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## ART AS INNER KNOWLEDGE: DINO VALLS

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*Abstract:* The marriage between painting and psychology is certainly propaedeutic to inner research as well as to artistic expression tout court. The contemporary Spanish painter Dino Valls falls within this perspective as his art is utterly bipolar and focused on the two sides mentioned above: on the one hand the expressiveness supported by an outstanding technique, a broad cultural background and a downright innovative style, on the other hand, the search for oneself through the Jungian tool of active imagination. Through the latter, the painter investigates his inner world, testing himself in an extremely original and fascinating “psychoanalysis through art”.

The intent of this paper is twofold: firstly it intends to highlight the prominence of Dino Valls in the contemporary world art scene highlighting both his relationship with the Surrealist heritage, and his Jungian matrix, real foundation of his inspiration; secondly the paper aims to cast light on the concept of inner investigation, which turns to be the aim and the motor of his whole artistic commitment, giving art an utterly philosophical purpose.

*Keywords:* Dino Valls, Carl Gustav Jung, active imagination, psychology of art, surrealism, figurative painting, avant-gardes, esotericism, syncretism, unconscious.

## Introduction

A surgeon who eventually ended up working as an artist, carving himself out a prominent role in the world's art scene, is certainly a great character as well as quite a peculiar figure. Deemed one of the best figurative living painters, Dino Valls grapples with the mysteries of the unconscious calling them into question through representa-

tions ostensibly eerie, which certainly intrude upon usual figurative art.

Pondering on what lies behind the conscious, Valls posits a world of wonders typified by constant and steady attempts to any conscious' reliance, letting us glimpse the recesses of inner chasms unraveled by the psychological short circuit he sets off with his output.

What we are assessing here, challenges art ordinarily understood. What he ushers in conceptually, is way beyond it, let alone his expertise in painting, we are speechless in front of his technique and what's more, we can't even believe ourselves when we find out he's a self-taught painter. As Fabrizio Carli asserts: "Valls is an artist who in no way leaves indifferent: fascinates and even rejects; restless and maybe hurt. But it is impossible for his paintings to arouse a feeling of habituation" (Gomez, n.d.).

Born in Saragoza, Spain, in 1959, he graduated in Medicine and Surgery in 1982, however he never worked as a doctor, in fact he immediately embarked on his artistic journey. Valls started painting in oil in 1975 then, under the influence of the great masters of the past, especially the Italian and the Flemish ones, he opted for a combination of oil and egg tempera.

"Over a period of twenty years, he has applied himself to study in detail the techniques, iconography and iconology of 600 years of Western art; ... Valls is not at all a realistic painter, in any case, quite the opposite. An art of his own, imaginative and mental, metamorphic, often visionary, always separated from direct comparison with nature, and nourished by the history of art" (Gomez, n.d.).

His mission as an artist, blatantly exposed in his conceptual works – mainly representing uncanny, bewildering, creepy faces belonging to tormented bodies – deal with exploring the human psyche; the latter is repeatedly displayed, charged with his profound symbolism. Valls, in virtue of a solid cultural background, succeeds in his undertaking, presenting us a highbrow, sophisticated gallery of dazzling, thought-provoking pictures which, as a psychological blast, throws the mystery of the id right in front of our wonder. "And just as all paintings are self-portraits, mirrors are hung on the walls, which extends the relation of participation and incidence between the work of art, the author and the spectator" (Dino Valls, modern symbolist painter, 1993), a sort of chemistry immediately raises between us and those *vultus*.

Even though, visually literate people are now inured to the most shocking artistic outputs, what Dino Valls does, strikes us and

floors us to a fault. On top of that, Valls' art qualifies as being pedagogical too as it teaches us something, it points out a way, it sets a path – following it, it's up to us.

In the picture *Mutus liber* (Mute book), we see a lady<sup>1</sup> in front of a bookshelf, full of ancient books, all of them with the same title: indeed *Mutus liber*.

She is sat on a carpet in which a maze is drawn. On her back some mysterious, tiny and indecipherable writing, is tattooed. The symbolism is quite clear: she could remind us of our inner self which is pointing out the path to follow, she warns us though: the track is dark and hard to follow, it is a real labyrinth. However, we could manage to find our way in virtue of the knowledge, symbolized by the bookshelf next to her, the books are ancient, therefore filled with perennial philosophies and universal truths. Moreover they share an identical title, they hammer those truths, their aim is well-nigh straightforward and inclusive.

The *puella* embodied that knowledge, its formulas are tattooed on her flesh, they are always with her then, she can't fail – we can't fail: that occult, precious wisdom is the key to find a way out from the labyrinth of our psyche.

The whole work of Valls, fraught with enigmatic inscriptions and inscrutable codes, is a detailed system meant to let you extricate in the dark, treacherous labyrinth of the unconscious, where inmost meanings of our life path lay – this is what Valls seems to convey through his paintings, at times whispering, at other times "screaming" it to us. Nevertheless, hitting the mark.

The main character of this gripping journey is a little girl, differently portrayed in any picture, at first we actually see different girls, usually one for each picture but then, analysing his work we could figure out she is the same one depicted in different ways, as many as the sides of our unconscious. One of the first question one can inquire about in front of Valls' works is, indeed, who are *those* girls? Who is *that* girl? We know Valls doesn't use real models, so who is she? Where did he see her?

<sup>1</sup> She is the main recurring character depicted in different ways in Valls' works.

In the meanders of his unconscious, obviously. However, first things first.

### Main Subject Matters

Valls' art is extremely rich in content; therefore it is necessary to go through them meticulously. First of all, sickness: both of the soul and of the body. We know he is a doctor, so obviously patients, sick people, doctors and any kind of inspections are widely shown in his pictures. What mostly strikes him, however, is mental sickness. The latter is carefully displayed in numerous pictures, let us mention *Insania*, *Limbus*, *Ad inferus*, *Aurum*.

Weird diseases are shown too, we see girls with two heads, *Anfisbena*, or even three sisters embedded in one body, *Aracne*, two sisters in one body, *Vortice* and *La cuerda de plata*. Here's what Michael Pearce thinks about it:

Valls shows the girl as the subject of examination by an outside force: she's poked and pierced by pins, measured with dividers, dismantled from herself and compartmented into display cases as if a half-buried mannequin gazing directly out at us.

The paintings imply that someone is very focused on taking apart this poor girl, making a reductive examination of every part of her. She's presented as a wonder of the cabinet. She is carefully and sadistically labeled, categorized and displayed. But the intensity of the examination has had its effect on her, leaving piercings on her face, the Latin word *vultus* cut into her skin, her red eyes emptied of her tears, a metal bar piercing her head.

The sophistication of the paintings makes it perfectly obvious that Valls is a profoundly intelligent, well-read fellow (Pearce, n.d.).

Valls' art "is the conjunction of the conscious with the unconscious, of the subjective with the objective, of the easy with the difficult, of the circumstantial with the eternal.

There enters the view of the spectator who projects on the canvas all their joys and restlessness, arriving at a symbiosis so perfect that you no longer know who is who, what is what..." (Brevisima historia de la belleza, 2010). All this to say that, another main topic in Valls is dualisms, he constantly plays with them: oldness-youngness, sacred-profane, male-female, torture-ecstasy, sane-insane, patient-doctor, good-evil, beautiful-ugly. He's inquiring about them, whether he possesses the answer or not, is a mystery to us, we only see how he posits the questions: is *she* old or young? Sane or insane? Male or female? She's got white hair but she's an adolescent (*Quinto dolor*), so why? She represents the unconscious, the latter is not affected by time, at least in the way the conscious is. In a dream we could have an experience that lasts a day or a week or even a year while probably in reality only one minute has passed<sup>2</sup>.

What about the boundaries between what is sacred and what is profane? Who is in charge for that decision? Art could - should - shuffle cards, it's one of its main aims in the end, in order to make us think of course. As Gabriel Villalba states: "There is anguish where there is love, there is eroticism where death is. Where the obvious is dismissed there is life. You will meet a painter where there is thought" (Dino Valls, 2017).

Conceptual art is always dazzling and we are supposed - even compelled at times - to participate in the artist's journey, in his mission. We're not meant to be passive, in front of such an artist we are asked to be involved, a process is going on, those little girls are staring at us penetrating forcefully into our conscience through their "unconscious" gaze. Their specific situation, always different depending on the picture, is a blast of perennial quests, about our inner world, about who we really are.

<sup>2</sup> Pavel Florenskij (1977) reflects on it in his work *Ikonostasis*: "In an interval that is very short according to the external measure, the time of the dream can last hours, months, even years, and in certain special cases, centuries and millennia. In this sense no one doubts that the sleeper, isolated from the external visible world and shifting through his consciousness in the second system, also acquires a new measure of time by which his time, with respect to the time of the system he abandoned, passes with incredible speed" (p. 21). Authors' translation.

By looking at those puzzling *puellae* we simultaneously look at ourselves: we are old and young at the same *time*, just because the riddle of the id is beyond time itself, we are patients and doctors of ourselves as we constantly recover and improve through inner investigation, we are sane and insane, depending on which perspective we look at the world we live in, which in turn can be considered sane or insane too<sup>3</sup>. Observing Valls' uncanny pictures, we are requested to ask ourselves those kind of questions we can't get away with: we must inquire, by all means. It's an overpowering need for knowledge.

As Fernando Castro Flórez states:

We could understand the whole aesthetic of Valls as a kind of speculation about the condition of the contemporary subject. His paintings are mirrors where anxiety and the painful process of unfolding of the personality is settled. The darkest monster is actually inside us. The most beautiful and even "angelic" bodies are wounded and, from the space of representation, we are challenged. ...We can not escape the dismayed or disturbed look of the figures painted by Dino Valls, those eyes are on the edge of something we do not understand, as if they were expecting something that we can not do. Their symbols allegorize the unconscious, tangentially naming the drives, alluding to processes of transformation, retaking a thought that goes beyond the reticulation exerted by the rational? (Gomez, n.d.).

Duality is a concept which is thoroughly entwined in the next topic we are going to analyse:

<sup>3</sup> "The average man is generally considered "normal", as long as he play by the social norms of the environment in which he lives, in other words he is a "conformist"; however, normality understood in this way is an unsatisfactory concept; it is rather static and exclusive. This normality is a "mediocrity" that does not admit or condemn all that is outside the norm, and therefore is considered "abnormal", without taking into account the fact that many of the so-called "abnormalities" are actually beginnings or attempts to overcome the mediocrity" (Assagioli, 1988, p. 74). (Authors' translation).

esotericism. As Nadia Choucha (1991) puts it in her essay *Surrealism and the occult*: "The concept of the magical polarity between the ugly and the beautiful, life and death, etc., is also to be found in alchemy and the Cabalah" (p. 62)<sup>4</sup>. Jung (1977) was very concerned about it too and his *Mysterium Coniunctionis* is certainly the coryphaeus of this certainty, the latter, as a core point of conjunction, is unquestionably main in Valls too.

Hence, esotericism, syncretism and the thought of Carl Gustav Jung – whose echo is deafening in Valls - is another massive topic in his descriptions, whereas a great part of his whole work is marked with them.

Numerous are the canvases where these themes are illustrated, let us think of *Nigredo*, the title itself is a remind of Alchemy and in the picture we see the little girl wearing a dress made of many different fabrics, each of them ascribable to a different fashion, a different style, a different country, a different culture: syncretism, indeed. Some works already speak with their titles: *Ars Magna, Labor intus, Initiatio, Ad inferos, Aura, Opus nigrum, Mutus liber, Solve et coagula, Liturgia abisal, Sefirot*. A real joy for the lover of esotericism.

We definitely face a very well educated painter who is leading us into a marvelous philosophical journey, "philosophical" in its primordial connotation, i.e. who we are, where we come from, where are we going – three main perennial questions which are still yet to be answered. However, people who dare to cope with them are in high demand as the answers – this is what Valls seem to whisper - are the key to our "salvation" as human beings. An earthly salvation though. Even if

<sup>4</sup> This symbolism permeates Breton's second Manifesto too: "Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low are not perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may, one will never find another motivating force in the activities of the surrealist and the hope of findings and fixing this point" (Breton, 1972, pp. 123-124). Choucha claims that "this "point" can be compared with Kether, the pint of origin in the Cabalistic tree. It can also be related to alchemy, which attempted to reconcile opposites, particularly spirit and matter" (Breton, 1972, pp. 123-124).

Christian religion<sup>5</sup> is widely present in Valls' work, along with its elements of sufferance and martyrdom and their relative opposites of mystical ecstasy and beatitude. Works where this topic is evident are: *Martyr*, *Pange lingua*, *hiatus*.

Also religion is a perspective the painter uses for reflecting on dualisms, in this case those connected to it, i. e. sin and redemption, immanence and transcendence, flesh and psyche, sex and virginity, truths and lies, esotericism and exotericism.

Even though all Valls' subjects are strongly connected and all important, the one that stands out is certainly the unconscious. The way he gets into it is the active imagination, a technique created by Jung. Valls uses it to visualize – meet – his unconscious, then he paints it. Therefore, what Valls paints is in the end the mirror of his (our) unconscious, the little girl is the mask of it.

Now let us try to figure out how exactly the active imagination works.

### The Active Imagination

Jung describes active imagination as his “analytical method for psychotherapy” and in his final great work *Mysterium conjunctionis*, he shows how active imagination is the way to self-knowledge (“Know thyself”), and the process of individuation. From his mature perspective, he is describing much more than a specific meditative procedure or expressive technique. In the deepest sense active imagination is the essential, inner-directed symbolic attitude that is at the core of psychological development” (Chodorow, 1997, p. 17).

Active imagination is divided into two main parts, the first consists of letting the unconscious emerge, the second is about coming to terms with it. It can happen that the two parts interweave back and forth. In order to do so, the practitioner, with closed eyes in a kind of meditative state, tries to relax and suppress all his thoughts, focusing on breathing. It is noteworthy to mention it's not a passive state, rather a state of waiting, it's all about being conscious of what is going on, being con-

scious of the unconscious imminent coming up.

Jung speaks of the need for systematic exercises to eliminate critical attention and produce a vacuum in consciousness. This part of the exercises is familiar to many psychological approaches and forms of meditation. It involves a suspension of our rational critical faculties in order to give free rein to fantasy.

The special way of looking that brings things alive (*betrachten*) would be related to this phase of active imagination. In his Commentary on *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (1929) Jung speaks of the first step in terms of *wu wei* that is, the Taoist idea of letting things happen (Chodorow, 1997, p. 10).

It is all about being awake when the unconscious arises and let it express its content. Jung (2009), on several occasions, stated that the unconscious manifests itself by images and this is why painters can relate to it in quite a cool way, as they are familiar with processes of visualization. It is a matter of visualizing the unconscious, visualizing it while staying conscious and, of course trying to remember everything is shown in order to paint it afterwards.

There are many ways to approach active imagination. At first the unconscious takes the lead while the conscious ego serves as a kind of attentive inner witness and perhaps scribe or recorder. The task is to gain access to the contents of the unconscious.

In the second part of active imagination, consciousness takes the lead. As the affects and images of the unconscious now into awareness, the ego enters actively into the experience. This part might begin with a spontaneous string of insights; the larger task of evaluation and integration remains. Insight must be converted into an ethical obligation - to live it in life. For Jung, the second stage is the

<sup>5</sup> Both in its orthodox and catholic variant.

more important part because it involves questions of meaning and moral demands. In the German language, this is the *auseinandersetzung*, an almost untranslatable word that has to do with a differentiating process, a real dialectic. All the parts of an issue are laid out so that differences can be seen and resolved. In Jung's writings *auseinandersetzung* is usually translated as "coming to terms" with the unconscious (Chodorow, 1997, p. 10).

In conclusion, by dint of the active imagination Valls succeeds in generating a very detailed investigation of himself, exposed by his numerous pictures – each of them a side of his unconscious. What he really achieves then, doesn't merely deal with art, rather with an initiatic path of inner knowledge.

### Beyond Surrealism

As Edward Lucie-Smith (2001) puts it, Valls, far from being easily framed, "is the Spanish representative of a new and intriguing type of art that is beginning to challenge many of the respected presumptions of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Modern Art and the notions about what is and is not vanguard". This is because "his figures now challenge us in their own identity. What they represent is something that does not have to struggle to be modern or contemporary as these terms are understood today" (Lucie-Smith, 2001). What Valls stands for, is beyond time.

In the context of postmodernism and the broader scope that this movement has founded for the current figurative reality, Dino Valls presents a proposal that stands out for its intellectual power and its plastic mastery. It reinvents realism by completely destroying the very concept of reality and revealing the subjectivity of its pieces. Time is no longer linear and the narrative becomes internal and codified (Sotiropoulou, 2011).

Now, let us define the boundaries with Sur

realism itself. Investigating the unconscious through artistic-psychological commitment surely could let us consider a kinship with Surrealism, however that is not the case. It is well known how surrealists tried to get inspired only by using the unconscious, and then all those distinctive surrealist techniques such as automatic writing, frottage, trance, hypnosis and of course dreaming. Their foremost aim consisted of avoiding the use of the conscious – let us think of the famous Breton's statement: "the vigil is a state of interference".

As a matter of fact, what Valls is into, is totally beyond the early Surrealism methods as by virtue of the active imagination he manages to set in motion a fruitful collaboration between conscious and unconscious. The latter excludes *a priori* any surrealist approach which instead should be centered only on the unconscious.

Therefore, all this, works in favor of the artist himself, in terms of innovation and uniqueness and in terms of artistic excellence. As far as contemporary art is concerned, Dino Valls is a remarkable and outstanding example of entanglement between Jungian psychology and the surrealist heritage.

From Surrealism he only inherited the attraction to the unconscious, the way to encounter it, was provided by Jung. Easy to spot how the second is much more significant in terms of knowledge and consequent self-transformation. Jung as a rigorous scientist, set an advanced method of inner investigation, grounded on syncretism and a super human thirst for knowledge. Valls took advantage of it, his art shows it extensively. "Not only does precision make these works memorable, but the intellectual sophistication that conceives them makes the message communicate more strongly and sharply" (Lucie-Smith, 2001).

Let Valls himself clarify:

There are many artists that were intended to represent only beauty, the celebration of life. I was instead given to represent the existential vertigo.

The figures I paint are incarnations of the subconscious-projection of my soul.

Just like a psycho-analyst-easel. There, psychoanalysis walls and mirrors of the collective unconsci-

ous are exposed. Sciences and religions claim to explain the eternal question of the meaning of existence, the profound dichotomy between the material and the spiritual. Art must unite this duality; its realm is the space between one and the other (Trabacchini, n.d.).<sup>6</sup>

How far away he is from Surrealism is not even questionable. He actually bridges the gap with it: bringing into play Jung, Valls yields a mighty breakthrough and leads Surrealism itself to unexpected and unsettling horizons.

## Conclusion

Up to this point, everything suggests that the girl who is repeatedly depicted, is the image of some archetypes of Valls' unconscious. However, considering Jung's influence we could infer that what he sees belongs to the collective unconscious as well. This is why we find something familiar in his paintings, this is why we sense those characters are gazing at us.

In conclusion, Valls' work is not merely paintings rather "a pleasant way to go deeply into the dark basements of the mind, to explore the collective unconscious. It's a lonely mystic work of self-knowledge" (An interview with Dino Valls, 2013). In the same interview Valls was asked what he likes to do when he's not working, here's his reply: "I don't believe in these moments. You are always working, even when you aren't in front of a painting" (An interview with Dino Valls, 2013). His answer is very incisive and eloquent, art is not a pastime, neither a job, it is a state of mind, a way to live.

Here is what follows after that answer: "Any little known things about yourself you'd not mind sharing with our readers? - I already do: look at my paintings" (An interview with Dino Valls, 2013).

Art for him is the incarnation of a living *inneres Auge* which brings about a new perspective towards life and at the same time an invitation to do likewise; when he is asked: "Anything you'd like to say before you go?" (An interview with Dino Valls, 2013), he replies:

"Gaze at my paintings with your nape, with the eyes closed..." (An interview with Dino Valls, 2013).

Eyes, look, *that* look, here's the backbone of Valls' visual power. Let us consider the words of Christina Sotiropoulou (2011):

The viewer who is facing for the first time a work of Dino Valls will live a unique experience that is not limited to an aesthetic pleasure, something predictable in a work of art, but also manages to completely surpass what until then was perceived as a reality.

In essence, the painting of Dino Valls is an alternative way of visualizing, a different interpretation of objects and situations that are usually implicit or taken for granted. The viewer has the impression that the pictorial surface before him develops in a parallel universe that absorbs and integrates immediately, upsetting the dimension of space and time that until then considered familiar. However, nothing is what it seems in the world of Dino Valls, and our senses go from being an instrument of perception and comprehensive understanding of the world that surrounds us, to a tool that reinvents and reinterprets it.

As stated in the first paragraph, what is going on between a Valls' painting and a spectator is a sort of alchemical process based on a mirrors game and we do recognize ourselves in front of those mirrors, even though what we see throws us completely or even scares us. It does so, as we look into a window opened for the first time, a widely opened window on the most obscure and puzzling sides of the inner world, unsolved conflicts or psychological wounds. As Fernando Castro Flórez states (2011): "We are unable to escape from the disturbed or upset sight of the figures that Dino Valls paints, these eyes are focused to something that we are yet to understand, as if they expect something from us that we are unable to provide. Their symbolisms constitute allegories of the subconscious, define pulses superficially, allude to the process of transfor-

<sup>6</sup> Authors' translation.



mation, and recapture the meaning of a thought that exceeds the reticulation of the rational”.

This is because: “The relation between the person who looks and what is being contemplated causes archetypes to appear and ends up by establishing an active communication between the work and the receiver, as it is based on the power of projection which the unconscious causes to arise in the person looking. The gaze discovers the painting and this reveals what we only know intuitively: the irrational. It is during our attempt to rationalize it that the conflicts arises, originating in our collective cultural unconsciousness, which scientific research continues to try to unmask” (Guixa, 1993).

In a nutshell, what Valls has established is an unfathomable living museum of the unconscious, and what’s more, he has settled there - “What do you like to do when you aren’t working? - I don’t believe in these moments”. In this gallery, not only he paints pictures, he also *takes* pictures, with his *camera oscura* he brings into focus the pictures of the unconscious, then as an alchemist he, through them, transmutes his unconscious itself, whose pictures are a loyal (magical) mirror.

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