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Erotic Leonardo: Eroticism in Leonardo da Vinci's Sketches*

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Abstract. Though dissected under countless lenses, Leonardo Da Vinci's art continues to pulse with enigmatic work. This study ventures beyond familiar territory, unearthing potential erotic undercurrents within his sketches, anatomical studies, and paintings. It employs a multifaceted lens, weaving together threads of philosophy, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis to illuminate the subtle interplay of form and hidden psychology embedded within his works. More than mere discovery, this analysis seeks a critical revaluation. By incorporating gender-critical perspectives, it challenges established interpretations, offering a fresh and nuanced understanding of the master's enduring legacy. This approach not only delves into underexplored territory but also invites broader conversations about representation, power, and the very nature of artistic expression.

Keywords. Leonardo da Vinci, *Angel in the Flesh*, eroticism, psychoanalysis, gender studies.

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1. *Introduction*

A burning question in today's art history and criticism, especially within postmodern thought, is the revaluation of ideas long confined by narrow interpretations within the classicist tradition. Leonardo da Vinci, whose art demands fresh inquiry, exemplifies this need. This article moves beyond historical limitations to analyse Leonardo's work as aesthetic expressions of human emotions, behaviours, and societal identity. By exploring his depictions of nature and the human form, we delve into the psychological dimension he emphasized: «A good painter has two chief objects to paint, man and the intention of his soul; the former is easy, the latter hard, because he has to represent it by the attitudes and movements of the limbs» (Leonardo da Vinci [2008]: 168).

Psychoanalytic theory has significantly influenced art criticism, as Blass ([2008]: 1259-1276) argues. This study examines Leonardo da Vinci's sketchbooks through a psychoanalytic lens, building upon existing art historical and psychological analyses. By mapping the current scholarly landscape, we can identify areas for further exploration. This research will delve into the intellectual reflections catalysed by these drawings within the frameworks of art psychology and classical psychoanalysis, focusing on aspects that have not been extensively examined before.

Freud's psychoanalytic analysis of Leonardo, while influential, has limitations. It focuses on childhood memories and homosexuality, neglecting the role of specific artworks. The 1991 discovery of *Angel in the Flesh*, a drawing depicting a nude male figure, opened new avenues for exploration, particularly regarding the erotic dimension of Leonardo's work. I will dwell on this at length later, but I can advance that the available evidence does not allow us to confirm that this drawing is by Leonardo. Its authorship is not important in this sense, but the analytical possibilities that it represents for Leonardo's graphic work from a deeper level. Scholars like Murat Aydemir have argued that this drawing suggests homoerotic desires beyond what Freud's framework could capture, while Luciano Bottoni emphasizes the drawing's connection to themes of death and rebirth. These recent studies demonstrate the value of moving beyond Freud's initial analysis and incorporating diverse perspectives for a richer understanding of Leonardo's complex psychology.

While Freud's influence on psychoanalytic art analysis persists, recent critiques highlight the inherent limitations of his approach. Sarah Kofman incisively exposes the inherent power imbalance within Freud's framework, wherein the psychoanalyst assumes the role of supreme interpreter of the artist's mind: «If we accept this reading within the reading, we can say that the artist […] plays out the unconscious processes without understanding them and that the psychoanalyst

alone […] can interpret them» (Kofman [1988]: 43-44). This intellectual hierarchy risks overlooking the artwork's unique operational modes and its distinct functionalities within everyday life. This shift in focus underscores the need for alternative approaches that move beyond singular interpretations of the artist's unconscious.

Contemporary trends in psychoanalysis and art psychology offer promising departures from the Freudian framework. These newer approaches prioritize intersubjectivity, collaboration, and the artwork's inherent capacity to shape meaning and understanding. For example, relational psychoanalysis examines the dynamic interplay between artist, artwork, and viewer, recognizing the artwork as a catalyst for shared emotional and psychological experiences. Similarly, social art history explores the artwork's embeddedness within its historical and cultural context, highlighting its ability to reflect and challenge social norms and power structures.

This paper delves into the psychological depths lurking within select drawings by Leonardo da Vinci, specifically focusing on those engaging in unconventional or provocative depictions of the human form. We will explore the potential homoerotic subtext and voyeuristic elements present in these drawings, engaging with and critically evaluating existing scholarly psychoanalytic interpretations. The analysis will begin by contextualizing these themes within the broader tapestry of Leonardo's oeuvre, followed by a close examination informed by both Freudian and alternative frameworks. Ultimately, this study aims to develop a nuanced understanding of the erotic and critical dimensions within these seemingly peripheral works.

2. *The Sketch of Leonardo da Vinci: Art and Psychoanalysis*

In 1899, during his series of three lectures on Leonardo da Vinci, Aby Warburg (2019) cemented his position as a prominent art historian. His focus was to analyse three key aspects: his education, his artistic independence from mainstream styles, and the psychological depth he conveyed in his creations. Notably, in the third lecture, Warburg presents a key argument about Leonardo's work in Milan, stating that «he diligently strove to render the inner person as a whole, the complex world of thoughts and emotions, in his diverse figures, granting them an alluring quality that opened up a new realm of deeper emotional engagement with art for his contemporaries» (Warburg [2019]: 39). Warburg guides us into an introspective and psychological interpretation of Leonardo's sketches.

Leonardo da Vinci's artistic and scientific works demonstrate a profound exploration of visual perception. His extensive notebooks reveal a wealth of knowledge: detailed sketches, anatomical studies, meticulous observations of nature,

and innovative technical and military designs. This exploration transcends mere depiction, delving into the physiological and epistemological foundations of human vision and its interaction with the environment: «The eye, which is called the windows of the soul, is the principal means by which the brain can most completely and abundantly appreciate the infinite works of nature» (Leonardo da Vinci [1883]: 327). This emphasis on the eye as a bridge between the internal and external, coupled with his comprehensive understanding of the world, likely contributed to Aby Warburg's fascination with Leonardo's work. Warburg, in his own studies, explored the cultural memory embedded in visual representations, potentially finding resonances with Leonardo's ideas about perception and the evolution and philosophical underpinnings of imagery.

Furthermore, for Leonardo, the world perceived through our senses, particularly through vision, is inherently connected to a reality expressed through both internal mental images and external depictions. This perspective aligns with Aristotle's notion that art, by imitating nature and offering idealized representations, serves as a powerful tool to complement our understanding of the world, facilitating our journey toward comprehensive knowledge[2].

Martin Jay, in his seminal work on the primacy of vision in Western thought, identifies a pervasive tendency within European Modernity's epistemological frameworks: «ocularcentrism». This philosophical movement cemented the epistemological significance of the arts by associating them with visual imagery. Consequently, Renaissance artists, with Leonardo da Vinci as a prime exemplar, elevated drawing, and painting to the pinnacle of artistic expression (Jay [1993]: 21-48).

For Leonardo, the visual representation of all natural phenomena held paramount importance. He asserted that every observable event, accessible through sight, should be translated into visual form to facilitate comprehensive analysis and dissemination across other visual media. In this sense, the eye was an organ that projected the expansiveness of the body: «If the object in front of the eye sends its image to it, the eye also sends its image to the object; so, of the object no portion whatever is lost in the images proceeding from it for any reason either in the eye or the object» (Leonardo da Vinci [2008]: 107). On the art space, notably: «paintings have been known to make the point, visually, of showing vision's own inadequacies» (Feagin [2005]: 524).

His relentless visual exploration extended to human behaviour and movement, the interplay of light and shadow, and preparatory studies for his famed paintings. Within these notebooks, Leonardo unveiled a profound analytical depth, delving not only into the physicality but also the psychology of his subjects. This meticulous attention to both physiological and psychological dimensions further

1 «The one, then, is for the sake of the other; and generally art in some cases completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and in others imitates nature» (Aristotle 199a 15-17 [1995]: 340).

illuminates his unwavering commitment to translating observed reality into a comprehensive visual language.

This is indeed pertinent. While depicting the images unveiled by his discerning gaze within the realm of nature, he allocates a space for the meticulous examination of the intricate interplay among these phenomena. However, this heightened depth of inquiry is most conspicuously manifest in his studies of human countenance, particularly in his drawings of faces. Within these depictions, he delves into the analysis of moods, facial expressions, and the circumstances of individuals. Notably, in numerous physiognomic sketches, a discernible psychological fascination with the portrayal of mental disturbance and madness can be discerned:

> Five faces remain that – in terms of quality – grasp the problem of Madness where Leonardo da Vinci had left it, faces that seem to know everything about the advances of psychological science not only in the past decades but centuries, and that place the theme of Physiognomy, and therefore of the Deep, on the anatomical table where the positivist psychiatry of the young Sigmund Freud would operate. (Caroli [2012]: 189-190)

Leonardo da Vinci's work includes precise studies of nature but also explores affective and sexual themes. A striking phenomenon in his art is the emotional detachment of figures from their actions, creating a puzzling disconnect. This enigmatic quality caught Freud's attention in his psychoanalytic essay *Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*. There, he developed what some call a «pathography» of artistic forces shaped by sexual inhibition and childhood creativity (Spector [1988]: 54).

While Freud's essay explores various aspects of psychology, including childhood development and the then-controversial link between homosexuality and paranoia (Freud [2002]: 49-50), his core argument centres on sublimation. He interprets the emotional detachment and «purely rational mood» in Da Vinci's drawings as manifestations of sublimated desires. Freud argues that «his urge for knowledge was always directed to the external world; something kept him far away from the investigation of the human mind» (Freud [2002]: 23). Although some claims have limitations given contemporary research (Eysenck, Wilson [2013]), sublimation remains a valuable framework for analysing Da Vinci's work and its complexities.

From a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, life assumes an aesthetic quality in that it involves a fusion of bodily sensations with symbolic representations. This dynamic entails an ongoing interplay between the physical body and the realm of the mind, where symbolic constructs informed by societal norms and regulations are internalized by the individual. This notion encapsulates a psychosomatic aesthetics that is intimately concerned with the entirety of human existence. However, a seemingly contradictory perspective emerges when analysing Freud's own interpretation of da Vinci in his essay:

> In the first of these, research shares the fate of sexuality; thenceforward curiosity remains inhibited and the free activity of intelligence may be limited for the whole of the subject's lifetime, especially as shortly after this the powerful religious inhibition of thought is brought into play by education. (Freud [2002]: 26)

Through a Freudian lens, Leonardo da Vinci's artistic production can be seen as driven by a powerful force of sublimation. He channelled his creative energy into intellectual pursuits, often favouring theoretical exploration over emotional expression. Freud identified this dynamic in various artworks, including anatomical drawings of coitus (Figure 1), where emotional detachment suggests a focus on anatomical accuracy rather than subjective experience. In another drawing analysing coitus, this rational, mechanical approach leads to the depersonalization of the act (Figure 2). Similarly, many of his preparatory sketches prioritize technical precision and the aesthetic beauty of the human form, possibly at the expense of a deeper psychological exploration of the figures.

Figure 1. Leonardo da Vinci, The hemisection of a man and woman in the act of coition, c. 1490-1492, pen and ink (sheet of paper), 27.6 x 20.4 cm. (From folio RL 19097v, by permission of Royal Collection Trust; copyright © 2024 His Majesty King Charles III.)

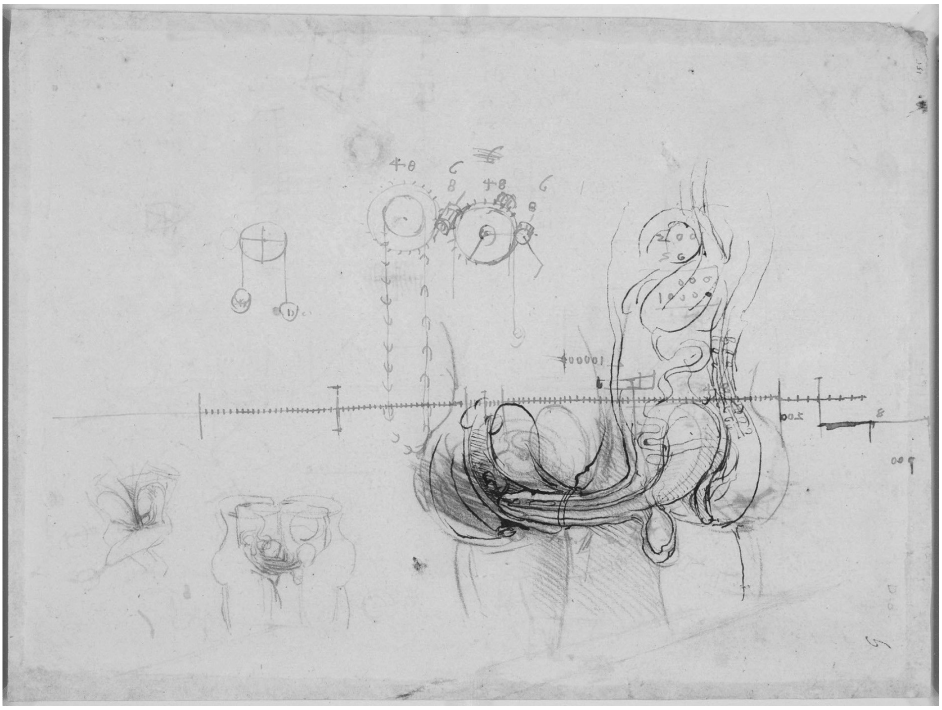

Figure 2. Leonardo da Vinci, Anatomical studies of the act of coitus, etc, c. 1490-1493, pen and ink and red chalk (sheet of paper), 21.3 x 28.5 cm. (From Folio RL 19096, by permission of Royal Collection Trust; copyright © 2024 His Majesty King Charles III.)

Leonardo's artistic intent in these works clearly leaned towards scientific research, prioritizing anatomical accuracy over emotional expression: «Leonardo drew the most complete representation of sexual intercourse yet made. But this famous anatomical section-drawing […] is probably the least erotic image of copulation in art» (Turner [2017]: 47). Regardless of the validity of Freud's assertions, many of Leonardo's artworks, especially those emphasizing technique and form, reflect a connection to rational inquiry. His figures, drawings, and paintings often reveal a preoccupation with the human form's physical beauty. Yet, within his detailed studies of bodily mechanics, emotional expression is obscured, leaving limited space for emotional engagement with desire.

Caution and scepticism are essential when evaluating Freud's assertions about Leonardo. In his essay on da Vinci, Freud connects daydreaming with play and fantasy, where the child plays, the adult imagines, and the artist transforms these relationships into artistic representations (Freud [1981]: 145-146). As Christopher Bollas suggests, dreams can be seen as self-constructed through imagery:

«the dream constructed by a unique aesthetic: the transformation of the subject into his thought» (Bollas [1987]: 64). However, Lou Andreas-Salomé offers a contrasting view, building on Freud's later ideas. She argues against seeing art merely as the ego's relationship with desired objects, proposing instead that it stems from a deeper, passionate, erotic nature. This interpretation places a greater emphasis on the emotional and sensual aspects of artistic creation:

> Just as artistic excitement is rooted in imaginative processes, from which the artist's whole being is affected, so also erotic excitement is rooted in sexual life, and just as the artistic process can nowhere leave the imagination as the fertile centre, no matter how much it wants to take up, no matter how much it wants to encompass the whole world, so too the erotic process never leaves the sphere of sexuality, no matter how many psychic forces it encompasses, no matter how far its effects extend. (Andreas-Salomé [1900]: 1024)

Freud's focus in his analysis of Leonardo's work shifts from daydreaming to a realm of imagination more readily grasped as intricately connected to the physical body. Consequently, the concept of sublimation, central to Freud's arguments, becomes subtler and less overt. This implies a deliberate attempt at concealment or hidden meaning within the artwork. Building on this, Jacques Lacan emphasizes the symbolic role of the veil, highlighting the inherent gap between the object of desire and its artistic representation, reflecting an underlying absence:

> What can materialise for us, as it were, in the sharpest way this relationship of interposition, which means that what is aimed at lies beyond what presents itself? Well, something that is truly one of the most fundamental images of the human relationship with the world, namely the veil, the curtain. […] The curtain is, so to speak, the idol of absence. If the veil of Māyā is the most commonly used metaphor to express man's relation to all that captivates him, this is surely due to his sense of a certain fundamental illusion in all his relations of desire. (Lacan [2020]: 173)

In this manner, the elements concealed in Leonardo's work now emerge in unique ways within the context of his psychology (Lichtenberg [1978]: 874). While an enduring absence persists, it points to a hidden presence framed by temptation. As Murat Aydemir observed, Leonardo's *St. John the Baptist* (Figure 3), painted between 1513 and 1516, expresses this dimension (Aydemir [2009]: 127). The painting features St. John in the foreground, with his head and arm bathed in light, while the rest of his torso and waist remain semi-dark. Everything appears illuminated, yet simultaneously shrouded, leaving the viewer uncertain about the true nature of what is being observing:

> The iconographic and anecdotal elements are reduced to a minimum: a dark background replaces the landscape and the figure is characterized only by the soft golden glow of the face without other colours: one could therefore appreciate the painting without being forced

> to decipher it – the beauty, the smile and the gesture immediately trigger emotions. There is nothing to read. Nothing alludes to the earthly experience of the saint who lived as a hermit on the banks of the Jordan River and who is usually depicted with an emaciated and savage aspect; this work only asks to be lived through emotions. (Bramly [1991]: 263)

Figure 3. Leonardo da Vinci, St. John the Baptist, c. 1513-1516, oil on wood (walnut), 73 x 56.5 cm. Louvre, Paris.

This interplay of presence and absence constructs a space that provides the viewer with a considerably expanded access, allowing figures to intertwine with a multitude of gazes. What we encounter here is a connection that enables us to preserve this artistic access rooted in the realm of dreams, albeit without fully adhering to Freud's viewpoint. Instead, it regards the oneiric space to interpret the dreamer's relationship with that which they hold dear:

> in the so-called waking state, there is an elision of the gaze […]. In the field of the dream, on the other hand, what characterizes the images is that it *shows*. […] Look up some description of a dream, anyone – not only the one I referred to last time, in which, after all, what I am going to say may remain enigmatic, but any dream – place it in its co-ordinates, and you will see that this it shows is well to the for. So much is it to the fore, with the characteristics in which it is co-ordinated – namely, the absence of horizon, the enclosure, of that which is contemplated in the waking state, and, also, the character of emergence, of contrast, of stain, of its images, the intensification of their colours – that, in the final resort, our position in the dream is profoundly that of someone who does not see. (Lacan [1998]: 75)

This provides a foundation to explore how dream, memory, desire, and art intertwine. The *Baptist* painting is especially significant for probing the amorous emotions Freud linked to desire, which Andreas-Salomé later explored in the erotic sphere. This analysis will gain precision as we engage with Lacan's theory of the veil, tracing its direction. By examining the historical evolution of the painting through Da Vinci's preparatory sketches, our goal is to clarify this psychoanalytical interpretation and access the erotic dimension embedded in his graphic oeuvre.

3. *The Angel in the Flesh*

It is uncommon to move beyond Leonardo's major paintings when examining his work, yet it is misleading to consider *The Baptist* a minor piece, despite its relative neglect. Housed in the Louvre, the painting initially appears as a straightforward allegorical depiction of John the Baptist. However, a deeper analysis reveals its complexity. Unlike the mature Baptist in works by Masaccio and Domenico Veneziano, Leonardo presents a youthful male figure with soft features and an innocent expression. Set against an indistinct, shadowy backdrop, the figure is lit by a beam of light from his raised arm pointing heavenward. This dramatic chiaroscuro aligns more with Baroque aesthetics than Renaissance conventions. Martin Kemp notes that *The Baptist* occupies a unique position in Leonardo's work, not only for its innovative portrayal but for its ability to evoke emotional depth (Kemp [2006]: 337; Clark [2005]: 232). This introspective quality influenced Caravaggio's later depictions of John the Baptist.

This work stands out as a key example in the vast artistic field and in Leonardo da Vinci's prolific body of work. Applying the proposed psychoanalytic framework to explore latent eroticism in his paintings involves delving into their hidden psychological layers, investigating the enigmatic shadows of his compositions, and examining the sketches that reveal his unconscious. Since its discovery, many researchers have attributed the drawing entitled by Carlo Pedretti as *Angel in the Flesh* (Figure 4) to Leonardo. It portrays a youthful male figure, likely representing the angel Gabriel from the Annunciation. However, the figure

bears a strong resemblance to John the Baptist, suggesting a possible symbolic or visual connection between the two.

The physiognomic identification of the Baptist with Salai is now further endorsed by the discovery of an erotic Nuncius, the so-called Angel in the Flesh. This establishment has put in motion – after the contested diagnosis advanced by Freud – a debate that, referring to the androgyny of the Saint, warned the audacity of disrespect and, at the same time, brutally denounced the effusions of an old homosexual. […] The angelic nuncius in the drawing is depicted in the same position as the Baptist, except for the foreshortened arm indicating upwards. (Bottoni [2009]: 141)

Despite uncertainties about its provenance and authorship, the drawing's value lies not in its attribution to Leonardo, but in its potential to illuminate interpretations of his work, particularly the eroticism in his depiction of the Baptist. Through Lacanian psychoanalysis, we explore psychological dimensions and symbolic meanings, offering insights into Leonardo's artistic vision and cultural context, enriching our understanding of his proposal:

> But beneath his face, lit by an ephebic sensual ecstasy, instead allows a glimpse of a turned breast and a female nipple, the other hand, folded over his chest, holding a veil which falls to the groin revealing, with provocative pornographic ostentation, an erect penis. (Bottoni [2009]: 141)

Beyond the explicit sexual rendering in the purported angel and the potential for arousal, what stands out is the prominently featured erect phallus within the composition. Bottoni's characterization is accurate: we encounter a young man exuding ephebic allure, with androgynous features that give him a divergent corporeal presence. His physiological traits refuse to conform to the conventional male-female dichotomy. This incongruity is highlighted through the erotic implications of these attributes, as Bottoni notes the pornographic connotation associated with the male member depicted. Therefore, it becomes manifest that the image and corporeal representation articulated by Leonardo transcends and diverges from the established norms governing the portrayal and discourse surrounding cisgender bodies.

This representation has been extensively analysed from multiple perspectives, including biographical connections to Leonardo's disciple, Gian Giacomo Caprotti (Salai), and historical interpretations of Leonardo's artistic intent. Some theories explore cryptic implications, such as the alignment of the hand pointing to the heavens and the phallus extending in the same direction (Aydemir [2009]: 133). While speculation about Leonardo's emotional and sexual life has sparked considerable discourse, there is insufficient evidence to support a definitive interpretation based on these conjectures (Turner [2017]: 42). However, a drawing like this would not be unusual in Leonardo's notebooks. In the Codex Arundel, there is a depiction of a naked ephebic body with an erect member. The uniqueness of these

drawings lies not only in their analysis but in the dilution of logos and pathos. In this context, many elements merit exploration, particularly the hidden erotic dimension, which intriguingly intersects with Lacanian theory regarding the Phallus.

In Lacan's framework, the concept of the «phallus» represents an empty signifier, defined by its relational ties to other signifiers through opposition and combination. It is not directly equated with the male genital organ but instead exists within the symbolic potentiality inherent to the phallus. Lacan emphasizes that the signifier of the phallus «is wedded to the advent of desire» (Lacan [2002]: 581). This means that, across all domains of life, whenever a collective consensus forms around an image that embodies desire, it influences the subject when it intersects with the phallus signifier. Though the phallus itself holds no fixed meaning, any signifier tied to it absorbs the connotations of desire. However, Lacan distinguishes between discourse in a linguistic or cognitive sense and discourse in a representational one. In this regard, he introduces the notion of the «imaginary phallus», which functions as a representational emblem of desire, further complicating its symbolic meaning:

> The phallus can be better understood on the basis of its function here. In Freudian doctrine, the phallus is not a fantasy, if we are to view fantasy as an imaginary effect. Nor is it as such an object (part-, internal, good, bad, etc.) inasmuch as "object" tends to gauge the reality involved in a relationship. Still less is it the organ – penis or clitoris – that it symbolizes. And it is no accident that Freud adopted as a reference the simulacrum it represented to the Ancients. (Lacan [2002]: 579)

This analysis suggests that artistic expression of desire relies on creating an imaginary representation, aligning with Lacan's notion of desire's signification. Through this framework, divergent interpretations of Leonardo's works with erotic undercurrents converge, particularly in sublimation and the portrayal of beautiful youth. While Andreas-Salomé cautions against equating these with Leonardo's personal desires, the concept of imaginary desire offers a unifying lens, helping us understand how various interpretations converge in the artistic expression of veiled eroticism.

On the back of the *Angel in the Flesh*, three Greek words appear: «astrapen», «bronten», and «ceraunobolian». These terms reference Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*, specifically Apelles' skill in depicting the unrepresentable forces of nature – lightning, storms, and thunder – manifesting invisible forces (Pedretti [2009a]: 72). Some scholars interpret Leonardo's anatomical sketches as suggesting a belief in the penis's autonomous will and capacity for erection (Goldstein [2000]: 70). However, a closer examination reveals a more nuanced interpretation. Leonardo appears to understand the physiological processes behind erection, notably the role of blood pressure (Figure 5), but lacks the knowledge of blood circulation that Harvey would later discover. Like many of his contemporaries, he is still influenced by the neo-Aristotelian paradigm (Noble, DiFrancesco & Zancani [2014]: 401). In this light, Leonardo's representation of the erection can be seen as

a force of nature at the centre of the human being: «The penis begins at the centre of the man» (Leonardo da Vinci [2008]: 141). Thus, Leonardo's anatomical explorations reflect a deeper connection between the human body and natural forces.

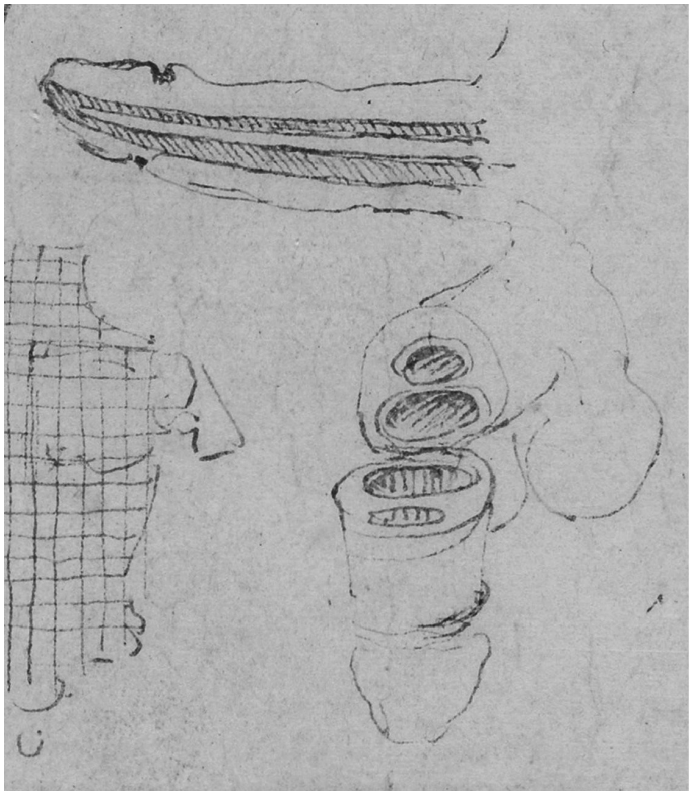

Figure 5. Leonardo da Vinci, Structure and function of tubes in longitudinal and cross sections of the erect penis. Section of Folio RL 19097v, c. 1490-1492, pen and ink (sheet of paper), 27.6 x 20.4 cm. (From folio RL 19097v, by permission of Royal Collection Trust; copyright © 2024 His Majesty King Charles III.)

This analysis posits the existence of a hidden force represented in the anatomical drawing, echoing Freudian interpretations. However, solely referencing Freud provides limited context. Examining this motif in relation to the preparatory drawing of an erotic Nuncio like *St. John the Baptist* offers a richer perspective. While sublimated through a Freudian lens, the anatomical drawing provides a rational examination of the phallus. Conversely, *Angel in the Flesh* presents a veiled depiction, aiming to create a liminal space between the physical and the unseen.

Figure 4. Annunciating Angel with Erection (The Angel in the Flesh), c. 1513-1515, black chalk or charcoal on rough, blue paper, 26.8 × 19.7 cm. German private property, in trust of The Pedretti Foundation, Los Angeles. Extracted Pedretti [2009]: 71.

The distinction between a drawing – *Angel in the Flesh* – and a painting – *St. John the Baptist* – seems clear, but in this case, it is more metaphorical than real. Bottoni ([2004]: 98-103) finds significant common points between the two works, suggesting that *Angel in the Flesh* offers an alternative representation of the Baptist. However, this erotic density that moves between the latent and the manifest makes it clear that we are looking at two expressions and one and the

same work. The solemn and harmonious beauty of the Nuncio contrasts with the more pronounced thematic weight and emotional density in the *Angel*. From this perspective, we are not only dealing with a painting and its sketch, but with two manifestations of erotic psychology: the intellectual and restrained in the painting, and the more corporeal and rawer in the drawing. This veiled eroticism, especially in the hidden limb of the angel, resonates with Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the veil. The play between presence and absence in the drawing enhances this psychoanalytic lens, revealing a deeper connection between the works and the symbolic nature of desire. Let's look at this more closely.

From this Lacanian perspective, the artist engages in a creative play by incorporating various signifiers that beckon the viewer and interweave with an array of erotic elements, thereby prompting a heightened state of contemplation and arousal. The phallic signifier in this imaginary sense implies an unfolding of the spectator's cognitive processes and active engagement with the artwork:

> For the phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function, in the intrasubjective economy of analysis, may lift the veil from the function it served in the mysteries. For it is the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole, insofar as the signifier conditions them by its presence as signifier. (Lacan [2002]: 579)

Angel in the Flesh presents a compelling case of layered veils disrupting conventional representational norms. The artwork shows a nude young man in a state of arousal, but the phallus remains obscured, raising the critical question: is it vanishing or emerging? While this effect is the result of later censorship (Turner [2017]: 43), it contributes to the image's ongoing ambiguity. The figure's inherent eroticism is clear, but it is hidden through symbolic elements, effectively creating a «simulation» that engages the viewer's gaze and invites further interpretation. The veil serves as an interruption, rendering the status of the erect member uncertain. This deliberate obfuscation places the viewer in a position to project fantasy, exploring the language and meanings of the phallus. In doing so, the work encourages an active engagement with its latent eroticism and psychological dimensions, creating a space for both conscious and unconscious interpretations[3].

It is important to recognize that the painting cannot exist without the outline of the Angel. Leonardo emphasizes in his notes that painting, using shadows

2 Carlo Pedretti has dealt with the linguistic presence of phallus – cock – in da Vinci's notebooks through the Codex Arundel: «here there are ten notes words on theme of "cock", followed by an eleventh one with equivalent meaning "putz"» (Pedretti [2009b]: 209). However, he has also devoted special attention to the space occupied by the anatomical study of the limb and its relationship with the *Angel in the Flesh*: «On a sheet of the Codex Atlanticus, f. 249 r-c [647 r], with notes on mechanics, hydraulics, and painting – which can be related to those of Ms. E. *c*. 1513-1514, and therefore belonging to the time of the "Angel in the Flesh"» (Pedretti [2009b]: 207).

and light, represents physical distances on a flat surface: «Painting, however, by means of shadows and lights presents upon level surfaces, shapes with hollowed and raised portions in diverse aspects, separated from each other at various distances» (Leonardo da Vinci [2008]: 195). This insight offers a resolution to Freud's query: in Leonardo's work, rather than sublimation, there is a multidimensional expansion of erotic sensibility. Later psychoanalytical perspectives, particularly Lacan and Andreas-Salomé, examine the interplay of veils that shape both the painting and the sketch.

In Leonardo's work, the signifiers are veiled by John the Baptist and the final painting's execution: «Whereas *The Baptiste* suspends the penile referent from sight with the heavy and dark tunic, the promise of its eventual reappearance is kept in the "Angel"» (Aydemir [2009]: 133). In this shared visual experience, within an intersubjective realm, it's tempting to speculate that Leonardo manipulates the viewers with a drawing not meant to stand alone, inviting further interpretation and engagement. This playful dynamic is central to understanding the veiled eroticism in Leonardo's work:

> The veil intimates that signification be situated within a theatral frame, a performance of addressing and being addressed. The frontal position, the turned head, the ingratiating smile, and the offered bare shoulder in *The Baptist* all engage the viewer. Those signs invite or enlist the second person to join the manual gesture of the figure. (Aydemir [2009]: 133)

The *Angel in the Flesh* presents a captivating case study for exploring the interplay of desire and representation through a Lacanian lens. The artwork depicts John the Baptist imbued with suggestive elements, yet the phallus remains veiled. This intentional obfuscation invites nuanced interpretation, moving beyond simplistic Freudian readings and revealing a multifaceted engagement with desire.

The artwork's layered structure invites analysis through Lacanian psychoanalysis, with *St. John the Baptist* masking the underlying «imaginary phallus», a symbol of repressed desire. The absence of the phallus in the Angel drawing amplifies its symbolic presence, creating tension between concealment and revelation. Lacan's concept of the gaze highlights how desire emerges in the interaction between subject and object. While artistic intent remains uncertain, Lacanian analysis offers a framework to explore desire's complexities in the work, revealing a richer understanding of how the piece engages with the viewer's subjective desires.

4. *Ambiguity and Eroticism: An Artistic Relationship*

Leonardo's artwork presents a deeper exploration of erotic themes when analyzed aesthetically and psychologically, especially through his drawings. Among

them, a presumed preparatory sketch for *St. John the Baptist* reveals a strikingly explicit erotic dimension. *Angel in the Flesh* is not merely a nude depiction of John; it is a provocative image that exposes a network of psychophysiological relationships, engaging in an analysis of the genetic origins of the image. This interpretation extends beyond the psycho-physiognomic perspective emphasized by Caroli, highlighting an absence that never fully materializes – or rather, an ambivalent presence that lingers between concealment and revelation.

Freud suggests that this content reveals a latent desire rooted in Leonardo's childhood, later developed through his art (Freud [2002]: 61). However, Vygotsky challenges the direct psychoanalytic reading of art alongside love drives within the dreamscape. He acknowledges, though, that «dreams, they say, awake the desires of which we are ashamed; thus only in art are expressed those desires which cannot be satisfied in a direct fashion» (Vygotsky [1971]: 76). This perspective deepens the discussion on the relationship between desire, artistic expression, and the unconscious.

Indeed, art serves as a channel for expression, offering a privileged avenue for analysing the unconscious. Vygotsky explored connections between artistic creation and behaviour, while psychoanalysis views art as a metalinguistic expression of personality. For Freud, dreams reveal hidden drives, whereas art represents a means to depict unattainable desires.

Returning to the insights of Andreas-Salomé, who offers a correction to Freud's perspective by framing art as an erotic space, we venture into a liminal realm where the delicate shades of meaning transition into ambiguity. In this ambiguity, we encounter the essence of a boundary or borderline aesthetic experience, one that is marked by the interplay of tenuous and indistinct qualities:

> the artist's act brings into play and reveals archaic forces, with passionate emotion, beneath those that have been individually acquired: in both cases containing mysterious syntheses of past and present – i.e., fundamental experience – and in both cases the rapture of their secret interaction. (Andreas-Salomé [2013]: 67)

It is precisely this undercurrent of eroticism that we can explore in *The Angel in the Flesh*. The figure he portrays exists at the boundaries of all aspects of seduction. Through the androgynous representation and the (dis)appearance of the erect member, he confronts us with two opposing positions: the dissolution of sexual archetypes, or conversely, the affirmation of sexual binarism:

> In fact, the design of the phallic angel, mixing the masculine with the feminine, the angelic with the demonic, sacredness with pornography, juxtaposing the forefinger raised for a proclamation of salvation with the turgidity of an erect penis, creates a sense of unease, *the incongruity of a disturbing "Unheimliches"* that already emanates from the provocative smile of the lips to infect the viewer with the ultimate revelation of phallic prominence. (Bottoni [2004]: 100)

The resurgence of androgynous presence is a pertinent question within the realms of art and aesthetics, particularly in an era witnessing a revival of Platonic myths concerning beauty and love. This resurgence has sparked numerous debates within the domains of art and psychoanalysis. Freud himself acknowledged the psychological and genealogical aspects associated with the androgynous figure. Drawing inspiration from Plato's description in his *Symposium* of the androgyne as a «third sex» that unites male and female attributes, Freud proposed a hypothesis in which the androgyne, a body repeated as a duality that is subsequently separated, symbolizes «a need to restore an earlier state of things» (Freud [1955]: 57; cf. Plato 189c2-193e1 [2008]: 22-27). For Freud, the androgynous figure thus serves as a symbol, a reminder of the lack of unity that has been lost in human development.

Freud's analysis remains relevant to this study, as androgyny extends beyond *Angel in the Flesh*. Had Freud examined Leonardo's drawings further, he might have recognized the artist's own psychological explorations through allegorical representations of pleasure and pain (Figure 6) (Nova [2001]: 381-386; Keizer [2012]: 433-455). This is significant because, with this drawing, Leonardo engages in psychological analysis – an aspect Freud did not explicitly acknowledge in his work. Leonardo's art thus reveals a deep, introspective engagement with human emotion and identity.

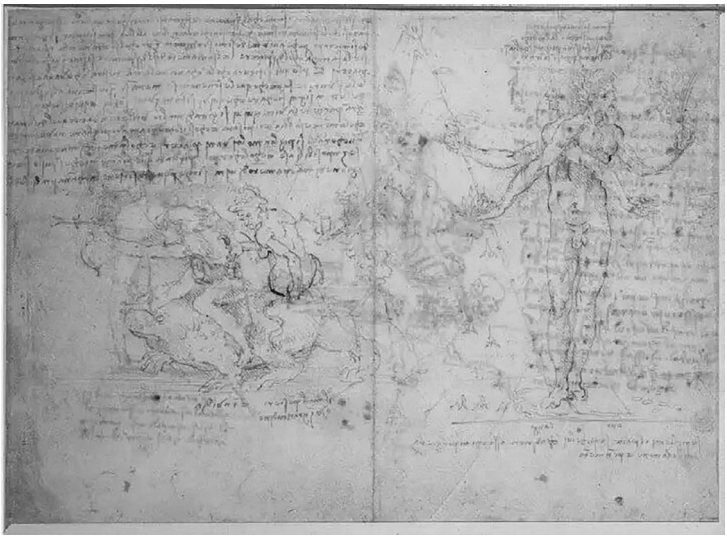

Figure 6. Leonardo da Vinci, Allegory of Pleasure and Pain (on the right), c. 1483-1487 (1494), pen and brown ink on paper. 21 × 28.9 cm. Christ Church, Oxford (Photo: Christ Church Picture Gallery©).

Freud's framework provides insight into the psychology of androgyny but often diminishes the agency of androgynous individuals, conflating androgyny with bisexuality. Julia Kristeva critiques this reduction, arguing that it risks collapsing androgyny into a singular, self-contained entity: «As to the androgyne, he is unisexual: he is two of himself, conversant onanist, bounded totality, heaven and earth jammed together, a blissful coalescence a hairsbreadth away from catastrophe» (Kristeva [1987]: 70). In Freud's interpretation, androgyny ultimately resolves into a veiled signifier: the phallus, reducing its complexity to a fixed symbolic structure. However, this perspective overlooks the fluidity and transformative potential of androgyny.

Hélène Cixous's concept of «bisexual writing» offers a more dynamic approach, rejecting rigid categorizations and embracing multiplicity: «To this self-effacing, merger-type bisexuality, which would conjure away castration […], I oppose the other bisexuality on which every subject not enclosed in the false theater of phallocentric representationalism has founded his/her erotic universe» (Cixous [1976]: 884). From this perspective, artistic representations of the body are not merely reflections of fixed identities but sites of transformation and interaction with otherness. Eroticism ceases to be a mere expression of latent desire and instead becomes a process of transcendence, where the body functions as a space of difference and fluidity. Art, in this sense, does not simply depict desire but reconfigures it, positioning the body as an open, evolving site of identity and meaning.

The critical insight we can glean from the eroticism present in Leonardo's depictions of young androgynous figures centres on the theme of indeterminacy concerning identity and the narratives associated with the bodies of others. As Susan Sontag asserts, the body, in its androgynous form, challenges fixed interpretations, positioning everything in «quotation marks» (Sontag [1966]: 280) and thus destabilizing conventional understandings. This ambiguity inherent in the androgynous body goes beyond mere cynicism; it becomes an active force for deconstruction, leading to a new sensibility and a transformed approach to gender expression. Sontag's vision of the androgynous body evolves, aligning with the notion of «queer» as a space for fluid identities. It becomes a powerful aesthetic force, contributing to the creation of new poetics, narratives, and images that break away from traditional gender norms. In the Nietzschean sense, this process fosters «new values», offering a rupture with established categories and giving birth to an eroticism that transcends conventional frameworks of understanding. This erotic body reveals a disquieting emptiness beneath regulatory masks, embraced through ironic inhabitation. It reflects a creative tension with norms, provoking ironic detachment and challenging established meanings.

The eroticism we find in Leonardo's drawings reveals to us that, although Freud was not entirely off the mark with his conceptualization of sublimation,

we can appreciate, through alternative readings of psychoanalysis, that we are in a different space within the artist's psychology. In this way, the eroticism that Leonardo displays in his drawings suggests a reflection on the transparency of the body between intellect/psychology and the body, fostering an alternative desire that does not confine itself to modern gender categories.

5. *Conclusions*

Through a psychoanalytic examination, I have conducted an analysis of selected drawings from Leonardo da Vinci's graphic portfolio, particularly focusing on the unique erotic dimension presented in the drawing *Angel in the Flesh*. In this endeavour, I have drawn upon Sigmund Freud's theoretical framework to explore: firstly, the potential applications of this theory within the context of the Florentine artist's works, using psychoanalysis; finally, I have undertaken a critical appraisal of Freud's perspectives with the assistance of contemporary art theorists and psychoanalysts.

By incorporating Lou Andreas-Salomé's insights, we've critiqued the connections between the oneiric, atavistic, and artistic elements, focusing on aesthetic and psychological considerations beyond Freud's framework. This has allowed us to reassess Leonardo's works and extend these insights to other boundary-pushing artistic expressions, highlighting erotic engagement and rapture:

> That is why the erotic, much more than the aesthetic, expresses its rapture in pure fantasies, images of a much "more mendacious" kind. True, in the artist too, the special state erupts in each case through the normal state, like an anomaly, a violation of the present, of the firmly hierarchical datum, by the stimulating interaction of past and future imperatives that occurs in this state. (Andreas-Salomé [2013]: 68)

Through this perspective, Leonardo's drawings gain renewed significance, especially in relation to the Angel. Freud's analysis overlooks the depth of erotic elements present in Leonardo's work. *St. John the Baptist*, though mathematically analysed, retains a sensual quality, with both form and expression inviting a new way of perception. In this context, sublimation operates differently, shifting paradigms rather than following traditional interpretations.

In Leonardo's works, intellectual concealment aligns with Lacan's theory of the veil and the Phallus, offering a fresh perspective for interpreting these artworks. By examining the eroticism in *Angel in the Flesh*, we situate it within an androgynous body. Freud's framework falls short in this case, and Kristeva critiques the reduction of androgyny to the phallus, noting: «the androgyne is unisexual: he is two of himself» (Kristeva [1987]: 70). Cixous offers a recalibration through her concept of «other bisexuality», recognizing gender identity's

complexities (Cixous [1976]: 884). Building on these insights, Sontag's analysis of camp sensibility reveals that this ambiguity carries a critical dimension: «the androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility» (Sontag [1966]: 279). The androgynous body embodies a dissident, critical disposition, expressing a new, baroque sensibility, disrupting established norms. It inhabits an ambiguous realm, offering a demoralizing critique of traditional identities and norms, providing a fresh perspective on both art and identity.

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