THE DEATH DRIVE

When Freud articulated the idea of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (*Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, 1920), he transformed himself into the psychological counterpart of a radical Hegelian without realizing it. The pleasure principle was "obvious." People sought to maximize their pleasures and minimize their pains. The ultimate pain was symbolized (and actually experienced) by death, avoided at all costs. But, Freud concluded in a way that was broadly misunderstood, the opposite was the case. Another drive, more powerful than the drive for pleasure, dominated human behavior and consciousness, a death drive. Note: "drive," *Trieb*, was translated as "instinct" until recently. Freud's drives related to the key critical objects of childhood: the breast, shit, the phallus, the gaze, and the voice. These complex mediators ("partial objects") continued to exercise an ambiguous force after first childhood encounters; they could not be assimilated within the world of objects and, thus, were linked to the idea of the Freudian Thing (*das Ding*).

Unlike Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm, who took the life and death drives literally, as about (good, healthy, sexy) life and (bad, destructive, selfish) death and posited a program to avoid the latter and embrace the former, Freud's idea was more radical. It was about the compulsion to repeat, to return to key positions, objects, and events that were, like the partial objects, incapable of resolution. The death drive was circular, but the circle had a gap. Filling this gap was what Lacan later identified as the *objet petit a*, an irrational source of pleasure converted from the pain of impasse. If, in the sexually driven pursuit of pleasure, space and time were "transitive" media of a here-to-there mentality, the gap committed the subject to the "intransitive" space-time of hysteric, subject to inversion, obversion, and topological negation that Lacan later called extimité (*extimité*). Key to the text of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is Freud's speculative interest in the biological origins of consciousness, an origin Freud locates clinically to have begun with the extremity of the organism — the place at which it is exposed to the environment. At this point, the tissue constituting the boundary between inside must develop a callous, a scarred surface, deadened to the over-stimulation of the boundary. Later, Lacan developed this in his idea of the lamella, akin to the skin, an imaginary organ that is both dead and alive.

What is radical about Freud is this upside-down view of subjectivity, a view that shows how the subject is fascinated with the boundary, the terminus, the impossible passage, and impossibility as a crossing. More radical, death becomes the *symbol* of the terminus, not the other way around! As a result, the subject cannot die just one death but must die twice: once literally and again symbolically (as all cultures seem to have already known). AND, this interval between the two deaths must be radically conditioned by the idea of passage and the impossible-but-Real. Lacan discovered Freud's truly revolutionary discovery, realized that none of his followers had recognized it (and in fact had reversed its evidence and conclusions); Lacan based his restoration of Freud on correcting and elaborating the importance of the death drive, which is ultimately the basis of the subject's relation to the world.

**Transitive Space-Time**

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Simple negation (stable but illusory)

**Intransitive Space-Time**

| A | → | ~A |
| ~A | ← | ~A |

Double negation (unstable; stable through and in repetition)

Privation converts to prohibition

α

Not being able to cross the gap is perceived as an instruction not to cross; thus, "law"

**The lamella**

Freud takes an unexpected turn in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, seeking a material basis for the paradox of the subject who seeks displeasure. Citing examples from biology, he notes that consciousness develops at the *extreme external limit* of the organism, where bombardment by the environment forces development of a layer of cells that are neither alive nor dead. This extremity is also the center and core of the brain neurologically, a combination of extremity and interiority that Lacan takes up in his idea of extimité. Also, this inside-out, live-dead, peripheral-central organ is a center that is fundamentally empty because of its function as pure mediation. Compare the lamella to examples of behavior as well as the landscape where the uncanny of the living thing with a kernel of death and the dead thing that has "forgotten how to die" materialize this idea.

**Hysteria is fundamental**

Hysteria, the exchange of pleasure for pain and the "territorialization" of the subject as body and the body of the subject, grounds the political use of space-time as a set of opportunities by which the drama of loss is repeated obsessively. This loss is also a return to this original source of pleasure, made evident in war, where loss is actually the goal and territory gained becomes immediately displeasurable but "defended to the death."

Todd McGowan: "The death drive emerges with subjectivity itself as the subject enters into the social order and becomes a social and speaking being by sacrificing a part of itself. This sacrifice is an act of creation that produces an object that exists only insofar as lost. This loss of what the subject does have institutes the death drive, which produces enjoyment through the repetition of the original loss."

Loss, as a gap, is also the pivot of reversed predication facilitating the exchange/flip between inside-outside, subject and other, and cause and effect. Thus the causal chain (the series of formations leading from efficient cause to final cause and then formal/material cause) is disrupted at the level of *materia*, namely the *materia* of the "partial object" that is key to the death drive.

Hysteria is thus both a subjective state and an environmental field where sites develop as "exceptions" to the causal order put in terms of spatio-temporal transitivity.

Todd McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don’t Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 2013).
THE OLD FREUD <1920

The Freud of the pleasure principle establishes a revolution of sexual awareness, demonstrating even the infant’s early sexual (“polyromous”) perversity, sacrificed in the face of social demands but at a personal cost of neurosis. This “Freud of sexual liberation” however supported the notion of revolutionary liberation, an investment of the libido in utopian aims that, actually, undercut themselves by denying the hidden agendas of the death drive.

THE NEW FREUD >1920

Discovery of the “irrational” dominance of the death drive over the “rational” pleasure principle showed that the pleasure principle was fundamentally ideological, manipulated by the “Enjoy!” mandate of the Other. The death drive, tied to the idea of return to the lost object that was possessed only in fantasy, was then the basis of psychoanalysis, the success of which was thwarted by the analysis’s love-transference as a “last ditch effort” by the unconscious to avoid discovery.

FATAL MISINTERPRETATIONS

Fromm, Reich, and others championed sexual liberation as fulfillment of Freud’s legacy of opposing mental health to social repression. They and “ego psychoanalysts” of the 50s inverted Freud’s ideas about the death drive, simplifying it as a desire for death; instead, the death drive is about compulsion to return to an impossible-Real point of loss that must be fantasized in terms of a “detached virtuality” where recovery can be imagined (false) or where the gap is “paid for,” as in the case of Faust.

LACAN’S RESTORATION OF FREUD

With his insistence of the importance of the Mirror Stage, Lacan sought to correct the distortions of ego psychoanalysts to show how the gap conditioned development of the subject through functions of gendering, interpellation (by ideology), discourse (four standard models), and fantasy formation (the matheme of $\delta a$, the barred subject in relations of autheniticity with fantasy, what we might call the “truth of fiction.” Adding spatial-temporal dimensions to this restoration project grows out of Lacan’s identification of externality as central to the relations of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real domains of subjectivity (represented as a Borromeo knot, whose integrity is produced with a topological “emergence”); and in this addition the function of hysteria is to identify the subject’s “interiority” with an “external” — a field of affordance (tuché, ῥύπνυ) within which automaton, as both chance and “mechanical” necessity, operates as a “demonic” force. This field is present in all four of Lacan’s classic discourses (hysteria, university, master, analysis) but the modality changes to fit the requirements of agent, Other, production, and truth. Expanding Lacan via exploration of “detached virtuality” connects with discourse theory, the idea of the sinthome, and (of course) Lacan’s extimacy ideas, where topology is “present” as agency and narratives of affordance/opportunity.

IT’S WORSE FOR ARCHITECTURE

While the positive view of the pleasure principle is fatal for psychoanalysis, it is at least visible as a clear flaw of interpretation; corrections can be made historically, textually, and critically. However for architecture the error is embedded not in literal theoretical positions but rather in popularizations of the idea of approach/avoidance, an endorsement of the “natural forces” of good and bad as they stimulate architectural response. Threats are taken literally, as are “positive projects” to provide shelter, utility, and social meaning. Desire in architecture is precisely opposite of what it should be, and this reversal becomes evident with the Enlightenment’s articulation of the problem of utility and taste, “resolved” in such matrix options as Durand’s rationalized plans. Within the new regime, space itself is “racialized,” making invisible the agendas of projects that manipulate subalterns according to concealed ideological agendas, eventually appropriated by corporations. Sites of exception continue however to reflect their traditional relationship to the “demonic” of venustas, where the mandates of utility and materiality are suspended by means of the “detached virtuality” of imaginary constructs. The effectiveness and integrity of these sites of exception depend, however, on their ability to avoid foreclosure by utopian pleasure principles, which would store ideology through the disguise of nostalgia for a “lost time.” This is not — we should note — the loss of the death drive, but precisely the opposite; a source of enjoyment that substitutes, for loss, the false lure of an actualized fiction.

TODD McGOWAN

Todd McGowan shows how Late Capitalism converts the traditional cultural ability to assimilate dissatisfaction into an obsession with consumption as enjoyment, denying the unconscious’s need for the more complex topography of the death drive. Ideology thus creates two layers, that of (mostly corporate) producers and (disincorporated) consumers, lured into false relations of identification by the deceptive voices of profit and pleasure as long as they possess (hence, the cycle of repetition belongs to the producers, who aim to kill consumers literally through their toxic/destructive products but sustain them long enough to maximize profits for investors). This model, seemingly paranoid in the extreme, is a perfect fit for Lacan’s four discourses (master, hysteric, university, analysis), which become the only effective formulae for political awareness and the emergence of a “psychoanalytic subject” able to break free of the “ideological subject.”

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Žižek’s background in Lacanian psychoanalysis was always connected to the projects of the political, but Žižek grounds Lacan and the Freudian death drive in Hegel’s dialectic. In the concept of Absolute Knowledge, Hegel’s Phenomenology shows how it is possible to renounce the notion of a future ideal merger of thought and thing but recover its glory in the shattered fragments of production (“the spirit is a bone” — Hegel’s interest in Golgotha as the other side of phrenology). Žižek, without mentioning metaphysics as such, shows how Hegel’s deployment of the three stages of negation (Vermeining, Verleugnung, Ververtung) are actually the cycle of repetition of the death drive, with confrontation of the impossible-Real, the Lacanian object petit a, that make subjectivity identical with the boundary-as-gap.

MLADEN DOLAR

Dolar identifies Lacan’s theory of the uncanny as well as the role of love as central to any restoration project. Dolar’s independent work on the acousmatic voice supplements these two positions. Fundamentally, the uncanny provides empirical/cultural evidence of the double inscription present with empathy. The transfer of subjective qualities to the object world comes at a “cost” that is imposed by the uncanny: alienation (from positions within) and separation (from without). The well-known play of love transference in analysis is the final defining moment in the transformation of the subject from an ideological to (psycho)analytical, providing an alternative to the “liberation sexuality” of those who had interpreted Freud’s pleasure principle. Love’s demands constitute a forced choice for the analyst, revealing the same three-part negation structure Hegel had identified.