

FROM TIMELESSNESS TO OTHERNESS: THE ARTICULATION OF SYMBOLIC TIME IN JACQUES LACAN'S WORK

Introduction

Among various topics covered by Jacques Lacan's writings, time does not seem to receive adequate attention. After his early paper 'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism', time rarely appears as a central topic in Lacan's writings. When Lacan was increasingly preoccupied with the theorisation of the symbolic order in the 1950s, few commentators make a note of the development of his thinking of time. In fact, Lacan's work in this period has often been referred to support the argument that he was a key member of the French structuralist movement, who paid more attention to system and structure while remained unconcerned with history and time.

Considering the theoretical continuity between Saussure and Lacan in terms of the privileged synchronic characteristic of the linguistic structure, it is understandable to see where this opinion comes from. To Saussure, diachronic changes of a linguistic system can only be understood once a synchronic description of language is provided and functions as 'the solid ground for discussion' (1965 p.73). With regard to the question of how 'the meaning that we attach to the word change', Saussure points to 'a shift in the relationship between the signified and the signifier' (p.75). The relationship itself must remain stable, permanent and even transcendental during the constant historical evolution of various languages, and it is precisely because of the nature of language as 'a system of arbitrary signs and lacks the necessary basis', that the historical changes of linguistic signs can become possible. In other words, diachronic change is rather an

effect of the synchronic structure, which unfolds spatial differences on the temporal axis.

The reduction of the signifier's diachronic movement to its synchronicity can indeed be observed in Lacan's texts. Following Saussure's argument that 'language is a system whose parts can and must all be considered in their synchronic solidarity' (1965: p.87), Lacan maintains that 'the subject proceeds from his synchronic subjection in the field of the Other' (1998: p.188). The synchronic point of view guides Lacan's reformulation of Freudian psychoanalysis. What Lacan finds interesting in Freud's work is the mechanism of word plays in numerous psychic phenomena, from jokes and parapraxes to dreams. Not only can the signification of these phenomena be read through the linguistic structure, but they themselves are structured like language. Language presents a complex network of oppositions that relates one signifier to another at one point in time. The infinite combinations and displacements of signifiers include and predetermine any potentiality, if not actuality, of meaning. By replacing Freud's ideas of condensation and replacement with rhetorical devices such as metaphor and metonymy, Lacan moves away from individual psychology to a study of the symbolic function as the determination of the human order: 'Everything which is human has to be ordained within a universe constituted by the symbolic function' (1988: p. 29). The idea of the 'symbolic universe' suggests some universal and autonomous rules of human society and the human mind, an assumption fundamental to structuralist thoughts.

This being the case, many have pointed out that the overall theoretical edifice of Lacan cannot be confined to a structuralist framework. Bruce Fink suggests that 'while structure plays a very important role in Lacan's work, it is not the whole story, nor was it ever at any point in Lacan's development' (1995: p.64). Not only because chronologically, Lacan in the 1970s became more interested in the Real which lies outside language and resists assimilation by the symbolic structure, but also because Lacan's theory, in general, does not share the strong sense of conformity with structuralism. As Eve Tavor Bannet suggests, if we cease to regard the label 'structuralist' as a description of method, and begin to think of it ideologically, as an intellectual endeavour that defines society as a system that exclusively restricts human action, 'leaving no place for innovation, creativity and non-conformity',

then we must read Lacan as an anti-structuralist or counter-structuralist (1989: pp.3–4). The Lacanian subject, despite being alienated by the symbolic order and determined by the name-of-the-father, retains what Jacques-Alain Miller (2012) calls ‘the ineliminable feature of subjectivity’ that has often been excluded in typical structuralist thinking. Lacan is able to maintain this seemingly paradoxical position by reversing Saussure’s algorithm and putting the signifier over the signified, which not only indicates the primacy of the signifier but also produces an incessant sliding of meaning in the symbolic structure that can never be pinned down to a fixed point. The subject in the symbolic structure is not an entity but a void that lacks substantial existence, a speaking being that does not manifest itself in speech.

However, while presenting the Lacanian subject as lack or absence that keeps the symbolic structure incomplete, these attempts to distance Lacan from structural determinism fail to demonstrate the significance of time in Lacan’s work on the symbolic. Is it possible to speak of time, when the whole symbolic structure constitutes an all-encompassing system, ‘in which the subject, the small circle which is called his destiny, is indeterminately included’ (Lacan 1988: p.98)? Having noticed the seeming superiority of synchronicity over diachronicity, Adrian Johnston questions whether the subject’s interaction with the Symbolic can lead to a genuine temporal experience or the Lacanian model of time is simply a redoubled synchronicity, reaffirming the hegemony of static, spatialised logic (2005: p.43). Slavoj Žižek, in his own manner, arrives at a similar conclusion, as he suggests that Lacan’s theoretical models take the ostensible historical account simply as ‘a temporal projection of the possibilities of variation within the timeless structure itself’ (2006: p.377).

In contrast to both the structuralist and the post-structuralist reading of Lacan, I intend to make an argument in this article that Lacan’s theorisation of the symbolic order does not overlook or intentionally reject time. On the contrary, the deterministic effect of the symbolic upon the subject is made possible by the individual’s subjection to a specific temporal dimension, which I would call “symbolic time”. It is not a time whose duration and variations are altered by one’s subjective experience, but the time of the Other that does not fall into the subject’s grasp while cultivates his desire. In drawing upon relatively underdeveloped

material in Lacan's work, I present this unique temporal dimension as Lacan's original contribution to our understanding of the necessary condition of the subject's symbolic existence.

Is the unconscious timeless?

One major obstacle we confront when trying to introduce time into Lacan's symbolic structure is posed by Freud's idea of the timeless unconscious. Throughout Freud's theoretical development, there was a rich account of different temporal features in relation to a range of psychic phenomena, among which the timelessness of the unconscious plays a central role. If, according to Lacan's famous claim, the unconscious is structured like a language, how can we relate time to the symbolic on the basis of the function of language when the unconscious resists being subordinated to time?

To answer this question, we need to first examine the genesis of the idea of timelessness in Freud's work. As Adrian Johnston suggests, Freud's argument that the unconscious is timeless is a result of a long line of observations and thinking. It is abstracted from a congregation of various psychoanalytic ideas including 'the indestructibility of infantile wishes, the persistence of polymorphously perverse libidinal activities through sublimation, the mechanisms of transference object-choice in neurosis' (2005: p.7). Strachey, in his examination of appearances of the term 'timelessness' throughout Freud's writing, points out that while the idea had already been indirectly alluded to in *The Interpretation of Dreams*,¹ the first explicit reference to it was in a footnote added in 1907 to *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), where Freud made a comment that 'in the case of repressed memory-traces it can be demonstrated that they undergo no alteration even in the course of the longest period of time' (p.274). The timelessness of the unconscious takes the form of psychological fixation which preserves all previous impressions, 'not only in the same form in which they were first received, but also in all the forms which they have adopted in their further developments'. In *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* (1914), Freud continued to elaborate this idea by highlighting how early childhood impressions are the most

¹ Freud makes a claim in this book that 'it is a prominent feature of unconscious processes that they are indestructible. In the unconscious, nothing can be brought to an end, nothing is past or forgotten' (1900: p.577).

valuable memories for psychoanalysis: ‘Not only some but all of what is essential from childhood has been retained in these memories. It is simply a question of knowing how to extract it out of them by analysis’ (p.148). Based on these speculations, timelessness was introduced as an essential characteristic of the system *Ucs.* in Freud’s 1915 metapsychological paper *The Unconscious* (1915):

The processes of the system *Ucs.* are timeless; i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all. Reference to time is bound up, once again, with the work of the system *Cs.*

(Freud 1915: p.187).

According to these statements, it is clear that what Freud had in mind when he talked about ‘timelessness’ is certain representational content (memories, wishes and fantasies) in the unconscious that is unforgettable. In this sense, timelessness equals permanence and immutability. However, understanding timelessness in this way immediately causes tensions with other characteristics of the unconscious. Taking infantile wishes in Freud’s dream theory as an example, if the unconscious consists of infantile wishes as the permanent source of the content of adult dreams, it still needs to be explained how these wishes become unconscious in the first place. According to Freud, the primary process is the dominant unconscious mental activity, in which psychic excitations are able to be discharged instantly without obstruction or delay. ‘An inhibition of the tendency of cathected ideas towards discharge’, as Freud would later indicate, belongs to the secondary process of the system *Pcs.* (1915: p.188). However, how is it possible for the unconscious to be able to preserve unsatisfied wishes during infancy when the *Pcs.* has not yet fully developed? Returning to Freud’s *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), we find that what is supposed to be stored in the unconscious is rather the mnemic image of the object that fulfils the wish, so that when the state of wishing appears, the accompanied unpleasure can be quickly discharged along the perceptual pathway in the form of hallucination (p. 318). It is not the task of the primary process to prevent wishes from fulfilment and thus keep them repressed in the unconscious, yet Freud’s idea of the indestructibility of infantile wishes requires it to do so. As Malcolm Macmillan points out, ‘Freud’s explanations of the

formation of symptoms and of some types of dreams requires the existence of a class of fantasies the theory of the mind says cannot exist. Repressed fantasies cannot exist in the Ucs. and cannot therefore be incorporated into dreams' (1997: p.271).

Secondly, there is a noteworthy inconsistency in Freud's explanation of the mechanism of regression essential to the formation of dreams in adult life. According to Freud, everyday experience in adult life is not strong enough to produce a dream, unless it is connected with the forbidden expression of infantile wishes, and thus 'attracted by the memory into regression as being the form of representation in which the memory itself is couched' (1900: pp.544-45). Therefore, an adult dream is 'a substitute for an infantile scene modified by being transferred on to a recent experience' (p.545). However, Freud does not explain how infantile wishes hold such a determinate power in the timeless unconscious. Adrian Johnston has drawn attention to this problem, as he points out that 'if the unconscious is truly timeless, then it shouldn't be capable of recognizing any chronological differences between the mnemic traces forming its content. This would therefore imply the possibility of nonhierarchized interactions between representations being the paradigm of unconscious processes' (2005: p.136). In this sense, recent adult wishes should be as influential as earlier infantile wishes, both of which deserve equal distribution of wishful impetus from the unconscious. At least the activation of the former should not rely on the energetic displacement from the latter. Even Freud himself admits this problem:

We have learnt, lastly, from numerous analyses that wherever a dream has undergone distortion the wish has arisen from the unconscious and was one which could not be perceived during the day. Thus it seems at a first glance as though all wishes are of equal importance and equal power in dreams. I cannot offer any proof here that the truth is nevertheless otherwise.

(Freud 1900: p.552).

The immanent difficulty to reconcile the idea of timelessness with his theory of the unconscious in general leads Freud to shift his position. Marie Bonaparte suggests that the late Freud 'is prepared to admit that repressed psychic content

undergoes some modification, however unalterable it may appear to our conscious minds' (1940: p.439). For instance, in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933), Freud revisits the idea of timelessness and goes on to suggest that the unconscious contents 'can only be recognised as belonging to the past, can only lose their importance and be deprived of their cathexis of energy, when they have been made conscious by the work of analysis, and it is on this that the therapeutic effect of analytic treatment rests to no small extent' (p.92). If the task of psychoanalysis is to render the unconscious contents conscious by putting it in the temporal sequence of an individual's life, to recognise and reconstruct the forgotten in the present, it must admit the possibility that the unconscious can be altered by the passage of time. For this reason, Charles Hanly argues that 'Freud's attributions of timelessness to unconscious constellations of memory, phantasy and wishful motives are inconsistent with his valid claim that these constellations can be modified by psychoanalysis' (2009: para.24). The assumption that the unconscious is timeless is unjustifiable as it undermines the foundation of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic technique to bring change.²

Having noticed the difficulty to characterise the unconscious in terms of permanent and immutable content, some contemporary readers of Freud come to suggest other ways to understand the idea of timelessness. To Derrida, understanding Freud's opposition between timelessness and time requires a more

² In her book, Kelly Ann Noel-Smith defends the validity of the timeless unconscious by arguing that 'Freud never claims that the cathartic effect of psychotherapy is to change the unconscious' (2016: p.144). She describes a transition in Freud's thinking on this topic, from an ego-centred view in the beginning, which regards the task of psychotherapy as permanent strengthening of the ego, 'either enabling it to firm up its repressive function or to permit what is repressed access to consciousness: that is, either to keep material timeless or to impose temporal order on it' (pp.144-45), to a more pessimistic perspective in the end, which admits the temporariness of the therapeutic effect, due to the strength of the death drive 'that undermines the help afforded by psychoanalysis' (p.146). I find this explanation problematic for two reasons. Firstly, imposing a temporal order on the unconscious is not merely adding a new attribution to a self-contained entity. It altered the content of the unconscious which is related to other conscious memories and subject to meaningful associations. To argue that the unconscious remains intact after being revealed is to deny the subjective reconstruction and resignification of memories which take place at the conscious level. Secondly, the impossibility of permanent change does not mean that any change is impossible. On the contrary, it further indicates that the unconscious is no less temporal than the conscious, both of which defy the idea of permanence and belong to a process of constant transformation.

Careful examination of the context in which the term 'time' is defined:

The timelessness of the unconscious is no doubt determined only in opposition to a common concept of time, a traditional concept, the metaphysical concept, the time of mechanics or the time of consciousness[...]The unconscious is no doubt timeless only from the standpoint of a certain vulgar conception of time.

(Derrida 2005: p.270)

This argument is echoed by Julia Kristeva, who, in her reading of Freud, suggests that Freud's idea of timelessness does not imply non-time, but refers to a 'lost time', a 'time outside time' (Kristeva 2002). Both Derrida and Kristeva reject the absolute absence of time in the Freudian unconscious while maintaining that the time of the unconscious cannot be confused with our everyday concept of time, namely the individual's conscious temporal experience. If the target of Freud's critique is only a form of time that is conscious, linear and chronological, there is no good reason to consider the negation of time as the only alternative.

The Other's voice at the Other's moment

Similar to Derrida and Kristeva, we find in Lacan's work a radical reworking of the relationship between time and the unconscious that does not fall into the naive opposition between chronological time and timelessness, as Lacan actively explores new possibilities of temporal modality. We shall see that in Lacan's interpretation, time of the unconscious is not erased, but articulated as a different temporal dimension separated from inner time consciousness, one that is experienced by the subject as a radical sense of otherness.

In his reading of Freud, Lacan offers an explicit critique of the indestructibility of infantile wishes as the cornerstone of Freud's idea of timelessness. In *Seminar II*, Lacan rejects the idea of regression in any developmental sense. He remarks that 'do we ever see any adult actually regress, return to the state of a small child, start wailing? Regression doesn't exist' (1988: p.103), and 'the idea of the regression of the individual to the initial stage of

his development dominates[...]The entering into play of this notion, which now seems so familiar, is however not a matter of course' (p.147). To Lacan, infantile wishes do not enjoy any particular psychological significance whose distribution is based on chronological order. The unconscious is not defined by the residues of a phase of development when the primary process is the only kind of psychological process, nor shall we merely rely on childhood experience to understand conflicts in the present. If the indestructibility and immutability of infantile wishes are put into question, so is the timelessness of the unconscious. However, how can we interpret the unconscious in the dream after getting rid of the dependence on the distant past? Does it mean that the unconscious is only the sedimentation of the present experience during the day, or does it belong to another temporal dimension beyond the chronological order of conscious time?

Lacan's interpretation of the dream of Irma's injection provides us with an answer. As the first dream presented by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a dream through which the secret of the unconscious is revealed to him, the dream of Irma's injection occupies a crucial position in Freud's theoretical development. However, as Lacan points out, Freud's treatment of this dream does not lead to the conclusion he summarises later in the book, that the indestructible infantile wish is determinant in the dream formation. In his meticulous analysis of this now well-known dream, Freud reveals two wishes - excusing his own responsibility in the unsuccessful treatment of Irma's symptoms and putting the blame on his friend 'Otto' - both of which are merely responses to the waking experience of recent events in Freud's adult life. One may wonder where the unconscious infantile wishes are. If it is so important, how can they be absent in the dream which Freud carefully chooses to demonstrate the technique of dream interpretation?

The question in my view is rather more like this – how is it that Freud, who later on will develop the function of unconscious desire, is here content, for the first step in his demonstration, to present a dream which is entirely explained by the satisfaction of a desire which one cannot but call preconscious, and even entirely conscious?

(Lacan 1988: p.151)

After rejecting the need to regress to infantile wishes to explain this dream, Lacan does not accept the two preconscious wishes as the ultimate meaning of this dream either. In his two consecutive sessions devoted to this topic, Lacan divides the dream of Irma's injection into two parts. In the first part, Freud in the dream maintains an imaginary relationship with Irma by seeing his wife and another ideal patient behind her image. This part ends when he gets Irma to open her mouth, where a horrendous scene appears, 'that of the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things, the other side of the head, of the face, the secretory glands par excellence' (p.154). To Lacan, this horrendous picture designates the subject's encounter with the Real, and 'the experience of his being torn apart, of his isolation in relation to the world has been attained' (p.167).

If this traumatic moment in the dream marks the disintegration of the ego as a loose aggregation of a series of imaginary identification, then the theme of the second part of the dream can be interpreted as symbolic reorganisation. After Freud's ego being decomposed into imaginary figures of three doctors, all of whom desperately try to explain the scene and thus to symbolise the Real, the dream reaches another emotional peak, when a mysterious word presents to the subject: *trimethylamine*. This, in Lacan's word, 'explains everything.' In Freud's original account, a series of associations are produced in relation to this word. However, to Lacan, the significance of this word does not come from what it may signify, be it the mystic trio (three women, three doctors) or certain sexual content (trimethylamine as a decomposition product of sperm). Instead, it is derived precisely from a lack of meaning. It is the pure gesture of pronunciation that introduces the discourse of the Other into play, 'discourse as such, independently of its meaning, since it is a senseless discourse' (p.170). *Trimethylamine* appears in the dream as a signifier without a signified that represents the subject, whose lack of being is revealed through its encounter with the Real. Substituting the 'I of the subject' with the 'N of the trimethylamine formula', the subject in the dream regains a sense of self not by imaginary attachment but by symbolic fixation in the discourse of the Other, in a way to recognise oneself as defined by the signifier. In this sense, the dream of Irma's injection does not reveal a personal secret but expresses the fundamental truth of psychoanalysis regarding the constitution of the subject.

Lacan's interpretation of Irma's injection offers an insight into his understanding of the relation between time and the unconscious. The unconscious meaning of the dream is far more complicated than a narrowed range of infantile wishes, and far more dynamic than a limited number of messages with unchanging contents. To understand the unconscious necessarily means to locate the subject in the symbolic order and to find the signifier through which he speaks. The word *trimethylamine* in Freud's dream can be seen as an 'enigmatic signifier' in Laplanche's terminology that comes from the Other. However, different from Laplanche's approach, I argue that the encounter with the signifier does not take place in the inner time consciousness. A linear narrative cannot be provided in which an enigmatic signifier was received in one's early childhood and then revives in one's adult life, calling for reinterpretation and retranslation.³ On the contrary, nothing in the subject's life-history makes a particular signifier such as *trimethylamine* a certainty to come in the present, neither does the subject come across this signifier purely by accident. This signifier rather belongs to a temporal register independent of the subject's existence and experience, produced through the autonomous mechanism of symbolic substitution and condensation, and spoken in a voice that is 'nothing more than the voice of no one', 'which speaks in me, beyond me' (1988: pp.170-171).

The game Freud mentions at the end of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* further clarifies this point. In this game, the subject is invited to say numbers at random. In the following association, these numbers turn out to be not random at all but contain significance unique to the subject. In Lacan's reading, the reason why 'what he chose goes well beyond anything we might expect from pure chance' is not that these numbers were acquired in the past and repressed in memory, or that these numbers were articulated by the subject unconsciously

³ The problem of Laplanche's theory of *après-coup* is that although it intends to go beyond the either-or choice between two temporal directions in the traditional understanding of time – a determinist one that proceeds from the past to the future and a retrospective or hermeneutic one that proceeds from the present to the past – by introducing the unconscious of the other, so that the dilemma of the primal scene between reality and fantasy can be solved by the idea of 'enigmatic signifier', it is still dominated by a unified and singular temporal dimension that is both subjective and conscious. To place the enigmatic signifier in one's childhood means that the individual only reaches the unconscious in a closed temporal circle consisting of his 'own past' and 'own present'. The problem of the temporal hierarchy which always prioritises the past remains to be solved.

and one's following association is simply a rediscovery of what one has already known. On the contrary, Lacan argues that these mathematical combinations are counted by the symbolic machine. The subject pronounces numbers as the production of a temporal process to which he himself does not belong: 'Chance doesn't exist. While the subject doesn't think about it, the symbols continue to mount one another, to copulate, to proliferate, to fertilise each other, to jump on each other, to tear each other apart' (1988: p.185). The individual's association is not a kind of reminiscence directed towards his own past, but a genuine exploration that introduces him into the discourse of the Other and provides meaning which he has never sensed before. In this sense, an encounter with the signifier from the Other is always an encounter with the time of the Other. The history of the signifier is not 'my past' in which the signifier is acquired, remembered and utilised, but an unknown process of becoming in the Other that will only unfold to me in the future.

Symbolic order and cybernetics

By replacing the repressed messages left in the individual's own past with the unknown signifier emerging from the operation of the symbolic order, Lacan's reinterpretation of the unconscious opens up a different temporal dimension which externally determines the subject's psychical life. In order to understand this temporal movement in which a thinking subject is absent, Lacan has to find another theoretical inspiration other than Saussurean linguistics.

Alongside various assertions of static, synchronic characteristics of the symbolic structure, Lacan, throughout his seminars, also insists on the existence of another side of the symbolic structure that is intrinsically temporal. For example, in *Seminar VI*, Lacan speaks of language not as the fixation of the momentary appearance of things, but as the very creation of time:

At a time when the whole of philosophy is engaged in articulating what it is that links time to being...It is quite simple to see that time, in its very constitution, past-present-future, refers itself to the act of the word – and to nothing else.

It is strictly impossible for us to conceive of a temporality in an animal dimension, namely in a dimension of appetite. The abc of temporality requires even the structure of language.

(Lacan 1959: p.254).

Further on, in *Seminar XI*, Lacan relates time to the unconscious by claiming that ‘we are beginning to circumscribe the unconscious in a structure, a temporal structure’ (1998: p.32) and ‘I speak to you of the unconscious as of that which appears in the temporal pulsation’ (p.143). These statements show a complexity of Lacan’s symbolic order, which cannot be easily accommodated within the synchronic structure of the Saussurean model. Instead of reducing them to another linguistic effect that produces the illusion of time, I suggest that these statements make sense if we pay attention to another theoretical resource underlying Lacan’s construction of the symbolic order. In the 1950s, what Lacan appropriated as new epistemological approaches to reinterpreting the Freudian unconscious and thus reinventing psychoanalysis include not only Saussurean linguistics and Lévi-Strauss’s anthropology, but also cybernetic theory, to which Lacan devotes a large proportion of the discussion in his early seminars. While the former two are more concerned with the synchronic structure, cybernetic theory, as Lacan explains in *Seminar II*, ‘was born very straightforwardly from the work of engineers concerned with the economics of information passing through conductors’ (1988: p.296). It is dedicated to the study of data transmission and feedback that highlight the importance of time. More importantly, this temporal dimension offered by cybernetics is inaccessible through the lens of Saussurean linguistics. To Saussure, to think time or diachronic change of language necessarily means a transition from *la langue* to *la parole*, from a study of the language itself ‘which is social in its essence and independent of the individual’ to a study of the individual part of language. As he writes in the *Course*:

If we considered language in time, without the community of speakers[...]we probably would notice no change; time would not influence language. Conversely, if we considered the community of speakers without considering time, we would not see the effect of the social forces that influence language.

(Saussure 1965: p.78)

While ‘language is not a function of the speaking subject’ (p.14), speech, for Saussure, certainly is. This opposition of language to speech clearly designates language users as the subject that sets the historical changes of language in motion. In other words, the time of language only appears in interpersonal communication where meaning is generated by humans. However, in making this distinction, Saussure’s theory seems to return to a notion of ‘consciousness’ as the metaphysical presupposition of time, a consciousness capable of receiving and transmitting signs and meanings that logically precedes the time in which differences between signifiers are realised. If the human being is the only agent that can change the potentiality of time embedded in the synchronic differences within a linguistic system into actuality, it means, as Derrida points out, that ‘difference [which] has been derived, has happened, is to be mastered and governed on the basis of the point of a present being[...]this present being, for example, a being present to itself, as consciousness, eventually would come to defer or to differ’ (1982: p.15).

The characterisation of consciousness as the determination of temporal experience clearly contradicts the fundamental viewpoint of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which persistently enhances the idea of a decentred subject that inscribes itself within the symbolic order. To Lacan, ‘what’s involved is knowing what time is involved’ (1988: p.286). The historicity of language is not defined by the time of language users. Instead, language has its own time and to use language is to ‘introduce ourselves into the temporal succession’. What Lacan learns from cybernetics pushes him further in this direction. In *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, a book written by Norbert Wiener, the originator of cybernetics to whom Lacan frequently refers in his seminars, we find a different description of language which not only exists independently, as Saussure argues, but can also function independently without human involvement:

Language is not exclusively an attribute of living beings but one which they may share to a certain degree with the machines man has constructed.[...]We ordinarily think of communication and language as being directed from person to person. However, it is quite possible for a person to talk to

a machine, a machine to a person, and a machine to a machine.

(Wiener 1989: p.76)

The human being does not exist as a stable entity prior to the symbolic order, nor is he in control of the symbolic machinery that automatically functions. Opposing the argument that the human subject is the only speaking being that manifests itself as an unconditional self-presence, this anti-humanist point of view makes cybernetics ‘one of the principal destabilizing instruments of the anthropocentric conception of man’ (Dupuy 2009: p.109).

It is easy to imagine how Lacan was impressed by Wiener’s assertions that would have likely led him towards the conclusion that ‘cybernetics also stems from a reaction of astonishment at rediscovering that this human language works almost by itself, seemingly to outwit us’ (1988: p.19). If Saussurean linguistics provides a theoretical framework for Lacan to investigate the systematicity of the symbolic order, and Lévi-Strauss’s anthropology demonstrates how fundamental symbolic relations are set up, then cybernetics can be regarded as the only science utilised by Lacan that illustrates the autonomy of the symbolic process. It is the new theoretical foundation upon which Lacan is able to continue the work of the decentralisation of the ego after Freud. By recognising the existence of the machine that transmits messages according to its own algebraic laws, Lacan is able to move away from a traditional binary distinction between atemporal, impersonal language and temporal, subjective speech. It is the starting point for him to articulate symbolic time that transcends human consciousness.

Time of the machine

In cybernetics, what interests Lacan most is the cybernetic idea of the machine. The machine has long been a fascinating topic in Western philosophy, particularly since the eighteenth century, when the industrial revolution initiated rapid development of labour-saving machinery that would eventually change the landscape of social life. The steam engine that ushered in the industrial age became a key object of contemplation for theorists who popularised the idea of mechanism that explains human behaviour in terms of an outside or internal motor force.

However, in the 1950s when Lacan started his seminars, he had observed that ‘there is a mutation taking place in the function of the machine, which is leaving all those who are still bent on criticising the old mechanism miles behind’ (1988: p.32). The first electronic computers were constructed in the years just preceding Lacan’s seminar. These symbol-processing machines, which ‘automated the ‘laws of thought’ in a series of logical and combinatorial operations’ (Johnston 2008: p.71), radically redefined what the idea of the machine could offer for philosophical thinking. We can observe that Lacan’s theoretical development throughout *Seminar II* is, in fact, a transition from an old mechanical model based on the energy-driven machine to a new one based on the information machine. In the first half of the book where the body and the Real are concerned, Lacan develops but does not go beyond the Freudian machine, which uses the steam engine as a template to construct a theory of energetics; however, in the second half, preoccupied with Poe’s *The Purloined Letter* and in particular with the game of even and odd in the story, Lacan attributes the cybernetic machine a central role in the mobilisation of the symbolic order.

In the fifteenth chapter of *Seminar II*, Lacan dedicates the whole seminar to the discussion of the cybernetic machine. It is no coincidence that Lacan makes this move just after he finishes the reinterpretation of the dream of Irma’s injection, which, as we have examined in the previous section, ends with a symbol that is devoid of meaning but nevertheless represents the subject. Such a conclusion opens rather than closes the question about what constitutes the being of the subject. Therefore, in the following seminar, in order to make fully comprehensible his claim that cybernetics is something ‘which concerns us in the highest degree’ (1988: p.175), Lacan turns to the game of even and odd which appears in Poe’s story as an anecdote. It is a simple game in which one puts two or three marbles in his hand and lets the other guess whether the number is odd or even. In the original account, the detective Dupin talks about a brilliant boy he knows that always wins the game by ‘mere observation and measurement of the astuteness of his opponents’: a simpleton keeps changing the number of marbles every time he loses, while a smart one chooses the same number for the next round. By ‘making himself other, and to end up thinking that the other, being himself an other, thinks like him, and that he has to place himself in the position of a third party, to get out of being this other who is his pure

reflection' (p.180), the boy is able to beat his opponent. However, in his seminar, Lacan points out some problems in this strategy. Since the boy can only recognise the opponent as either naive or smart, it will be difficult for him to play against 'someone of superior intelligence [who] can in fact understand that trick', whose play-style does not fall into the prefigured scripts. After criticising the boy's strategy to play the game of even and odd on the level of the dual relation, 'of the equivalence of one and the other, of the alter ego and the ego' (p.181), Lacan asks the audience to think beyond imaginary intersubjectivity, considering a game played not between two persons, but between a person and a machine, which will allow the emergence of the symbolic function.

What is it like to play with a machine? As Lacan suggests, because of the complexity of the mechanic articulation which makes it impossible for the subject to identify with, the game of odd and even is no longer a psychological game but a symbolic game based on probability and chance. What the subject addresses is the symbol and his chances 'bear only on the symbol' (p.182). The process in which the machine automatically generates seemingly random numbers for the subject bears a resemblance to the operation of the symbolic order, whose secrets remain inaccessible to human intelligence. The machine does not require the intervention of a thinking subject to produce an infinite sequence of numeric combinations, yet Lacan also points out that 'there are the temporal breaks which we make in it (the machine)' (p.284) that produce signification for us. The subject comes to find himself being determined in this symbolic process over which he has no control. What produces the effect of symbolic subjectivisation is precisely 'the temporal element, the intervention of a scansion permitting the insertion of something which can take on meaning for a subject' (p.285). To illustrate this point, Lacan asks his audience to imagine a case in which a player surprisingly wins multiple times against the machine. If we examine each round separately, his chance of winning is always fifty percent; however, on the symbolic level, his chance of continuing to win the next round actually decreases. As Lacan summarises:

Anything from the real can always come out. But once the symbolic chain is constituted, as soon as you introduce a

certain significant unity, in the form of unities of succession, what comes out can no longer be anything.

(Lacan 1988: p.193)

Chance exists in the Real but doesn't exist in the Symbolic, where an isolated signifier is always oriented towards a certain direction in the temporal succession of signifying substitution and displacement. What appears random often turns out to be determined when the whole cybernetic circuit of signifiers are taken into consideration. As Lacan points out: 'Since there is a temporal succession, things are oriented, and it is evidently not the same if there is first 2 then 1, or 1 then 2' (p.269). John Johnston gives a succinct explanation of this point: 'The very recording of random events gives rise to a rudimentary form of order, since it allows the formation of units and hence the emergence of a syntax governing their possible sequences of succession' (2008: p.76). Lacan gets this idea from the practice of psychoanalysis. Although the patient on the couch is encouraged to freely associate, the more his thoughts get as close as possible to chance, the more evident it becomes that his speech is not free at all but somehow determined. In this sense, Lacan's symbolic order is not a spectrum of signifiers that is open to the play of differences and thus becomes subject to multiple interpretations. On the contrary, as Lacan mentions in *Seminar IV*: 'It is evidently not the same if there is first 2 then I, or 1 then 2' (1957: p.269), the symbolic order is always a temporal order that sets itself in motion and restricts the ways in which differences can be distributed and meaning can be derived.

Lacan's analysis of the game of even and odd sets the tone of his reading of Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. Although Lacan's delineation of a triadic structure within Poe's text has now become classic, the primary focus of his analysis is not the structure as such but the temporal movement of the subject from one symbolic position to another, the very concrete way in which symbolic time intervenes in human reality. This point is made clear at the beginning of his seminar:

This is why I have decided to illustrate for you today a truth which may be drawn from the moment in Freud's thought we have been studying – namely, that it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject – by demonstrating in a

story the major determination the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier.

(Lacan 2006: p.7)

As is well-known, Lacan abstracts from Poe's story 'three moments, ordering three glances, sustained by three subjects, incarnated in each case by different people' (p.10). These three subject positions are organised around a letter received by the Queen, whose content remains mysterious throughout the whole story. In the first scene, the King sees nothing; the Queen sees that he doesn't see and thus believes the letter to be covered; the Minister sees what the Queen is hiding and takes advantage of it. However, in the second scene, the possession of the letter puts the Minister in the Queen's position. The way he conceals the letter by leaving it uncovered fools the police but not Dupin, who uses the same strategy the Minister used against the Queen to retrieve the letter.

This particular letter in the story, therefore, functions as a signifying mark around which three subjects constantly change their positions while maintain the balance of power. Lacan summarises the relation between the letter and the subject as such: 'When the characters get a hold of this letter, something gets a hold of them and carries them along and this something clearly has dominion over their individual idiosyncracies' (1988: p.196). Each subject shows a certain degree of blindness regarding the symbolic chain that orients them. Even Dupin himself, who uses the anecdote of the game of even and odd as a metaphor to demonstrate his capability of thinking what the Minister is thinking, cannot help but leave a vicious message to the latter at the last moment and thus becomes 'a participant in the intersubjective triad, as such, finds himself in the median position previously occupied by the Queen and the Minister' (2006: p.27). By demonstrating how the itinerary of a letter is always accompanied by the displacement of subject positions in a temporal sequence, Lacan's seminar on "The Purloined Letter" testifies the significance of symbolic time in organising one's life trajectory.

To conclude, the aim of this article was to introduce a unique temporal dimension fundamental to Lacan's work on the symbolic order. I started with Lacan's critique of the idea of the

timeless unconscious in Freudian psychoanalysis. The content of the unconscious is not the exception to temporal movement and change. Instead, it is a sequence of signifiers dynamically generated in the symbolic order. In its own time, the unconscious conveys the message from the Other, which is radically foreign to the human experience but somehow touches the very essence of subjective existence. Drawing on cybernetic theory, I further explain this temporal dimension in terms of the time of the machine. The Lacanian symbolic order is not a static structure governed by the principle of synchronicity. It is rather a symbol-processing computer, whose autonomous function initiates the movement of the signifying chain in which the subject is caught up. As such, symbolic time is experienced as a radical sense of otherness, something that cannot be easily integrated into the subjective syntheses of past, present and future. If the subject responds to the enigmatic presence of the Other with the question “*Che vuoi?*” (“What do you want?”), the process of subject formation must be driven by the same desire to know what time I am living in. While we often take our inner time consciousness as the anchoring point that produces a sense of self-coherence, it is actually the unfolding of symbolic time in relation to symbolic processes and with respect to the Other that exercises a direct influence on our existential condition.

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