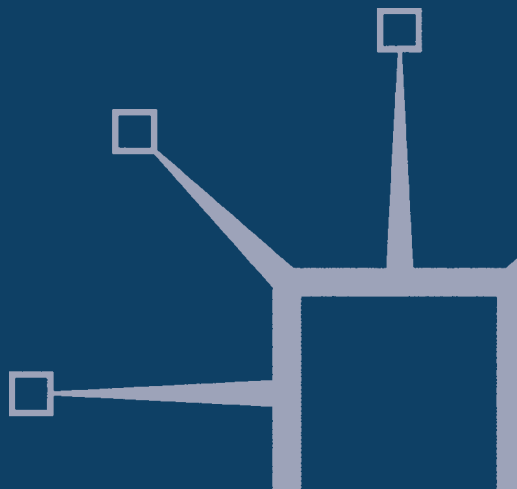


Freud's Drive

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Teresa de Lauretis



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Teresa de Lauretis

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Introduction: Death @ Work

Reflections for the end of a century

'La mort au travail.' This phrase of Jean Cocteau has been with me since I first encountered it, its unnerving figure working its way in my thoughts and meandering through the scattered reflections offered here by way of introduction. In 1970, speaking of cinema, Jean-Marie Straub glossed it to mean that cinema is the only art capable of capturing time in flight, catching death at work. Straub was arguing against the notion of 'historical film' understood as a film that more or less faithfully re-presents a historical subject, period or event. One can reflect on the past, he stated bluntly, but there is no such thing as a historical film; it cannot be made ('un film historique n'existe pas, ne peut pas se faire: on peut faire une réflexion sur le passé ...'). All that a film can do is to document the historical moment of its production ('l'époque où il a été tourné'), the history of its own time, the history of its present.¹

The project, or the wish, of this book is to reflect on the relevance of Freud's theory of drives for the history of this, our present. Like the early decades of the twentieth century, our times are marked by massive geopolitical trauma as well as shifts in technological, epistemic and sexual-representational practices. When Freud elaborated the idea of a death drive, between the First and Second World Wars, he was living in a Europe under the shadow of death and the threat of biological and cultural genocide. Now, in the postmodern, wireless First World, violence erupts spontaneously, apparently unmotivated, in individuals or collectivities as it does elsewhere throughout the geopolitical space; in the most comfortable, civil, managed, social environments as in the most impoverished, oppressive, controlled ones. The well-to-do clamour for reproductive rights, international adoption and the biotechnological

extension of human life through prostheses, cloning, stem-cell research, and so forth, while resources are diminishing throughout the world and others are dying of hunger, collateral damage, and – yes, again – genocide. In these times, with global warfare and genocide firmly planted on the horizon of history, Freud's speculation on the co-presence of life and death drives in the human psyche and in human society takes on a renewed significance.

It was only a few years ago we feared the United Nations might go the way of the League of Nations, when the general issue of gas masks to military and civilian personnel readying for the second Gulf War, digitally mediated on our computer and television screens, reactivated repressed memories of surrealist art photography and smudgy newspaper photos of the First World War, the first known instance of intentional chemical warfare, if we leave science fiction aside. The highly wrought figures of Djuna Barnes and Virginia Woolf – *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon*, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* – have an uncanny double in the visual inscription of the death drive in David Cronenberg's films *Crash* and *eXistenZ*.

This is not to say that history repeats itself, but rather that states of emergency have the capacity to collapse history and suspend the logic of linear temporality, as Walter Benjamin said of the 1930s. In such cases, he wrote, 'Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.'² If it may be granted that what is called theory in the humanities is nothing else than thinking about the world in which we live and die, then theory, as Benjamin suggests, involves not only thoughts that flow in a temporal movement towards the future or the past, but also thoughts that stop in their tracks and, in trying to figure out the enigma of the world at a particular moment, assume something of an abstract, spatial shape. The thinking that is theory, then, has both a temporal and a spatial form; it moves backward and forward in time only to visualize or make legible a space in which to live or die, in the here and now. In this sense, theory is timeless, like poetry, or like the unconscious as Freud conceived it – and by timeless I do not mean eternal, universal or valid for all times and places. On the contrary, I mean that theory is a figure of the history of the present. Or, to paraphrase Edward Said, it is 'the present in the course of its articulation, its struggles for definition'.³

Though its roots are grounded in the past, reaching across the contingent, material, social, sexual, racial, intellectual history of the theorizing subject, and regardless of its uses and abuses in the unforeseeable future, the time of theory is always now. To put it another way, thinking,

however abstract or whatever its form of expression, originates in an embodied subjectivity, at once overdetermined and permeable to contingent events. But to the extent that it is invested in figuring out the present opaque state of the world in the here and now, the thinking of theory is not simply personal or subjective, it is also political. The state of the world, of course, is constantly changing, and so is theory. I have myself, over time, contributed to articulate various forms of critical theory – semiotic and film theory, feminist theory, gender theory, queer theory – and in each of those instances the time of theory as articulated thought, as theorizing, thinking and writing about a state of the world, was always the present. But for well over a decade now, I have felt myself turn away from the militantly critical theories I have contributed to articulate.

At first it was a vague feeling of dissatisfaction, as with something gone adrift in its passage through discursive space, as a knot of twigs and leaves carried downstream by a weak current may get caught briefly on a tree stump or a rock only half-submerged, to then resume its drifting towards another rock or stump and then another, until the twigs and leaves, loosened, float lightly on the surface. What seemed pivotal moments in the flow of critical discourse after the 1960s – the debates on nature vs. culture, theory vs. praxis, essentialism vs. social constructionism, and related ‘binaries’ – were only temporary halts, quickly overtaken in turn by a new concern and another debate. Eventually, I could no longer tell what had held the twigs and leaves together in the first place.

In this brave new century, we are survivors of the modern era in the West. With the end of the twentieth century have also ended its enabling fictions, from the French Revolution to the October Revolution and all those that followed; its movements of resistance, independence, liberation; its myths of freedom and equality, universal suffrage, community-building and multiculturalism; its dream of a free cyberspace turning into the nightmare of globalization. The movement theories since the late 1960s, based in social practices engaged in contestations of power, marking the coming-to-voice of subjugated knowledges – women’s studies, Afro-American studies (as it was called), ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory – have been sustained by a hope that today appears hopelessly enmeshed in academic managerialism. Their later configurations – what in England Stuart Hall, after Ernesto Laclau, calls ‘a theory of articulation’ and Gloria Wekker in The Netherlands, after Kimberlé Crenshaw in the US, calls ‘intersectional theory’ – are facing

the old dangers of racism and general conservatism as well as the new danger of a rising neoliberalism.⁴ Modern Western forms – theorized practices – of armed struggle against the liberal-democratic state, such as those of the ‘lead years’ (*anni di piombo*) in Italy from the 1970s onwards,⁵ seem to me incommensurable with the forms of so-called terrorism that struck the World Trade Center in New York, the Atocha station in Madrid, the London underground system and other monuments of Western power. Yet they coexist.

The enigma of the world in the here and now consists in what I can only think of as a paradox: a negativity that is also, at the same time, a positivity; a stubborn, silent resistance to discursification, articulation, rationalization or negotiation that coexists with the technologies of instant communication through global media. Freud’s conception of the oxymoronic nexus of life and death drives in the human psyche and in human society offers the intellectual comfort of a trope, a conceptual figure of conflict and paradox with which to approach, if only asymptotically, the enigma of the now.

The events of 11 September 2001, commonly referred to as 9/11, and what took place 911 days later in Madrid on 11 March 2004 – to name only the first two of an apparently open series of occurrences – have both revealed and spectacularized, or made dramatically visible, a rupture in the fabric of the Western world that has reached the proportions of a societal trauma. The time of the idea of the collapse of history, differently inflected but not unrelated to Benjamin’s, has come again: ‘History can collapse because it is nothing but construction A given version of history collapses with the occurrence of an event that does not easily fit into received versions of a community’s past.’⁶ Just as the Nazi genocide collapsed the history of Germany and European high culture, states Hayden White, so ‘the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 had the effect of collapsing a particularly triumphalist version of American history – or shall we call it a history of America – and leaving it in a rubble every bit as toxic as that which remained on the site of the collapsed Twin Towers.’⁷ At the start of a century that seems so advanced in respect of the old, modernist 1900s, history is lived again as trauma.

Trauma, Freud wrote in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), is a breach in the protective shield of the human organism, the mental projection of the body’s surface, that ‘provoke[s] a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism’s energy and [sets] in motion every possible defensive measure. At the same time, the pleasure principle is for the moment put out of action.’⁸ What causes trauma is not fear (*Furcht*)

of something known, or anxiety (*Angst*) about something unknown, but rather fright (*Schreck*), the shock of something unexpected that suddenly attacks the ego from outside its bodily boundary, impacting the surface of the body, piercing or rupturing the skin, and produces the excess of affect commonly referred to as panic. The impact of two jumbo jets on the Twin Towers of New York, televised live around the world, was a spectacular representation of this notion of trauma on both a national and global scale.

Unlike medical theories that considered shock a physical damage to the molecular or histological structure of the nervous system – the shell shock diagnosed in veterans of the First World War, for example – Freud was concerned with the effects of trauma on the human psyche; that is to say, how the external assault on the organism affects the internal functioning of the psychic apparatus, or as he put it, ‘the organ of the mind’ (*SE* 18: 36). The psychic apparatus – or the ego, as Freud named it in his reconfiguration of the psychic space known as the second topography – caught by surprise, is unprepared to master or control the impacting force. Unable to bind the excess of affect produced by the impact on its bodily envelope and to sort out the indeterminate sensations it gives rise to – chiefly pain – the ego is overwhelmed. The psychic functions that constitute conscious subjectivity, such as cognition, perception, fantasy, memory and identity, are extensively reduced or paralysed, and the subject may end up in a catatonic state. This is also the case in the symptomatology of recently diagnosed diseases such as extreme environmental stress or post-traumatic stress disorder. However, unlike the psychological studies that seek to account for them, the psychoanalytic view of trauma is focused on intra-psychic processes, which centrally include the unconscious, or what Freud named the primary process, and hence hark back to the infantile condition. Indeed, one of the typical manifestations of panic is psychic regression.

Freud had been concerned with psychic trauma since the 1890s. In the ‘Project for a Scientific Psychology’ (1895), which he left unpublished, and in the early *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) co-authored with Josef Breuer, he had analysed the traumatic impact of sexuality and sexual seduction on psychic processes leading to the formation of hysterical symptoms. By 1919, he was confronted with another type of symptoms resulting from the ‘war neuroses’, which included the compulsive repeating, in dreams and hallucinatory fantasies, of the shock and terror actually experienced during the war. The evidence of a compulsion to repeat painful, even unbearable experiences, for which Freud found support in mundane observations as well as analytic practice, brought

him to formulate the hypothesis of a death drive and to re-elaborate, on that account, his entire theory of the psyche. It is hardly coincidental, I think, that the idea of a death drive should take centre stage in Freud's thoughts from 1919 until his death in 1939: that was the time of the massive geopolitical trauma that hit Europe in the wake of the Great War and was to culminate in the Shoah and the Second World War. That Freud's conception of the death drive was unacceptable then, as it still is for the most part today, is but a confirmation of the traumatic impact that the very idea of a death drive has on the ego, causing it indeed, as Freud said, to set in motion every possible defensive measure.⁹

When Sándor Ferenczi, Karl Abraham and others at the 1918 Psychoanalytic Congress in Budapest called for the establishment of centres for the therapy of war neuroses by psychoanalytically trained physicians, they encountered typical medical objection to psychoanalysis, namely, its insistence on the sexual origin of psychic conflicts, as Freud's expansive view of sexuality was (and continues to be) 'confused with the narrower concept of "genitality"'; and the expert opinion Freud presented in a 1920 Memorandum to the Austrian War Ministry about the deleterious and often lethal effects of shock treatment for war neuroses was filed away in the Ministry Archives.¹⁰ The twin scandals now dogging the US military nearly a century later – the incidents at Abu Ghraib in Iraq and at the Walter Reed National Army Medical Center in Washington, DC – are instances, if egregious ones, of the return of what medical science represses.

In the Memorandum and in his introduction to *Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses*, Freud argued in his most restrained, for-laymen-only style that all neuroses are the expression of a conflict in the ego, whether the 'ego is defending itself from a danger which threatens from without' but provokes an aggressive and morally intolerable reaction within the ego, as in the war neuroses, or whether the ego is defending itself from the demands of the libido, as in peacetime neuroses; in either case, the enemy from which the ego defends itself by producing a neurosis is an internal enemy. He did not say (mindful, no doubt, of his addressees) what is obvious to anyone familiar with psychoanalytic theory – that the 'internal' or unconscious nature of the ego's conflict is attested by the very existence of the symptoms, the symptom being precisely the conversion or the translation of an unconscious (sexual) wish into a somatic event. But he did nevertheless clinch his argument: 'After all, we have a perfect right to describe repression, which lies at the basis of every neurosis, as a reaction to a trauma – as an elementary traumatic neurosis' (SE 17: 210).

The return of the repressed, in Freud's memorable phrase, is the result of a traumatic experience that is inscribed in the psyche in the peculiar manner of the double temporality he called *Nachträglichkeit*, inadequately rendered in English as *deferred action*: 'a memory [can arouse] an affect which it did not arouse as an experience' (SE 1: 356). Thus, for instance, what produces Emma's phobia at the age of 13 is the memory of having been sexually molested at the age of 8. The repressed memory is not traumatic until it is revived at a later date (*nachträglich*), when its sexual nature is understood and the excitation it contains becomes unacceptable or threatening to the ego, thus creating a conflict; faced with that conflict, the ego represses the memory, and this further (secondary) repression produces, in turn, the neurotic symptom.¹¹ The case of Emma, Freud remarks, 'is typical of repression in hysteria. We invariably find that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by *deferred action*' (SE 1: 356).

One of Freud's most effective tropes is the figuration of psychic trauma as an internal 'foreign body', an alien entity installed in the psychic space of the ego and acting there like a computer virus in a database.

The causal relation between the determining psychical trauma and the hysterical phenomenon is not of a kind implying that the trauma merely acts like an *agent provocateur* in releasing the symptom, which thereafter leads an independent existence. We must presume rather that the psychical trauma – or more precisely the memory of the trauma – acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work.

(SE 2: 6)

The double temporality of psychic trauma accords with the two kinds of processes with which it is inscribed in the psyche: the linear or diachronic temporality of secondary process (conscious or preconscious memory) and the timeless or synchronic present-ness of the primary process (unconscious mnemonic trace). It is because of this double temporality that, when an external event impacts the bodily ego as 'a breach in the protective shield of the human organism' and provokes the excess of affect (the large-scale disturbance 'in the functioning of the organism's energy') that we call trauma, there can be no simple determination of cause and effect, but there is, instead, an overdetermination of unforeseeable effects due to the linkages that may be established with unconscious memory traces through the primary process.

The compulsion to repeat unpleasurable, unmasterable or shattering experiences appeared to defy the rule of the pleasure principle, that is, the work of the psychic apparatus to regulate the amount of excitation in the organism and hence to reduce excessive tension to the level that the ego perceives as pleasure or well-being. On the concept of the pleasure principle, elaborated in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud had built his theory of the psychic apparatus and of the interactions between the external world and the psychic processes internal to the ego. In 1919, on the evidence of repetition compulsion in the war neuroses and in what he then was calling the narcissistic neuroses (dementia praecox, paranoia, melancholia), Freud found himself compelled to hypothesize the presence in the human organism of a force driving the apparatus to lower excitation beyond the pleasure threshold to a zero level of energy or the total absence of tension characteristic of inorganic matter. This self-destructive force, which he named *Todestrieb*, or death drive, appeared to work 'silently' (undetected by consciousness) in opposition to those forces he designated as life drives, or Eros, in that they tend to preserve, reproduce and enhance life in social as well as physical organisms. The two contrary sets of forces, then, Freud speculated, must coexist in conflict in each organism from the beginning to the end of its life, if in different proportions at different times.

As Jean Laplanche has incisively argued, the metapsychological concept of the death drive reconfigures the theory, no less than the dynamic landscape, of the psyche by ascribing to the death drive the 'radical tendency to unbind', that is, the disruptive, undoing – shall we say, *uncivilizing* – force that Freud had first identified with the sexual drive.¹² At issue, however, is the question of where the drive comes from. Is it innate in the organism, the physical body, or a product of language and culture? It might seem obvious, even to a casual reader of Freud, that to pose such an either/or is to miss the point, for the concept of the psyche is precisely what undoes the categorical distinction between body and mind. Nevertheless, the question is quite relevant, because Freud himself was ambivalent. While his earlier definition of the sexual drive was cast in the figural terms of a conceptual, virtual space ('an instinct appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic'; *SE* 14: 122), the death drive seems solidly planted in the living organism ('an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things'; *SE* 18: 36).

Laplanche, one of Freud's most astute and closest readers, attributes his ambivalence to 'going astray' (*fourvoisement*) or backing off from the strictly endopsychic conception of the unconscious and the drive that

marked Freud's radical break with Cartesian rationality; a backing off that could only lead him back to a reliance on biology and thus to a 'retrenchment' into biologism. I take issue with this reading in Chapter 3, 'The Queer Space of the Drive', where I suggest another way to read that ambivalence and still do justice to Freud; a way Laplanche himself indicated but did not follow.

Freud's view of human imperfectibility has always been unpopular, and understandably so. To me, there is something quite compelling in a negativity that counteracts the optimistic affirmations of the human's infinite potential for life through information, communication and biotechnologies at a time when Western technology is synonymous with global capitalism and like capitalism appears unstoppable, inevitable, awesome and yet exciting in its creations as in its destructions – much as the reproductive instinct urging procreation appeared to Sabina Spielrein, the lay analyst whose writing anticipated Freud's conception of the death drive. (I discuss Spielrein's work in Chapter 4.) Today, to many in the West, procreation is an option, unlike technology. If we no longer think of it as an innate instinct, a force of nature, we owe it in no small measure to Freud, who first disjoined sexuality from reproduction, and drive (*Trieb*) from instinct (*Instinkt*). And yet he remained ambivalent, the doubt persisted and grew darker with the darkening of the world towards the end of his life.

Thinking about the world today, I wonder whether our epistemologies can sustain the impact of the real; whether our theories and epistemic practices, our modern belief in or reliance on the discursive, the productive, the cultural, the socially constructed order of things are adequate to confront the here and now. If I return to Freud's notion of an unconscious death drive, it is because it conveys the sense and the force of something in human reality that resists discursive articulation as well as political diplomacy, an otherness that haunts the dream of a common world. As the world again grows darker in these times, I want to recover Freud's suspicion that human life, both individual and social, is compromised from the beginning by something that undermines it, works against it; something that may transcend it not from above or beyond, but from within materiality itself.

Psychoanalysis, literature, cinema

The chapters in this book return to Freud's metapsychology in an attempt to approach the enigma of the now through the figures of his *Bildersprache*, the 'figurative language' with which, Freud states, he is

'obliged to operate,' in full awareness that all scientific terms, be they those of depth psychology or those of biology, 'are only part of a figurative language' (SE 18: 60). Freud's own terms – the drive, the unconscious, the ego and other terms of his metapsychology – are conceptual figures or tropes which inhabit the space between mind and matter, a space not traversable by referential language. By that I mean a language that is believed adequate to represent the phenomenal world and trusted to comprehend it. Figural language, on the other hand, offers no guarantee of phenomenal cognition, as Paul de Man puts it: rhetoric 'opens up *vertiginous* possibilities of referential aberration'.¹³ It cannot, therefore, presume to close the gap between language and the real or, subsuming one in the other, elide the space between mind and matter; a space that indeed can only be represented figurally, as in de Man's verbal metaphor or in Hitchcock's cinematic metaphor of the stairwell in *Vertigo*.

The space outlined by Freud's 'topographies' is of such a kind. Consider the ego: for all the mundane personifications he devised to convey the ego's relations to the superego and the id (a servant to three masters, a constitutional monarch dependent on parliament's decisions, a man on horseback driven by the horse, and so on), the ego figures a space between the inhuman in language which de Man reads in Benjamin's *reine Sprache* – 'linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language'¹⁴ – and the inhuman 'inorganic' which insists, or persists, in the living matter (*lebende Materie*) of the organism. Freud's *Bildersprache*, his way of writing and thinking, should not be read 'as the representation [*Darstellung*] of something that can be grasped, named, once and for all', remarks Samuel Weber, but rather as an *Entstellung*, the distortion characteristic of the dreamwork; for his metapsychology entertains 'a singular relation of cognition to the unknown, figured and disfigured'.¹⁵ This accords with my reading of Freud's paradoxical organism 'wish[ing] to die only in its own fashion' in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (SE 18: 39) as an oxymoron that defies the binary logic of either organic or inorganic; its materiality is not that of empirical science or, for that matter, the materiality of the signifier, but the intimation of a materiality, exactly, 'figured and disfigured'.

My reading of Freud takes place in the context of what Laplanche, himself a university professor as well as a psychoanalyst, has wittily called 'extramural psychoanalysis' (*psychanalyse hors les murs*; EO, 118). But in extending the concept of drive, and of the death drive in particular, to cultural texts, I am not proposing to apply a theoretical (metapsychological) model to an object or a domain of pertinence external to it.