TWO SYMBOLIC READINGS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS: BETWEEN MERLEAU-PONTY AND LACAN

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From the very beginning of psychoanalysis and phenomenology, the concept of the unconscious has been an important object of investigation. This is obvious for psychoanalysts. As Laplanche and Pontalis state, 'If Freud's discovery had to be summed up in a single word, that word would without doubt have to be "unconscious"' (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 474). The concept of the unconscious is the basis on which new techniques for the treatment of hysteria can be proposed and different topographical theories of the mind can be constructed, without which the theoretical edifice of psychoanalysis would be unimaginable. In the field of phenomenology, on the other hand, the significance of the unconscious is less self-evident. For a long time, Husserl's phenomenology has been generally regarded as a philosophy of consciousness and a philosophy of reflection, which seems to leave no room for something that remains foreign to our conscious process. But in fact, the unconscious is not absent from Husserl's work. In various texts from different periods, Husserl explicitly speaks of 'unconscious intentionality' and 'unconscious consciousness' (Husserl 1970: 237). More importantly, there are sufficient reasons for phenomenology to examine the unconscious: when phenomenologists try to explore the structure of intentionality through reduction at the level of consciousness, there are always phenomena — birth, death, the earliest infantile states, dreamless sleep and syncope, where consciousness is suspended or abrogated for various reasons — which stay at the edge of what the phenomenological method of research can reach. For Husserl, these so-called limit phenomena are not residues to be discarded, but rather the sunken thoughts, feelings and volitions of the mind, the zero level of consciousness. 'If lived-experiences - for example in the specific form of cogito - sink down into inactuality, in a certain sense the pure Ego also sinks down into inactuality' (Husserl 1952: 106). Only by understanding these states where the givenness of the self is interrupted, disturbed and suspended, can the historical consistency of being be maintained.

In the subsequent development of psychoanalysis and phenomenology, the concept of the unconscious continues to be explored in different ways. Although what Freud and Husserl have said about the unconscious hardly resonate with each other — directions of their investigation are different and communication between them on this topic is non-existent — in the work of Lacan and Merleau-Ponty, the psychoanalytic and phenomenological reading of the unconscious reach a rare point of convergence. In the 1950s, both Lacan and Merleau-Ponty reconstructed the concept of the unconscious on a symbolic level under the influence of Saussurean linguistics, and both commented directly on each other's work regarding the understanding of this concept. This rare interdisciplinary dialogue not only provides an entry point for us to observe the development of two lines of thinking, but also offers new answers to questions of intersubjectivity that are of general interest to us today. In this paper, I will first examine the symbolic turn in Merleau-Ponty's theory of the unconscious, with a focus on the concept of the symbolic matrix which he proposes. I will then introduce Lacan's theory in the same period to compare these two symbolic reading of the unconscious and explicate the theoretical value of their engagement.

1. The symbolic turn of Merleau-Ponty's unconscious

The concept of the unconscious plays an important role in Merleau-Ponty's theory. From his earliest work, *The Structure of the Behavior*, to his unfinished posthumous work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty returned again and again to the question of the unconscious, drawing on it to discuss the nature and meaning of subjective life within the framework of human experience. Each time, Merleau-Ponty reorganises a new layer of the unconscious on the basis of previous theorisation. Unlike Husserl who encounters unconscious processes, ideas and phenomena through a purely phenomenological investigation of intentional experience, Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the unconscious is mindful of existing work on the same topic in the field of psychoanalysis. It is by analysing and commenting on the meaning given to the concept by Freud's psychoanalytic theory that the unique characteristics of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the same concept are made visible.

At the beginning of his work *The Structure of the Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty states, 'Our aim is to understand the relationship of consciousness and nature: organic, psychological or even social' (Merleau-Ponty 1983: 3). The activity of consciousness is traditionally confined to the subjective side, where nature is presented to consciousness as an object of the subject's

awareness, but consciousness itself cannot enter nature beyond the realm of the mind. Merleau-Ponty argues that this here-and-now consciousness only reveals phenomena that occur within and beyond us for the subject of existence through perception, but cannot explain actions that extend outwards from the subject with the aim to transform reality, so much so that the content of consciousness and the consciousness of action, which is also rooted in the subject's being, can only maintain a relationship of externality. To address this epistemological limitation,

> it would have been necessary first of all to stop defining consciousness by knowledge of self and to introduce the notion of a life of consciousness which goes beyond its explicit knowledge of itself. But something further would also have been necessary: to describe the structures of action and knowledge in which consciousness is engaged, instead of leaving this life of consciousness indeterminate and being content with the 'concrete in generals'.
>
> Merleau-Ponty 1983: 164

Conscious life draws the transcendental 'I think' in the Cartesian sense back into the living and moving body. This is not only a breakthrough in the phenomenological tradition,[1] but also constitutes a challenge to Freud's theory of the unconscious.

For Merleau-Ponty, the energetic system of Freudian metapsychology is based on an outdated biological model that reduces bodily activity to a reflex in response to stimuli. Such a body is akin to a piano keyboard, 'an apparatus which permits the production of innumerable melodies, all different from each other depending on the order and the cadence of the impulses received' (Merleau-Ponty 1983: 12). Yet the body as consciousness not only passively receives, it can also actively respond. The physical act originated from the body and the conscious act originated from the mind together form the basic structure of the subjective orientation towards the world. On this basis, Merleau-Ponty does not share Freud's definition of the unconscious as the product of repressed instinctual impulses. Freud describes various defence mechanisms

[1] O'Connor argues that this view of Merleau-Ponty is a rejection of Husserl's theoretical approach to explaining the unconscious in terms of a passive synthesis. For Husserl, passivity allows the unconscious to be presented to consciousness without being reduced to self-constitutive activity. For this reason the unconscious must remain simply being, non-intentional and non-producing knowledge. But if consciousness as body-consciousness always already encompasses intentional acts that are not perceived by the psyche, then it is somewhat superfluous to consider the latter as unconscious. Tony O'Connor, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of the Unconscious', *Research in Phenomenology* 10 (1980), 77–88.

between the unconscious and the ego: compromise formation, repression, regression, denial, displacement, compensation and sublimation. But can we understand these mechanisms only through a psycho-causal theory, or is it possible to explain them using a different language? According to Merleau-Ponty, the development of the individual 'is not a fixation of instinctive forces on a given external object, but a gradual and intermittent structuring of behaviour' (Merleau-Ponty 1983: 177). In the process of structuring, the subject develops a new understanding of his previous behaviour, and the attitudes of the child no longer have a place or meaning in the new adult attitudes. The unconscious is not mysterious, but merely an unintegrated conception of behaviour. Rather than using energy to explain the repression that produces the unconscious, we should see it as an integration that 'has been achieved only in appearance and leaves certain relatively isolated systems subsisting in behavior which the subject refuses both to transform and to assume' (Merleau-Ponty 1983: 177). In so doing, Merleau-Ponty replaces Freud's metaphor of energy with a metaphor of structure. In the new framework the unconscious loses its ontological privilege.

> What is called unconsciousness is only an inapperceived signification: it may happen that we ourselves do not grasp the true meaning of our life, not because an unconscious personality is deep within us and governs our actions, but because we understand our lived states only through an idea which is not adequate for them.
>
> Merleau-Ponty 1983: 221

We can observe that Merleau-Ponty in his early stage already made a tentative connection between the unconscious and the symbolic. By distancing himself from Freud's energy model, Merleau-Ponty saw the unconscious as another unrealised meaning. At this stage, however, the realisation of meaning is not directly linked to linguistic symbols, as Merleau-Ponty continued to follow Husserl's path of thinking in terms of the perception of conscious experience, which led him in his subsequent *Phenomenology of Perception* to understand the unconscious as a background consciousness alongside perceptual consciousness, a pre-reflective, experienced and ambiguous consciousness. In contrast to Freud's view of the unconscious as the result of repression, Merleau-Ponty here sees ambiguous consciousness as the response of the embodied subject after encountering the multifaceted nature of the world. Many seemingly incomprehensible acts of the subject are not due to the existence of unconscious tendencies that are deeply hidden within, but to the fact that we are constantly overloaded with information

coming from many relatively closed worlds and situations. ‘We are surrounded and cannot be transparent to ourselves, so that our contact with ourselves is necessarily achieved only in the sphere of ambiguity’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 444).

For Merleau-Ponty, the psychoanalytic definition of the unconscious from an instinctual perspective leads to a flawed theory of sexuality. When Freudian psychoanalysis takes sexuality as central to the unconscious and thus determining all human behaviour, is it arguing that all existence has a sexual significance, or that every sexual phenomenon is a reflection of the meaning of existence? If the former is true, existence is reduced to sexual life, whose monopoly does not cover a full sense of being in the world; if the latter is being suggested, sexuality is confined to what has already been given, losing its ability to radically alter the subject's existential situation as an action. The dilemma of psychoanalysis is that it still assumes an external relation between existence and sexuality, in the same way that Freud insisted on the opposition between the unconscious and the conscious. Sexuality is either seen as an eternal drive that transcends human life, or as an unconscious representation buried deep within the individual psyche. This assumption prevents psychoanalysis from gaining insight into the true meaning of sexuality as an embodied way to live this or that world.

Merleau-Ponty uses a psychoanalytic case to illustrate this point. ‘A girl whose mother has forbidden her to see again the young man with whom she is in love, cannot sleep, loses her appetite and finally the use of speech’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 185-86). This aphasia occurred before during her childhood, once after an earthquake and again after a serious fight. A strictly Freudian reading would suggest that the young girl is trapped at the oral stage of sexual development. Sexual instincts that demand release through the mouth as an erogenous zone was first repressed, and then took every opportunity to break out after every traumatic events (earthquake, fight, mother's prohibition) and achieve expression in the form of symptoms. But for Merleau-Ponty, these symptoms are not a surplus element that directs us to the underlying sexual meaning; they constitute a way of living as a sexual subject. Considering how the mouth as a bodily organ is closely bounded with the act of speaking and, more generally, co-existence with other subjects via speech, we may interpret the young girl's aphasia as a rejection of the scene of being together with the other (the mother). Her lack of appetite symbolises her refusal to swallow the prohibition imposed on her by the other. While the mother's prohibition of her relationship with her lover shuts off the future from the subject, the subject's symptoms

represent a direct response from the body, an intention to escape from the present, and ‘a break with relational life within the family circle’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 186).

Merleau-Ponty points out that the body's expression of the modalities of existence cannot be equated with the indication of a house by a house-number. ‘The sign here does not only convey its significance, it is filled with it’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 186). In the case of the young girl, what we are witnessing is not the drama of the unconscious hidden deep within the subject and acting out on the stage of her body, still less the classic psychoanalytic dichotomy of the unconscious knowing and the conscious not knowing. It is rather a form of self-deception due to the impossibility of subjective experience to ‘separate what he really feels or thinks and what he overtly expresses’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 187). The subject's symptoms are themselves already a choice of existence: the subject chooses to reject the future, to reject the other, and to refuse to exist in such a world. Merleau-Ponty believes that the embodied subject as a sexual being has the capacity to withdraw from this world, but this does not mean that he holds a pessimistic view of the destination of subjectivity. A psychic retreat by choice can also prepare the subject for the next moment of opening up. ‘The momentum of existence towards others, towards the future, towards the world can be restored as a river unfreezes’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 191). In order to help the young girl regain the ability to speak, Merleau-Ponty believes that rather than depending on the intellectual work to explain the unconscious secrets she failed to realise, the key is to transform her entire body from a closed posture to a genuine gesture of opening once more to the way of co-existing with others.

In his reading of this case, Merleau-Ponty implicitly points out that the unconscious needs to be understood in a relationship between the subject and others. The central idea articulated by Merleau-Ponty — that sex is the indeterminacy of being — can only be fully presented in the encounter of one subject and another subject. The dialectic of sexuality as being is essentially a dialectic of the historicisation of social relations, ‘the tending of an existence towards another existence which denies it, and yet without which it is not sustained’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 194). If one's sexual history provides a key to one's subjective life, it is because in his sexuality lies the projection of his manner of being ‘towards the world, that is, towards time and other men’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 183). Yet to deepen this understanding at the level of intersubjectivity, Merleau-Ponty needs new theoretical tools. In *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty begins to reflect on the question of how language constitutes

meaning. The traditional view is that the individual psyche already contains meaningful thoughts in a developed form, which are then expressed through words. For Merleau-Ponty, however, the pre-linguistic subject possesses nothing more than a vague pressure of expression that demands the fulfillment of meaning. To speak is to take up a position 'in the world of his meanings' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 225), the latter of which is not constituted by the subject himself but the result of historical and social construction. The production of meaning, therefore, depends on how the linguistic system, with its myriad possibilities, shapes the expressive gestures of an embodied subject. Saussure's linguistics began to influence Merleau-Ponty's thinking at this stage (Phillips 2017). The distinction between the signifier and the signified demonstrates the reciprocal implication between the physical form of a sign and its mental image, which further supports Merleau-Ponty's belief that meaning needs to be carried by the word. In addition, since the meaning of each linguistic sign is defined in terms of its difference from other signs, the notion that language serves as a translation of pre-existing thoughts needs to be abandoned. Instead, a speaking subject shall embrace the possibility of new ideas constantly emerging from the unfolding of words in discourses whose proliferation is caused by difference. The symbolic paradigm constituted by the intersubjective exchange becomes the structural mechanism upon which the relationship between subject and world should be understood. This point underpins Merleau-Ponty's critique of theories of linguistic representation and also paves the way for his subsequent new understanding of the unconscious.

2. Symbolic matrix

In 1952, Merleau-Ponty was appointed professor at the Collège de France. Two years later, in a course on the subject of 'the problem of passivity: sleep, the unconscious, memory', he discussed Freudian psychoanalysis in detail and introduced a new dimension of the unconscious. In this period Merleau-Ponty's focus shifted from the perception of the embodied subject to the relationship between the unconscious and language, symbols and the generation of differences in the intersubjective sphere, as he moved away from the attempt at replacing the Freudian unconscious with ambiguous consciousness in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In the analysis of dreams, for example, many commentators have argued that Freud introduced the unconscious as the second subject of thought, whose products seem to be available only to consciousness as the first subject of thought. This means that the concept of the unconscious takes us back to the hegemony of consciousness — which determines what is acceptable and

whether the subject is able to get access to the repressed — while the unconscious becomes a special case of self-deception. But Merleau-Ponty argues that we have overlooked Freud's most significant contribution: not the idea of a second 'I think' which knows what we do not know, 'but the idea of a symbolism which is primordial, originary, of a "non-conventional thought" (Politzer) enclosed in a "world for us," responsible for the dream and, more generally, the elaboration of our life' (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 207).

In his seminar between 1954 and 1955, Merleau-Ponty introduced the concept of the symbolic matrix, which represents the paradigm of meaning formed by the symbolic sedimentation of intersubjective interaction. For the subject, the symbolic matrix is expressed as a historical influence on the present, but this history does not limit the expression of subjectivity. The symbolic matrix is not determined by particular historical events (e.g. Childhood sexual abuse as postulated by Freud's early seduction theory), by trajectories of the instinctual movement (e.g. Oral or anal fixations), or by transcendental psychological complexes (e.g. The Oedipus complex). Rather, it is an accumulation of symbolic differentiation between different bodies, different characters and different relationships, and the gaps between symbols can only be filled through the subsequent unfolding of a new subjective perspective. The symbolic matrix as a past constructs a realm in which the subject can plan, express and find new meanings. The result is the openness of a field and a future, 'and from this result we have the possibility of a common adventure and of a history as consciousness' (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 13).

The symbolic matrix represents Merleau-Ponty's new understanding of the unconscious, an understanding that is fully demonstrated in his reinterpretation of two Freudian cases. The first is the dream told by Frau B, which appears in the appendix to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and is the only dream Freud recorded that was prophetic in nature. Frau B told Freud that one night she dreamt that she met Dr. K in front of a shop, an event that actually happened the next morning when she was walking along the same street. After talking to her, Freud established the fact that Frau B's recollection of the dream did not take place when she woke up that morning, but only after the encounter with Dr. K. Frau B further explained to Freud her relationship with Dr. K twenty-five years ago, Frau B, who had just been widowed, was giving music lessons to make ends meet. Dr. K (K1) was her family doctor at the time and provided a lot of help. Meanwhile, she had a secret love affair with another Dr. K (K2), a barrister who took care of her husband's ruined business. She recalled a real occurrence dating from this

unhappy period of her life: she was alone at home and passionately longing for her lover the barrister, when at that very moment he came to visit her. Twenty-five years later, having just lost her second husband, Frau B's affection towards K2 did not diminish, which, according to Freud, is the driving force for the formation of that prophetic dream. In Freud's view, Freu. K's real dream was a rendezvous with K2. That actual encounter twenty-five years ago 'may have been the real content of her dream and the only basis for her belief that it could be realised' (Freud *SE* IV 1900: 624). However, the scene that Frau B dreamed of expressed wishes that her consciousness could not accept for practical reasons, which led to the repression of latent dream thoughts. Only after an encounter with K1 during the day was her dream able to reappear in a distorted form, in which K2 was replaced by K1 through the mechanism of displacement. Freud's interpretation of this case reaffirms his argument that the creation of a dream involves censorship as a defense mechanism, 'thanks to which the dream is able to make its way through into consciousness' (Freud *SE* IV 1900: 625).

For Merleau-Ponty, Freud's reading sets up a dichotomy between the unconscious truth (i.e. The desire to meet K2) and the conscious deception (i.e. The belief that she dreamed of an encounter with K1), the latter is produced only to cover up the former. But he proposes that we can interpret this case in another way: there was no deception taking place throughout the process described by Frau B. After the encounter with K2, she indeed produced a recollection of the dream of her encounter with him, who was not produced as a screen figure or cover behind which a hidden desire can be discovered. Merleau-Ponty points out that Freud's reading gives Frau B less access to the truth than necessary (in Freud's view, Frau B does not know in her conscious mind that K1 is in fact a substitute for K2. The truth can only be discovered in the unconscious once the displacement mechanism is identified through analysis) and more knowledge of the truth than necessary (Freud believes that Frau B's unconscious knows the truth all the time that the whole event was a repetition of a past scene). For Merleau-Ponty, 'this truth would not be repressed out of any grasp into an unconscious, but it would be a matter of a perceptual contact which is not knowledge' (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 168).

Why is the encounter between Frau B and K1 already a perceptual contact with the truth, when Frau B clearly states that the person she loves is K2? Merleau-Ponty answers this question by introducing the symbolic matrix: 'The recollection of someone is the recollection of an entire epoch of life, of a past self, of a drama or event' (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 168). Admittedly, K1

is not the person Frau B loves, but he is intimately associated with the excitements Freu. B feels about that happy-unhappy time. In Merleau-Ponty's view, K1 and K2 play parallel roles in the historical scenario in which the subject situates herself, and Frau B is not indifferent to this fact. Her gesture towards the other constitutes a kinship between these two figures. Merleau-Ponty stresses:

> There is neither mechanical association between KI and K2 nor synthesis through a second consciousness and substitution of one for the other; there is the drama of this period of her life, which is a symbolic matrix, ordering all the perceptions, and in which KI and K2 are implicated, which subsists in her under the form of a *generality*, of *a sensitive zone*, and as sensitive to walk-ons as to the principal actor.
>
> Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 168

That encounter twenty-five years ago seemed to Merleau-Ponty a miracle: the lonely Mrs. B. found both in her thoughts and in reality the presence of her lover. The world answered her wishes and fulfilled her deepest call. The encounter back then was where desire met desire, 'a rendezvous all the more moving that it was not expressed in words' (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 169). It is this perfect encounter with the other that forms the basis of Frau B's symbolic matrix which structures her subjective schema and orients her expectations in the realm of intersubjectivity. It is in this sense that the encounter with K1 is a perceptual contact with the truth: she feels the miracle again with all its affectivity in a new scene and a new relationship.

In his reinterpretation of Dora's case, Merleau-Ponty takes a similar approach. As the protagonist of Freud's iconic case study, Dora was brought before Freud by her father because of her suicidal intention and hysteric symptoms. She accused Herr K, a long-term family friend, made an inappropriate sexual advance to her, an accusation Herr K adamantly denied and Dora's father disbelieved. In his analysis Freud learnt that Dora's father and Frau K had a love affair and that Dora, knowing this secret, felt that she had become the victim of a bargain — her father acquiesces to Herr K's behavior in exchange for the continuation of his own relationship with Frau K. Freud attempted to interpret Dora's hysteria as a result of her jealousy of her father's relationship with Frau K and her ambivalent affection towards Herr K. The fact that Frau K was also an object of desire for Dora further complicated the interpersonal dynamics. When Dora prematurely exited the treatment, Freud was left to wonder whether he

himself had replaced Dora's father as the object of jealousy during the analysis (Freud *SE* VII 1905). In Merleau-Ponty's view, Freud's analysis failed because his attention was fixated upon finding a definitive answer to the question 'who does Dora really love?' as the unconscious truth, without realising that Dora's hysteria stemmed from the overdetermination of intersubjectivity across multiple individual histories, in which objects of desire and identification constantly exchange and intertwine,[2] together forming a symbolic matrix: 'That is, there is no me-others relation — Dora-her father, Dora-Herr K, Dora-Frau K. — but relation to an interactive system' (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 184). Each other encompasses a dimension of being for the third other, and the key to understanding this case is to see all the objects of affection as constituting the symbolic matrix of the subject as a whole. 'Dora's truth is thus made of this system with all its facets' (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 186). Every choice Dora made to navigate through her entanglements with important figures in her life (her father, Herr K, Frau k, Freud, etc.) leaves its mark on the trajectory of intersubjective interaction, where differences are mapped out and the question of desire persists as a question. Merleau-Ponty further suggests that the truth of the unconscious does not hide behind the subject, but appears in front of him. It is the principle which selects 'what, for him, will be the thing or background, what, for him, will exist' (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 189). The unconscious as the symbolic matrix becomes the fundamental horizon of the subject's future-oriented vision, in which the one's relationship with others constantly emerges from its ambiguity.

As we can see from the two case studies above, Merleau-Ponty argues that his intention is not to eliminate Freud's original psychological interpretation, but to add a new layer of philosophical interpretation. In both examples, we recognise the existence of the symbolic matrix: the dramatic scene involving one's historical relations with others is deposited to become a classifying principle of everything the subject perceives and expects. Such a symbolic matrix in the past is not constituted by oneself alone, while one's orientation towards the future can only be established through it. Each subject is not essentially defined by a given past, but rather, because of the openness of history, he must undertake endless tasks of self-interpretation and self-transformation. Merleau-Ponty presents the symbolic matrix as the continuous interweaving of constitutive events, otherness, symbols and emotions in the

[2] For example, love for the father may be motivated by competition with Mrs. K; love for Mrs. K may be a desire to be loved by the father as she is; love for Mr. K may be both a desire to see him as a substitute for the father and a desire to occupy Mrs. K's place as his partner. In short, the subject-other relationship is structured by a myriad of possibilities of desire and identification, and it is futile to try to find a definitive essence within it.

development of the subject. It is through the lens of the symbolic matrix that the unconscious becomes ‘existential eternity, the cohesion of a life, [and] the fecundity of the event’ (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 169).

3. Unconscious between Merleau-Ponty and Lacan

As prominent French thinkers of their time and close friends in life, the theoretical paths of Merleau-Ponty and Lacan were closely intertwined. In fact, Merleau-Ponty himself recognised and actively explored the common ground upon which his phenomenological theory could speak with Lacan’s psychoanalysis. Between 1949 and 1952, as the chair of psychology and pedagogy at the Sorbonne, Merleau-Ponty spent a great deal of time reading and discussing Freudian and contemporary psychoanalytic literature, which also included Lacan’s texts. The Sorbonne Lectures thus provide a rare opportunity to see how the comparison between Merleau-Ponty’s and Lacan’s theory unfolds from the former's own perspective. In his lecture, Merleau-Ponty takes Lacan as a representative of 'broad psychoanalysts' (Merleau-Ponty 2010b: 73), whose conception of psychoanalysis differs from the Freudian version in three manners: Firstly, they move away from the idea that childhood experiences remain the same into adulthood and recognise the continuous recreation of the infantile prehistory by the adult’s present attitudes. Secondly, the unconscious is replaced by ambivalence. Taking dreams as an example, Merleau-Ponty argues that the dreamer

> experiences in his dreams the symbols that allow him to discern his dream thoughts when he wakes up, but the difference is that in his dreams he feels the emotional reality and fullness of meaning of these symbols projected freely onto him. Only after he wakes up does he cease to recognise those feelings. Meaning is thus a state of ambiguity for him, rather than a state of unconsciousness.
>
> Merleau-Ponty 2010b: 73

Thirdly, sex is understood in a broader sense, as ‘the universalisation of the idea of the body and the consciousness of the body’ (Merleau-Ponty 2010b: 74).

Merleau-Ponty believes that in these three respects Lacan's psychoanalytic theory and his own phenomenological reading of Freud have reached an agreement. However, it is doubtful

whether Lacan would think the same. In *Seminar II,* Lacan offers a direct critique of the lack of the symbolic dimension in Merleau-Ponty's early theory:

> You must get acquainted with this symbolic system, if you want to gain entrance to entire orders of reality which very much concern us. If you don't know how to manipulate these capital E's and these capital F's correctly, you can't be qualified to speak about inter-human relations. And this is in fact an objection which we could well have made yesterday evening to Merleau-Ponty.
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> Lacan 1988: 83

Lacan is able to offer this critique on the basis of his long-term theoretical commitment to revealing the symbolic dimension of the unconscious. 'The subject's unconscious is the other's discourse' (Lacan 2006a: 219). This signature statement demonstrates the symbolic reconfiguration of the unconscious as an essential characteristic of Lacanian psychoanalysis. While the unconscious is traditionally understood as a reservoir of repressed feelings, thoughts and wishes an individual possesses and develops throughout his life history, Lacan, informed by Saussure's linguistic theory, points out that mental representations as the content of the unconscious are not the product of individual psychology. Rather, even the most private thoughts cannot exist without making use of signs from a socially shared linguistic system and following rules that govern the formation of words and sentences in a particular language.

Similar to Merleau-Ponty, Lacan recognises that meaning is the result of the inherent differentiation within a synchronic linguistic system (Saussure 1965), but different from Merleau-Ponty, Lacan's inversion of the position of the signified and the signifier highlights contingency and instability that characterise the emergence of meaning. Insofar as a mental image is only loosely connected to a word, the constant sliding and shifting of the signifier becomes the generative force of what the subject would later uncover as his own unconscious. From this perspective, Lacan identifies in Freud's texts a large number of wordplays - unconscious representations such as dreams, jokes and parapraxes produced through displacement and condensation. For Lacan, the mechanism of these primary processes corresponds exactly to the way metaphor and metonymy work in the symbolic system of linguistic signs (Lacan 2017: 53). Although the formation of a dream is entirely the result of the work of the subject's own psyche,

> we only recognise it through the fact that whatever enters into a dream is subject to the modes and transformations of signifiers, to the structures of metaphor and metonymy, condensation and displacement. What gives the law for the expression of desire in dreams is, effectively, the law of signifiers.
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> Lacan 2017: 254

Lacan goes even a step further by stating that 'Everything which is human has to be ordained within a universe constituted by the symbolic function' (Lacan 1988: 29). The linguistic system as a complex network of oppositions between different signifiers has prearranged every potential meaning. The unconscious, in this sense, is not some kind of truth exclusive to the subject, but a possibility not yet grasped by a finite being in an infinite stream of sense-making determined by the Symbolic order.

As we have already seen, Merleau-Ponty in his later career also makes use of Saussure's linguistic theory to build up a theory of symbolism. Both Merleau-Ponty and Lacan, in their respective ways of re-reading Freud, have dismantled the hypothesis of the unconscious as a purely internal system of repressed mental representations, locating the source of its formation instead in the symbolic network that gets a hold of the subject. However, this does not mean that differences between his and Lacan's view no longer exist. Silverman summarises Merleau-Ponty's four stages of linguistic understanding; the first period stresses the ambiguity of discursive expression; the second describes how the subject transforms the linguistic system of difference into a living language; the third focuses on non-direct speech; and the fourth returns language to the paradoxical expression of the corporeal world (Silverman 1980). We can see from this theoretical trajectory that Merleau-Ponty is mainly concerned with the linguistic experience of an embodied subject. The symbolic relationship as he understands it is between the subject and a concrete other. While Saussure's linguistic framework provides the basis for the differentiation of meaning, for Merleau-Ponty new possibilities of meaning are ultimately expressed through interpersonal discourses, bodily gestures and even silence in the gaps between speech and writing, as he makes this point clear in 'Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man':

> It no longer suffices to reflect on the languages lying before us in historical documents of the past. It is necessary to take them over, to live with them, to speak them. It is only by making contact with this speaking subject that I can get a sense of what other languages are and can move around in them.
>
> Merleau-Ponty 1964: 83

For Lacan, however, it is not the interaction with another being with all his particularities that produces a determining effect on the subject's unconscious, but the encounter with the structure of language itself as the big Other. Instead of speaking directly to the subject, the symbolic Other arranges and organises the space in which the subject is able to speak. Metaphor and metonymy are the mechanisms through which one signifier relates to another, and they constitute the basic principle of the movement of the signifying chain. As a psychoanalyst working in the clinical setting, Lacan certainly recognises that meaning can be produced in concrete interpersonal communication, but he emphasises the need to distinguish between two modes of communication and two types of intersubjectivity. In *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, Lacan puts forward two forms of speech: full speech, which is engaged in the structuring on the symbolic level; and empty speech, which is merely seeking similarity on the level of imagination (Lacan 2006a). Intersubjectivity on the basis of empty speech is an imaginative relationship in which the subject sees the other as a reflection and projection of himself, trying to achieve narcissistic satisfaction of the imaginary self through the internalisation of the other, as in the mirror stage experienced in childhood. In symbolic intersubjectivity, on the other hand, the subject sees the other as the real Other, and the encounter with the other becomes an encounter with an unfathomable otherness, in which symbolic referencing becomes a desperate attempt at bridging the impossibility of understanding.

For Lacan, it is only when another concrete other disappears or is even replaced by a symbolic machine that the true meaning of intersubjectivity is revealed. The subject, at that moment, is forced to traverse the fantasy created by the ego to confront the alienation of his own existence. For this reason Lacan cites a game of even and odd in Edgar Allan Poe's novel: a man hides two or three marbles in the palm of his hand for the other to guess. One boy manages to win more than he lost by observing the acuteness of his opponent. His strategy is to change the number each time he lost if he found his opponent to be stupid, and to keep the number the

same if his opponent was smart. Lacan summarise that the boy is able to win by taking advantage of an imaginative intersubjectivity, 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.
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> Lacan 1988: 180

But is this success still achievable if we play this game against a machine which produces a number of marbles based on its own algorithm? In such a game, it becomes impossible to equate oneself with the other, one's ego with another ego. The opponent who rejects our attempt at imaginary identification forces us to play the same game on the symbolic level, by engaging in the calculation of probability and chance. The game of even and odd is therefore no longer a psychological game but a symbolic one - the subject is confronted with symbols and his chances depend only on them. All the subject can do is to analyse the relations between a series of successive results in the hope of finding a possible logic and a law. Johnston comments on this process by arguing that by recording the sequence of random events, it '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' (Johnston 2008: 76). The subject is involuntarily defined by a signifying chain, whose destiny is bound up with substitution and displacement between signifiers. Absolute otherness transforms the subject into a symbolic being that exists outside itself.

The differences between Merleau-Ponty and Lacan are further reflected in their different understandings of symbolism. For Merleau-Ponty, the symbolic matrix is the historical sedimentation of embodied intersubjectivity. There is not only verbal communication between different subjects, but also physical interaction and emotional tension. This scenario as a whole constitutes an open field of possibilities for the emergence of difference. The drama is crystallised as the unconscious that influences the subject's orientation towards the world. In Lacan's work, on the other hand, the effect of symbols on the subject is most clearly reflected in his analysis of *The Purloined Letter*:

> I have decided to illustrate for you today a truth which may be 12 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.
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> Lacan 2006b: 7

In Edgar Allan Poe's story, Lacan identifies 'three moments, ordering three glances, sustained by three subjects, incarnated in each case by different people' (Lacan 2006b: 10). Three subject positions are organised around a letter received by the Queen. In the first scene, the King sees nothing. The Queen knows that the king does not see it and therefore believes that the letter has been well hidden. The Minister, however, sees everything. In the second scene, the Minister who stole the letter takes the place previously occupied by the queen. His strategy to hide the letter in broad daylight fools the policeman, who saw nothing, but not the detective Dupin, who retrieves it in the same way as the Minister had tricked the Queen before. The reader is not told the content of the letter from the beginning to the end of the story, which, for Lacan, is precisely because the value of the letter rests upon its materiality as a signifier rather than its content as the signified: '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 idiosyncrasies' (Lacan 1988: 196). Each subject is blind to the working of the signifying chain that determines and directs the transformation of their subject position, even Dupin himself has to leave a note to the minister at the last moment and thus becomes 'a participant in the inter subjective triad and, as such, finds himself in the median position previously occupied by the Queen and the Minister' (Lacan 2006b: 27).

By showing how an anonymous letter determines the unfolding of a drama, Lacan reveals the way in which the linguistic unconscious is abstracted from a complex scenario by eliminating all extraneous elements, thus preserving the pure relation between the subject and the signifier. In *Seminar II* Lacan makes it clear that 'the letter itself, this phrase written on a piece of paper, in so far as it wanders about, is the unconscious' (Lacan 1988: 209). The unconscious transmits a message from the symbolic Other. It intervenes in a completely alienated way in the subjective experience and touches the essence of his being. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty does not agree with this view of Lacan. James Phillip observes that Merleau-Ponty shows resistance to the symbolisation of the unconscious. Instead of highlighting, as Lacan did, the crucial role

of the grammatical function in Freud's analysis of jokes, Merleau-Ponty argues that an excessive push for the determinacy of the signifier runs the risk of objective idealism (Phillips 1996). While the late Merleau-Ponty reassesses and affirms Freud's unconscious, he still refuses to define it in terms of the symbolic law that works in the way of code translation. Instead, it is his long-standing point of view that language should be incorporated as a lived experience of the subject, which 'counts as an arm, as action, as offense and as seduction because it brings to the surface all the deep-rooted relations of the lived experience wherein it takes form' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 126).

Conclusion

In this article, I reviewed how Merleau-Ponty and Lacan formed a dialogue on the unconscious and symbols in the midst of their theoretical development in the 1950s. Both of them made radical changes to Freud's notion of the unconscious, introducing linguistic symbols to redefine it. But in the process of reinterpretation, they also showed different theoretical orientations. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the symbolic matrix illustrates how the historical symbolic interaction between the individual and the other constitutes a fundamental dimension of the subject's existence, and that this historical field of interwoven symbols and emotions is the constitutive force that opens subjectivity to the future. In Lacan's symbolic order, on the other hand, the concrete face of the other is obscured. An encounter with the absolute Other reveals the finitude of the self, which in turn requires the subject to acknowledge itself as a being that lacks. The possibility of subjectivity is determined by the operation of the symbolic apparatus in which the subject is caught up, where the body and the symbol collide to create tensions of desire.

The divergence between Merleau-Ponty and Lacan does not imply irreconcilable conflicts and contradictions. We can easily recognise that both their perspectives highlight intersubjectivity as a central path to a better understanding of the unconscious. For Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity is the moment of encounter between the subject and the other's mind, senses and body, the field in which the unconscious as difference and openness is generated. Meanwhile, for Lacan, the essence of intersubjectivity is the relationship between the subject and the symbolic order as absolute otherness, which deprives the self of its ontological privilege but imbues subjectivity with desires. In this sense, a more extended understanding of the unconscious cannot be achieved without an appreciation of valuable insights both of them have

offered. Although Merleau-Ponty's and Lacan's interpretations are not entirely consistent, this does not prevent their theories from complementing each other and together depicting the diverse forms of the subject's relationship with the other, the Other and the world.

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