

Chaos and Control: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Unfolding Creative Minds by Desy Safán-Gerard. Published by Routledge, London and New York, 2018; 280 pp, £35.00 hardback

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## Reviews 331

Born as a revolutionary form of therapy for the neuroses, psychoanalysis soon also became a psychological theory for the understanding of all sorts of cultural phenomena, the arts included. Early instances are Freud's own interpretations of a fictional work of literature ('Delusion and dream in Jensen's *Gradiva*', 1906) and of a sculpture ('The Moses of Michelangelo', 1914).

With a few notable exceptions (e.g. Milner, 1950; Kris, 1952; Gedo, 1983; Orem-land, 1997), those who have written about the world of the arts from a psychoanalytic perspective have focused on art products rather than on the creative process involved in making them. Besides, most of such authors were either psychoanalysts without personal experience of creating art works, or art critics borrowing (and often misrepresenting) psychoanalytic ideas.

Desy Safán-Gerard, the California-based Chilean author of *Chaos and Control: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Unfolding Creative Minds*, is an exception, being herself a visual artist also trained as a psychoanalyst, with considerable experience of working with creative patients from several fields. Prefaced by her first analyst Otto Kernberg, her book focuses on the different emotional components (both conscious and unconscious) involved in the creative process through a detailed observation of her own mind and body at work while painting.

The book consists of 16 chapters, neatly divided in two distinct parts: 'Theories, conditions, and obstacles' and 'My own development'. This second section is richly illustrated with colour reproductions of many of her paintings and includes a sort of autobiographical trajectory of the author as an artist: from her early studies in music composition (and her 'breakthrough' encounter with Pierre Boulez and his music) to the development of her personal style as an abstract painter. Each page of her

book conveys the impression that she approaches her painting activities with great passion – troubled at times, ecstatically joyful at others.

A helpful suggestion, borrowed from Marion Milner (1950), is that artists engage in constant and productive dialogues with their works as they conceive of, and produce, them. 'What goes on between the artist and the work in progress', Safán- Gerard believes, 'is like a communication between two people where there is no hidden agenda but a mutual responsiveness to what the other is saying' (p. 34).

Throughout her book the author stresses the centrality of destructive components in creative endeavours, the presence of which, I would add, would then be as inevitable as that of silences in the psychoanalytic dialogue. Creating, the author claims, can be experienced as a 'dangerous' activity in so far as it may lead to a resurgence of infantile anxieties of abandonment, loneliness and loss, as well as of omnipotent fantasies. Patients, such as the 'blocked' artists in the few vignettes presented in the book, may end up suffering from such conditions as helplessness and depression.

I have found here a confusion, or perhaps an intended ambiguity, as to the actual meaning of destructiveness in the creative process. Does the author refer to art works as attempts to repair the damage and to assuage the guilt related to the presence in the artists of pre-existing unprocessed aggressive feelings of developmentally primitive origins and quality? Or does she refer to the artists' (mostly unconscious) wish to damage or destroy their own work? Safán-Gerard's references to the Kleinian perspective on creativity (as formulated by, among others, Hanna Segal, 1991), would suggest the former, while some of her examples, including from her own work, would point to the latter interpretation, consistent with the Freudian concept of a death drive coexisting with libidinal forces (Eros and Thanatos).

Artists faced with their own mistakes may at first feel frustrated, incompetent and be tempted to give up. However, blocks in creativity, and so-called 'accidents', can (indeed, Safán-Gerard argues, should) represent challenges and become turning points in the whole process, provided that artists emotionally survive the mistakes occurring while producing their work: until, in due course, 'bad and messy accidents can become understood, appreciated, and integrated' (p. 7) in the final product.

More than once does she compare the state of mind (ambivalence, uncertainty) necessary to survive the anxieties which originate from destructive impulses to what Keats calls negative capability and Bion describes (in the context of psychoanalytic work with patients) as not knowing. 'Not knowing', Safán-Gerard states in no-ambiguous terms, 'turned out to be at the root of all creative work' (p. 120). I would myself reformulate such an idea by suggesting that artists are required to find and sustain a difficult-to-achieve balance between active curiosity and passive patience – a milder version, perhaps, of the Chaos and Control of the book's title: qualities also required, of course, to practicing psychoanalysts. And, indeed, Safán-Gerard is keen to remind us of the similarities between the attitude of artists in their studios and that of analysts in their consulting rooms: 'the move from chaos to control', she writes, 'is also intrinsic to psychoanalysis' (p. 7).

She is skeptical, and for good reasons I think, about the classical distinction between creativity (which concerns originality) and talent (as a highly developed skill); and she raises the ultimately unanswerable questions 'of whether analysis inhibits or encourages creativity, and whether creativity is in itself therapeutic' (p. 132). She also comments, in the context of discussing the Prinzhorn Collection's 'outsiders works' made by psychotic patients, on the ever-shifting boundaries between artistic creativity and mental disturbance, as well as on the difficulties for insane artists to differentiate what is internal from what is external. 'Psychotic art', she concludes, 'is the result of a dream that spills into reality' (p. 77).

I find it somewhat problematic to agree with the author's attempts to attribute symbolic meanings to shapes seen in her own abstract paintings 'as if' they were parts of figurative ones. For instance, she would state that in some of her abstract landscapes 'what is being depicted is the inside of the mother's body' (p. 167). The apparent contradiction could perhaps be resolved if we consider that the boundaries between abstract and figurative paintings (not unlike those, in film, between fictional features and documentaries) may not be as clear-cut as we tend to imagine.

The author's description of narcissism 'as an instance of an absence of passion ... other than towards the self or activities that enhance the self' (p. 64) and therefore as an incapacity to relate to 'the other', including the work itself being produced, emphasizes its pathological connotations. I would

suggest instead that a certain amount of healthy narcissism constitutes a necessary motivating factor, alongside curiosity, in one's creative activities.

Although not explicitly stated, the chapters here collected in book form seem to have been written, and some of them published, at different times in her career. As a result, the reader comes across several repetitions of ideas, anecdotes and quotations which, I think, should have been avoided by a more careful editing.

Such reservations aside, this is a book rich with important reflections on the mental states of the artist during the creative process, and on its parallels with psycho-analytic work. I enjoyed reading it and I would recommend it to anyone with an interest in the arts, in psychoanalysis, and in the complex and fascinating relationship between them.

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## **Response to Andrea Sabbadini's Review:**

Dear Andrea:

We briefly met during a small group discussion at the Boston IPA some years ago. I remember liking a comment you made about film during that meeting, so I was delighted that you were the one reviewing my book. My friend and colleague Emma Letley, Marion Milner's biographer, took it upon herself to submit my book to the British Journal of Psychoanalysis to see if there would be an interest in reviewing it. I am so grateful that she did this!

I so appreciate the time you have spent reading my book to allow you to notice repetitions that could have been avoided by a more careful editing. I wish I had been able to discuss my ideas with you during the time I was writing them! I am now tempted to respond to each of your points, but I am choosing only some for them.

You seem to object to the centrality of destructiveness in my arguments and find a confusion or intended ambiguity between pre-existing aggressive feelings and the artist's wish to destroy their own work. You add that I only give examples of the latter. In order to overcome your objections, I would have had to rely on clinical work with artists and their destructive feelings toward important people in their lives, or to reveal my own destructive feelings toward others. My recent paper *Victims of Envy*, to appear in the *Psychoanalytic Review* this coming June, contains an account of my own envious attack toward an esteemed colleague. In my *Chaos and Control* book, I limit myself to a description of the process.

You reformulate my notion that not knowing is at the root of all creative work with your notion that creativity in action should achieve a balance between active curiosity and passive patience. I appreciate and agree with your perspective. I am also glad that you seem skeptical of the distinction between creativity and talent or of the boundaries between artistic creativity and emotional disturbance. I agree that there is a complex relationship between them. You also suggest an alternative to a pathological view of narcissism and that, together with curiosity, healthy narcissism constitute a motivating force for creative work.

All and all, I am very appreciative of your review for opening new doors to the understanding of creativity. It could not have been done by someone unfamiliar with creative work. I am eager to find out about the vicissitudes of your artistic adventures with film.

With my warmest wishes!

Desy