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The Navel of the Dream, Fixation and Repetition : Shlomo Lieber (Translation Dan Shalit Kenig) : 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2022

See <https://nlscongress2022.amp-nls.org/blogposts/the-navel-of-the-dream-fixation-and-repetition> or [www.LacanianWorksExchange.net](http://www.LacanianWorksExchange.net) /authors by date (June 2022)

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# The Navel of the Dream, Fixation and Repetition

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## ***Shlomo Lieber***

Irma's *Injection* dream, the opening dream in 'The Interpretation of Dreams', is not only a *specimen dream*<sup>1 2</sup>, nor is it only the dream through which Freud discovered, as he reports, "*the secret of dreams*"; it also contains something else, another secret, the secret of all secrets, I would say it is an encapsulated secret; and the name of that secret is "*the navel of the dream*".

The Irma's character in the dream encompasses two more women (to the very least): Irma's best friend, whom Freud preferred, as patient, over Irma, and Freud's wife. As he compares Irma to those two other feminine characters, who "*have been recalcitrant to treatment*"<sup>3</sup>, too, Freud stops suddenly but still comments that "*I had a feeling that the interpretation of this part of the dream was not carried far enough to make it possible to follow the whole of its concealed meaning*"<sup>4</sup>. But He is not referring hereto whatever else might have been said to expose the ostensibly "full" meaning but to his following statement: "*If I had pursued my comparison between the three women, it would have taken me far afield. There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable – a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown*"<sup>5</sup>. A more fine-tuned translation reveals that we are not speaking of the unknown here, but of the German *Unerkanten*, i.e., that which cannot entirely be known or identified (I might add in this context that I do not think it is a coincidence that women, being recalcitrant, and the navel of the dream, are all mentioned here in the same breath! The "not all" of the feminine position joins them in one bundle).

But if the dream is the highway to the knowledge of the unconscious, or to the **interpretation** of the unconscious, as Freud mentions elsewhere<sup>6</sup>, then the navel of the dream is that which will forever remain unknowable and uninterpretable, the inaccessible part of the unconscious, the **un-conscious**, **as such**.

Indeed, Lacan, in his answer to Marcel Ritter's question<sup>7</sup>, connects the navel of the dream, and the related concept of *Unerkannten*, to what Freud calls *Urverdrangung*, the 'Primal Repression'. Primal repression, "which consists in the psychical (ideational) representative of the instinct being denied entrance into the conscious"<sup>8</sup>, is the first stage of repression, a preliminary and indeed necessary stage prior to "repression proper" which is about to follow. Lacan sees (a) the primal repression, which is at the basis of the unconscious's mechanism of *displacement*, as an outcome of the very act of speaking, of our being a parlêtre – and (b) the (earlier) concept of the navel of the dream, as two overlapping concepts. What is involved here in what these two concepts denote is of order of what cannot be said, and the impossible as a sign of the real is what connects them. They remain a sealed hole, in Lacan's words, a "scar" in the body. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the word "navel" was chosen to characterize that hole.

I think we can feel, in view of the above, why Freud immediately makes a connection, in the same paper, between primal repression and 'fixation'. These two concepts are mutually intertwined. He writes: "With this [the stage of primal repression], fixation is established; the representative in question persists unaltered from then onwards and the instinct remains attached to it"<sup>9</sup>. Let us note that the concept of fixation, in this context, does not indicate, as is usually the case in Freud's writing, a fixation onto some libidinal stage or its vestiges, but, first and foremost, the very fixation of drive to its representation in the unconscious, or, we might say, the very fixation of affect as *quantity* to the unconscious representation (S1) even before that affect was felt as one that has some *quality* (tone, emotion, mood, etc.), that is to say, before it has been displaced (S2), in some mythic-logic time. In that sense, the capacity for fixation may possibly be seen here as the initial infrastructure that comes before any fixation becomes possible. Primal repression, and the fixation it contains, operate as a sort of gravity, a black hole, if I may use this term, that pulls in, to an inner sphere forever sealed from us, everything that is close to it or that comes near it ('repression proper').

What, then, in view of the above, might be the nature of *repetition*? I would say this: repetition will always be a return to a place that is different to what we were supposed to be in, because that place is the place where we never really were, but which nevertheless must exist there as a *cause* of this repetition itself. But this (impossible) place is also the place where unconscious desire stems from "like a mushroom out of its mycelium"<sup>10</sup>. And if, as Lacan said, desire is never anything but "a defense against another desire"<sup>11</sup>, then that "other desire" is the place where our body, the speaking body, can only dream about, by virtue of metaphor and metonymy, and at the same time incarnate it in our experience "as real and present"<sup>12</sup> and in "complete sensory vividness"<sup>13</sup>, in Freud's words, and thus leave it **inside us** as "existing outside" of ourselves. This, I think, is the dream's inherently elusive and sublime essence – which also holds an exceptional opportunity, and possibly turns it, as Freud wrote towards the end of his life, into "the most favorable

object of our study"<sup>14</sup>. This, in any case, is Freud's gamble, "in this no-holds-barred expression of his message".<sup>15</sup>

### References

<sup>1</sup> English translation: Dan Shalit Kenig

<sup>2</sup> Freud S., "The interpretation of Dreams" (1900), *S.E., IV*, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Freud S., "Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis" (1910), *S.E., XI*, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> *La Cause du Desire*, n 102, June 2019, pp. 35-43.

<sup>8</sup> Freud S., "Repression" (1915), *S.E., XIV*, p. 148 NOT p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Freud S., "The interpretation of Dreams" (1900), *S.E., V*, p. 525 NOT p. 528.

<sup>11</sup> Lacan J., *The Seminar, Book X, Anxiety*, Trans: A. R. Price, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014, pp. 316-318.

<sup>12</sup> Freud S., "On Dreams" (1901), *S.E., V*, p. 647.

<sup>13</sup> Freud S., "The interpretation of Dreams" (1900), *S.E., V*, p. 545.

<sup>14</sup> Freud S., "An Outline of Psychoanalysis" (1938), trans: Helena Ragg-Kirkby, London: *Penguin Books Ltd.* (2003), p. 193.

<sup>15</sup> Lacan J., "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud", in *Ecrits*, trans. B. Fink, New York/London: Norton & company, 2002, p. 424.

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#### Availability of references

[2] "The Interpretation of Dreams" (1900), *S.E., V*, p. 96. – Dream of Irma's injection.

Information, references & notes <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=655>

Texts on dreams <https://lacanianworks.net/category/practice/case-studies/case-studies-clinical/dreams/>

Notes on texts by Sigmund Freud <https://lacanianworks.net/category/works-in-progress/freud/>

Available bilingual at [www.Freud2Lacan.com](http://www.Freud2Lacan.com) /homepage (The complete bilingual of THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS and ON DREAMS)

Chapters I-V, Chapter V, Chapter VI, Chapter VII, ON DREAMS; Bibliographies, Indices)  
Text : Irma's *Injection* dream, the opening dream in 'The Interpretation of Dreams', is not only a *specimen dream*<sup>1 2</sup>

SE IV p96 : this is the beginning of Chapter II, The Method of Interpreting Dreams : An Analysis of a Specimen Dream, particularly your attention is drawn to 'Lay opinion has taken a different attitude through the ages. It has exercised its indefeasible right to behave inconsistently; and, though admitting that dreams are unintelligible and absurd, it cannot bring itself to declare that they have no significance at all. Led by some obscure feeling, it seems to assume that, in spite of everything, every dream has a meaning, though a hidden one, that dreams are designed to take the place of some other process of thought, and that we have only to undo the substitution correctly in order to arrive at this hidden meaning.

SE IV p98 Footnote 1 added by Sigmund Freud in 1914 : The technique which I describe in the pages that follow differs in one essential respect from the ancient method: it imposes the task of interpretation upon the dreamer himself. It is not concerned with what occurs to the interpreter in connection with a particular element of the dream, but with what occurs to the dreamer.

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- [3] As he compares Irma to those two other feminine characters, who "*have been recalcitrant to treatment*"<sup>3</sup>, too,

SE IV p110 : So in the dream I had replaced my patient by her friend. I now recollected that I had often played with the idea that she to might ask me to relieve her of her symptoms. I myself, however, had thought this unlikely, since she was of a very reserved nature. She was recalcitrant, as was shown in the dream.

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- [4] Freud stops suddenly but still comments that "*I had a feeling that the interpretation of this part of the dream was not carried far enough to make it possible to follow the whole of its concealed meaning*"<sup>4</sup>

SE IV p111 Footnote 1

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- [5] "*If I had pursued my comparison between the three women, it would have taken me far afield. There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable – a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown*"<sup>5</sup>.

SE IV p111 Footnote 1 : James Strachey refers to SE V p525 :

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown.

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- [6] But if the dream is the highway to the knowledge of the unconscious, or to the **interpretation** of the unconscious, as Freud mentions elsewhere<sup>6</sup>,

Third Lecture of Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis : 1910 : Sigmund Freud, SE XI p3-59.

SE XI p38 : I was held back by a purely subjective and seemingly secondary motive. It seemed to me almost indecent in a country which is devoted to practical aims to make my appearance as a 'dream-interpreter', before you could possibly know the importance that can attach to that antiquated and derided art. The interpretation of dreams is in fact the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious; it is the securest foundation of psycho-analysis and the field in which every worker must acquire his convictions and seek his training. If I am asked how one can become a psycho-analyst, I reply: 'By studying one's own dreams'.

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- [7] Indeed, Lacan, in his answer to Marcel Ritter's question<sup>7</sup>, connects the navel of the dream, and the related concept of *Unerkannten*, to what Freud calls *Urverdrangung*, the 'Primal Repression'

[Introduction to a cartels' working sessions : 26th January 1975 \(Strasbourg\) : Jacques Lacan replying to Marcel Ritter](#) or [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12702](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12702)

Published in the *Lettres de l'École freudienne*, 1976, n018. Day of the cartels. Strasbourg. Introduction to the working sessions.

P5 of [www.Freud2Lacan.com](http://www.Freud2Lacan.com) /lacan ( , translated by Anthony Chadwick

Jacques Lacan : I think we have to distinguish what is taking place at that level of the bodily orifice, from what functions in the unconscious. I think that, in the unconscious as well, something is signifiable that is entirely analogous. I think that what Freud stops in front of at this time as the dream's navel, since it is on this subject that he uses the term *Unerkannt*, unrecognized, I think that what is in question is what he calls, expressly designates elsewhere as the *Urverdrängt*, the primordial repressed (one translated that as best one could). I think that it is in the destiny of the primordial repressed, namely of that something which is specified as not being able to be said in any case, no matter which approach is used, of being if one can put it this way at the root of language, that one can give the best image of what is in question.

The relationship of this *Urverdrängt*, of this original repressed, since one asked a question concerning origin just now, I think that it is what Freud comes back to apropos of what has been literally translated by the *dream's navel*. It's a hole, it's something which is the limit of analysis; it's obviously got something to do with the real which is a perfectly nameable real, nameable in a way which is pure fact; it's not for nothing that he puts in play the function of the navel.

It is in effect to a particular navel, that of his mother, that someone found himself in sum suspended in reproducing him, if I may put it that way, by the severing of his umbilical cord. It is obvious that it is not to his mother's navel that he is suspended, it's to [1] his placenta\*. It is from the fact of being born from that womb there and not elsewhere that a certain speaking being or yet what I am calling for the moment, what I am designating with the name of *Parlêtre* [speakingbeing], which turns out to be another designation of the unconscious, it is indeed from being born of a being who desired him or not, but who from this single fact situates him in a certain way in language, that a Speakingbeing finds himself excluded from his own origin, and Freud's audacity in this case is simply to say that one has somewhere the mark of it in the dream itself. The subject through his imaginative productions, let us not forget that the condition of the *Darstellbarkeit* which is so important in the formation of the dream, that this *representationality*, if I may put it that way, the fact of being able to imagine oneself in the dream, preserves the mark somewhere of a point where there is nothing to be done. It is the point precisely from which stems the thread, but this point is as closed as is closed the fact that he was born in that womb and not elsewhere, that there is in the dream even the stigmatum since the navel is a stigmatum. It's a stigmatum through which, it's the only point, it has something in common with everything which has been born in this viviparous mode, but with this in addition that it is a question of a placental being and this placental being preserves a trace which there is signed at the very level of symbolization. It is certain that only the *Parlêtre*, the speaking being can come to the notion from which I started as far as the unconscious is concerned. There is something about which it is not for nothing that that is summed up in a scar, in a place in the body which forms a knot, and that this can be pointed to, no longer in its very place, of course, since there is there the same displacement which is tied to the function and field of speech.

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- [8] Primal repression, "*which consists in the psychical (ideational) representative of the instinct being denied entrance into the conscious*"<sup>8</sup>, is the first stage of repression,  
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- [9] He writes: "*With this [the stage of primal repression], fixation is established; the representative in question persists unaltered from then onwards and the instinct remains attached to it*".<sup>9</sup>

Repression : (1915d) : Sigmund Freud, SE XIV p141-158. Published. bilingual, at [www.freud2Lacan.com](http://www.freud2Lacan.com) / Freud: The Metapsychological Papers, Papers on Technique and others (7. Repression)

SE XIV p148 : We have reason to assume that there is a *primal repression*, a first phase of repression, which consists in the psychical (ideational) representative of the instinct being denied entrance into the conscious. With this a *fixation* is established; the representative in question persists unaltered from then onwards and the instinct remains attached to it. This is due to the properties of unconscious processes of which we shall speak later [p. 187].

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- [10] But this (impossible) place is also the place where unconscious desire stems from "*like a mushroom out of its mycelium*".<sup>10</sup>

The Interpretation of Dreams : 1900 : Sigmund Freud, SE IV & V, See Footnote 2 above. SE V p525 In the best interpreted dreams we often have to leave one passage in obscurity because we observe during the interpretation that we have here a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled, and which furnishes no fresh contribution to the dream-content. This, then, is the keystone of the dream, the point at which it ascends into the unknown. For the dream-thoughts which we encounter during the interpretation commonly have no termination but run in all directions into the net-like entanglement of our intellectual world. It is from some denser part of this fabric that the dream-wish then arises, like the mushroom from its mycelium.

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- [11] And if, as Lacan said, desire is never anything but "*a defence against another desire*"<sup>11</sup>

Seminar X : 26<sup>th</sup> June 1963

See [Seminar X: Of/From Anguish \(De l'angoisse\) : 1962-1963: begins 14th November 1962: Jacques Lacan](#) or <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=212>

NOTE

In both Cormac Gallagher's and Adrian Price's translations, 'l'angoisse' has been mistranslated. This is also true of James Strachey's translations of Sigmund Freud's texts. 'l'angoisse' & 'angst' should not be translated as 'anxiety'. So 'Inhibitions, Symptoms & Anxiety' should be 'Inhibitions, Symptoms & Anguish – Angst' : 1926d : Sigmund Freud SE XX p75-175 & 'Seminar X, Anxiety' should be 'Seminar X, Of Anguish'.

From Cormac Gallagher's translation. Please note : the original French word, translated as 'anxiety' has not been checked.

Seminar X : 26<sup>th</sup> June 1963 pXXIV 222 : In its polar relationship to anxiety (*anguish/angst*), desire is to be situated there where I put it for you, corresponding with this old matrix, at the level of inhibition. This is why desire - as we know - can take on the function of what is called a defence. But let us go step by step to see how this happens eventually. What is inhibition? For us, in our experience, it is not enough for us to have this experience and for us to manipulate it as such for us yet to have correctly articulated its function, and this is what we are going to try to do. What is inhibition if not the introduction into a function - perhaps not an indifferent one; in his article, Freud takes as support, for example, the motor function - the introduction of what? Of a different desire to the one that the function satisfies naturally.

Seminar X : 26<sup>th</sup> June 1963 pXXIV 223 : Well then, it is here in this relationship of o [a] to the constitution of a desire - and what it reveals to us about the relationship of desire to the natural function - that our obsessional has for us his most exemplary value. In his case we put our finger all the time on this characteristic, whose enigmatic aspect can be effaced for us only out of habit, that in his case desires manifest themselves always in this dimension that I went so far as to call earlier, anticipating a little no doubt, the function of defence.

How can this be conceived of simply, on what basis does this incidence of desire in inhibition deserve to be called defence? It is because, as I told you, that - it was in an anticipatory fashion that I was able to speak about defence as an essential function of the incidence of desire - it is uniquely in so far as this effect of desire, signalled in this way by inhibition, can be introduced into an action already caught up in the induction of another desire - this is also for us a common fact of experience - and after all, without mentioning the fact that we are always dealing with something of this order, let us observe that, not to leave our obsessional, this is already the position of anal desire, defined in this way, by the desire to retain centred on a primordial object, to which it is going to give its value, it is already here that there is situated the desire that is situated as anal. It has no meaning for us except in the economy of the libido, namely in its liaisons with sexual desire. It is fitting to recall here that in the *inter urinas et faeces nascimur* of St. Augustine, the important thing is not so much that we are born between urine and faeces, at least for us analysts, it is that we make love between urine and faeces. We piss before and we shit afterwards or inversely.

Seminar X : 26<sup>th</sup> June 1963, pXXIV 225 : What should retain us here? Have we seen, circumscribed, even approached, the question I posed about the incidence of another desire which with respect to this one whose path I have travelled along, might play the role of defence? Manifestly not. I traced the path of the return to the final object with its correlation of anxiety; for it is here there lies the motive for the growing arousal of anxiety. And in the measure that the analysis of an obsessional is pushed further towards its term, provided only it is guided along this path, the question then remains open, if not of what I meant - for I think that you have already glimpsed that - but about what the incidence as defence is, a defence no doubt working and working very hard to put off the expiry date (*échéance*) that I have just outlined, as defence of another desire.

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- [12] and at the same time incarnate it in our experience “as real and present”<sup>12</sup>  
[On Dreams : 1901: Sigmund Freud](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=671) See [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=671) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=671>, SE V p633-687 Available bilingual at [www.Freud2Lacan.com](http://www.Freud2Lacan.com) /homepage (The complete bilingual of THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS and ON DREAMS - ON DREAMS)

SE V p647 : But before taking leave of infantile dreams with their undisguised wish-fulfilments, I must not omit to mention one principal feature of dreams, which has long been evident and which emerges particularly clearly precisely in this group. Every one of these dreams can be replaced by an optative clause: ‘Oh, if only the trip on the lake had lasted longer!’ – ‘If only I were already washed and dressed!’ – ‘If only I could have kept the cherries instead of giving them to Uncle!’ But dreams give us more than such optative clauses. They show us the wish as already fulfilled; they represent its fulfilment as real and present; and the material employed in dream-representation consists principally, though not exclusively, of situations and of sensory images, mostly of a visual character. Thus, even in this infantile group, a species of transformations, which deserves to be described as dream-work, is not

completely absent; *a thought expressed in the optative has been replaced by a representation in the present tense.*

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- [13] and in “*complete sensory vividness*”<sup>13</sup>, in Freud’s words, Interpretation of Dreams : 1900 : Sigmund Freud, SE IV & V See footnote 2 above for details.

SE V p647 : We have put forward the view that in all probability this regression, wherever it may occur, is an effect of a resistance opposing the progress of a thought into consciousness along the normal path, and of a simultaneous attraction exercised upon the thought by the presence of memories possessing great sensory force. In the case of dreams, regression may perhaps be further facilitated by the cessation of the progressive current which streams in during the daytime from the sense organs;

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- [14] and possibly turns it, as Freud wrote towards the end of his life, into “*the most favourable object of our study*”<sup>14</sup>

An Outline of Psychoanalysis: 1938 : Sigmund Freud

trans: Helena Ragg-Kirkby, London: *Penguin Books Ltd.* (2003), Available at [www.LacanianWorksExchange.net](http://www.LacanianWorksExchange.net) /texts by request – password from [here](#)

p193 : Chapter 5 : Explanatory Notes Concerning the Interpretation of Dreams :

Probably, We set about understanding (‘interpreting’) the dream by supposing whatever we remember of a dream when we wake up not to be the real dream process but just a facade that hides this real process. This is what we mean when we differentiate between the *manifest* dream content and the *latent* dream thoughts. We call the process that allows the former to proceed from the latter the *dream-work*. The study of the dream-work uses an excellent example to teach us how unconscious material from the *Es* - both originally unconscious and repressed unconscious material - forces itself upon the *Ich*, becomes preconscious and, as a result of the *Ich*’s opposition, undergoes that transformation which we know as *dream-distortion*. There are no features of a dream that could not be explained in this way.

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-[15] This, in any case, is Freud’s gamble, “*in this no-holds-barred expression of his message*”.<sup>15</sup>

[The Agency \(Insistence or Instance\) of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud \(Sorbonne, Paris\) : 9th May 1957 : Jacques Lacan](#) See

<http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=5704>

P424 of Bruce Fink’s translation.

P159 of Alan Sheridan’s translation, II The letter in the unconscious : Thus in 'The Interpretation of Dreams' every page deals with what I call the letter of the discourse, in its texture, its usage, its immanence in the matter in question. For it is with this work that the work of Freud begins to open the royal road to the unconscious. And Freud gave us notice of this; his confidence at the time of launching this book in the early days of this century [24 namely the letters 107 & 109] only confirms what he continued to proclaim to the end: that he had staked the whole of his discovery on this essential expression of his message.

The first sentence of the opening chapter announces what for the sake of the exposition could not be postponed: that the dream is a rebus. And Freud goes on to stipulate what I have said from the start, that it must be understood quite literally. This derives from the agency in the dream of that same literal (or phonematic) structure in which the signifier is articulated and analysed in discourse. So the unnatural images of the boat on the roof, or the man with a comma for a head, which are specifically mentioned by Freud, are examples of dream-images

that are to be taken only for their value as signifiers, that is to say, in so far as they allow us to spell out the 'proverb' presented by the rebus of the dream. The linguistic structure that enables us to read dreams is the very principle of the 'significance of the dream', the *Traumdeutung*.

Freud shows us in every possible way that the value of the image as signifier has nothing whatever to do with its significations,

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