep meaning conveyed in pictures, “it will grow very well.”

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Santa Barbara and Ventura, California. She teaches analytical psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute and serves as Chair of the M.A. Counseling Psychology Program.

FURTHER READING

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THE ESCAPE OF SIGMUND FREUD.
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YORK: OVERLOOK PRESS.

Reviewed by Ann Walker

The first dream I recall from childhood was of a concentration camp, though I did not know what it was at the time—I only knew the blind terror of this nightmare. Many years later, in adolescence and young adulthood, I discovered that my maternal grandfather had died in a concentration camp, and my paternal grandmother and grandfather were the sole survivors of their families—they lost their parents, all 13 siblings, and their aunts, uncles, and cousins in concentration camps. I am the only person in my family named for someone who perished in a one of these death camps. I was named for a paternal uncle who held promise as a scholar of rabbinical studies. My parents never spoke about the Holocaust; the pain was too intense.