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Dialectics, Structure, Language – Lacanian "Return to Freud" in the First Half of the 1950s

Lacanian Psychoanalysis is very often described as the result of an attempt to combine Freudian psychoanalysis and the structuralist method (both Lèvi-Strauss' structural anthropology and Saussurean and Jakobsonian linguistics). Undoubtedly, the structuralist schools of thought have influenced the teaching of the author of *Écrits* most deeply. It is most noticeable in his style and in his specific vocabulary made up of "signifiers", "symbolic", and "metaphors". However, the other influence, that of Kojève's reading of Hegel, is often underestimated. Of course, in any comprehensive introduction to Lacanian theory, we can find at least a few sentences on the importance of the Master and Slave dialectic for the early stage of Lacan's teaching, but other aspects of this impact are mostly ignored.

Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, the author of *Le Livre Noir de la Psychanalyse*, states that Lacan was a "self-educator"; owed nothing to anyone, but not because he "owes everything to himself, but because he owes everything to

everyone".[1] Linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, psychiatry, and even cybernetics intersect in Lacanian thought. However, not all these sources are equally important; a certain "chronology" and a "hierarchy of influence" are crucial here. Unfortunately, we sometimes treat Lacan's teaching "ahistorically", as a monolith that emerged suddenly, being from the very beginning a mixture of structuralism and Freudianism.

In this article, I would like to address the fundamental question: how and to what extent Lèvi-Strauss' structural anthropology and Hegelianism shaped the teaching of Lacan. As I will attempt to demonstrate, these are the two basic sources of inspiration in the early development of Lacan's theory that also defined his views on the problem of subjectivity.

Before we begin, some historical clarifications are necessary – although Lacan was an active author long before the Second World War, when we talk about the "early period", it is rather the early period of his "return to Freud" in the first half of the 1950s. Moreover, the problems discussed in the article relate specifically to the years 1953–1954, when Lacan delivered a paper entitled *The Function and the Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* and was conducting a seminar on "Freud's technical writings". These lectures will be the basic subject of our considerations.

Lèvi-Strauss and the Concept of the Unconscious

Undoubtedly, the fact that Lacan, who was a psychiatrist, drew inspiration from cultural anthropology was quite unusual. But Lèvi-Strauss formulated his own and original view on the nature of the unconscious, and that was surely encouraging to Lacan. Also, we know for sure that Lèvi-Strauss read all the French translations of Freud's oeuvre in his high-school years.[2] These early readings had a significant role in shaping his methodology in later years. Both authors (Lèvi-Strauss and Freud) had a lot in common –

[1] Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The absolute master*, transl. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 1–2.

[2] François Dosse, *History of Structuralism: The Rising Sign, 1945–1966*, transl. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 112.

particularly, a specific approach to understanding reality. This approach was characterized by suspicion and the desire to learn about the hidden, unconscious processes that determine conscious discourses and phenomena.

That is why the author of *Tristes Tropiques* describes ethnology as a science that differs from history that studies "conscious expressions of social life" in that that it describes "unconscious foundations" of these manifestations.[3] Thus, the difference between the unconscious and the conscious is not quantitative. The fact that the unconscious is a condition for conscious phenomena clearly shows its qualitative dimension. The unconscious is, therefore, the place of the universal structure conditioning the conscious perception of the world.

However, structuralists, in particular Lèvi-Strauss, seemed more interested in the individual-collective distinction than in the conscious-unconscious distinction. Of course, what is most universal is also unconscious: "the transition from conscious to unconscious is associated with progression from the specific toward the general".[4] This universalism should be understood as de facto transcendental – the function of the unconscious is to impose forms on content received in perception; this form is identical to all minds, whether the mind is ancient or modern, "civilized" or "primitive". Lèvi Strauss described the unconscious as "the mediating term between self and others".[5] The task of ethnology would, therefore, be to reach these universal principles through a comparative analysis of empirical material and to indicate the similarities that make the meeting (between me and the other) possible.

In his works, Lèvi Strauss referred not only to the unconscious kinship structures, but he also went further by extrapolating the "collective/unconscious-individual/conscious" principle to the area of specific activity – magic. Two papers from *Structural Anthropology* are of key importance for our considerations: *The Sorcerer and His Magic* and *The Effectiveness of Symbols*.

The main thesis of the first essay is that the effectiveness of magic is the result of three factors. First, the sorcerer himself should believe in magic,

[3] Claude Lèvi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, transl. Claire Jacobson, Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 18.

[4] Lèvi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 20–21.

[5] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, transl. Felicity Baker (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 35.

second, the person subjected to the magical practice should also be convinced of its effectiveness. And third, what binds the faith of the sorcerer and the person subjected to the practice is the trust and faith of the community. Thus, the magic complex consists of individual experiences of the sorcerer, the ill person, and the community.[6] During the ritual, the sorcerer is not only an actor playing his role: "The shaman does not limit himself to reproducing or miming certain events. He actually relives them in all their vividness, originality, and violence".[7]

Lèvi-Strauss linked the shamanistic experience with the psychoanalytic notion of abreaction. The difference, however, is that in the case of a shaman, he – not the patient – is a reactive person. In *The Effectiveness of Symbols*, Lèvi-Strauss elaborates on this thought by identifying the purpose of abreaction as making "explicit a situation originally existing on the emotional level and in rendering acceptable to the mind pains which the body refuses to tolerate".[8] The disease here is not a purely physiological phenomenon but an element of a broader – symbolic – system. Lèvi-Strauss uses the same quasi-linguistic method that he earlier applied to kinship systems – the disease is the signified, and the signifier corresponds to it. It is not only about naming but also reconciling with the symbolic universe of the community, the source of the language. Therefore, Lèvi-Strauss claims that the sorcerer "provides language".[9]

Undoubtedly, this understanding of the shamanic cure makes it similar to the psychoanalytic therapy; the aim of both is to raise awareness of internal conflicts that were unconscious. There is, however, quite a significant difference: in psychoanalytical therapy, the patient himself is an active party, while during the shamanic therapy, the active side of the relationship is the sorcerer. The French anthropologist introduces a quite important distinction here: while psychoanalysis recreates an individual myth (i.e. the patient's speech tells his individual story), the shamanic cure is the process of inscribing the patient's narrative into a broader, symbolic universe. Thus, symbolic efficacy:

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[6] Lèvi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 168.
[7] Ibidem, 181.
[8] Ibidem, 197.
[9] Ibidem, 198.

> (…) would consist precisely in this "inductive property," by which formally homologous structures, built out of different materials at different levels of life – organic processes, unconscious mind, rational thought – are related to one another.[10]

There is also one important element of the distinction between an individual and a collective myth: Lèvi-Strauss refers once more to Freud, pointing to his statements concerning the essence of trauma – according to Freud, trauma is not trauma because it is its essence, there is no traumatic event itself. The effect of this event depends on its location in a specific symbolic constellation. Trauma is an event that relates to the unconscious structures that make it be treated as a trauma. Therefore, what determines the content of the unconscious is not the individual history of the subject:

> The unconscious ceases to be the ultimate haven of individual peculiarities – the repository of a unique history which makes each of us an irreplaceable being. It is reducible to a function – the symbolic function, which no doubt is specifically human, and which is carried out according to the same laws among all men, and actually corresponds to the aggregate of these laws.[11]

One of the basic accusations made by the opponents of psychoanalysis was that it is, in fact, a quasi-mystical speculation. This objection cannot apply to the Lèvi-Strauss' vision of the unconscious. Lèvi-Strauss "rationalized" the unconscious, made of it the rational, quasi-Kantian instance.

Lèvi-Strauss also significantly modifies the dividing lines between the individual and the universal. It seems that the novelty of this vision of the human psyche is, first of all, the "collectivization" of the unconscious (previously perceived as the seat of individuality). Also, the reason why social structures are perceived as external to the subject is that these structures are unconscious. This is the essence of the symbolic function that Lacan will later borrow from structuralism.

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[10] Ibidem, 201.

[11] Ibidem, 202–203.

Anthropological Inspirations in Jacques Lacan's Psychoanalysis

Although the foundation on which the edifice of structural anthropology grows is undoubtedly the *Elementary Structures of Kinship*,[12] and the theses presented in this work that constitute the primary source of anthropological inspiration for Lacan, the first trace of structuralist inspiration that we find in his work is a reference to *The Effectiveness of Symbols*:

> Indeed, for imagos – whose veiled faces we analysts see emerge in our daily experience and in the **penumbra of symbolic effectiveness** – the specular image seems to be the threshold of the visible world.[13]

This excerpt is from *Stade du mirroir* (1949), in which Lacan describes the birth of the ego as a psychic instance. While creating the foundations of this concept, he was influenced by the psychologist Henri Wallon, who noticed that 6-month-old child not only has the possibility of recognizing his own reflection in the mirror, but it is also certainly fascinated by this image.

For Lacan, this fascination is related to the fact that a person creates his image through identification with something that he finds outside – with its mirror image or another person (for example, parents). In a seminar on "Freud's technical papers" from 1953–1954, we find a significant advancement of this concept, explaining the earlier reference to the effectiveness of symbols. For the ego to be constituted, the mere fact that the child looks at himself in a mirror is not enough, and the involvement of some external factor is necessary, for example, in the form of the parent's affirming voice: "yes, that's you!". This is how this symbolic effectiveness (in a 1949 paper only mentioned) should be understood – although the ego is only an image, the final shape of this image depends on its mediation in a broader context, called by Lacan a symbolic order.[14]

[12] Not surprisingly, since the issue raised by Lèvi-Strauss in this work relates to the problem of exogamy, which is so crucial to the psychoanalytic problem of "oedipality".

[13] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The first complete edition in English*, transl. Bruce Fink (New York–London: WW Norton & Company, 2005), 77.

[14] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique*, transl. John Forrester (New York–London: WW Norton & Company, 1991), 80.

In the same year that the author of *Écrits* was beginning his seminar on Freud's technical papers, he delivered two papers strongly influenced by Lèvi-Straussian anthropology:[15] *Individual Myth of the Neurotic* and *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*. It is the second paper that we will focus on in our article, as it is basically a cornerstone of Lacan's early teaching. *Function* is perhaps Lacan's first attempt to formulate a theoretical framework for the "return to Freud". What was this "return to Freud" about? Any "returns" in humanities are obviously connected with the diagnosis of the current condition of a given discipline. Husserl's return to "the things themselves" was justified by the fact that – in his opinion – philosophy had abandoned its search for things as such.

By analogy, Lacan's "return to Freud" was necessary, because the psychoanalysis of that time had mostly forgotten the crucial aspects of Freud's teaching. *Function* is a text in which Lacan accuses post-Freudian psychoanalysis of succumbing to conformist tendencies that reduce the analytical practice to activities that adapt the individual to the requirements of social life. He primarily targeted American ego-psychology. In Lacan's opinion, American psychoanalysis ceased to be the "talking cure" and became human engineering. On the other hand, he criticized different tendencies in the psychoanalysis of that time, such as the object-relations theory, which arose from the doctrine of Melanie Klein, arguing that it emphasizes the extra-linguistic aspect of human reality too much. As we know, a diagnosis is accompanied by a prescription. And this recipe is suggested by Lacan – a return to Freud is possible only if speaking is considered as founding for the psychoanalytic technique: "psychoanalysis has but one medium: the patient's speech".[16] An unquestionable novelty in Lacanian theory was the setting of Freud's "talking cure" in the broader context of linguistics and anthropology.

What probably connects Freudianism and structural anthropology the most is the issue of the universality of the incest taboo:

[15] An exhaustive review of this impact is provided by the work of Markos Zafiropoulos. Markos Zafiropoulos, *Lacan and Lévi-Strauss or the Return to Freud, 1951–1957* (London: Karnac, 2010).

[16] Lacan, *Écrits*, 206.

> This is precisely where the Oedipus complex – insofar as we still acknowledge that it covers the whole field of our experience with its signification – will be said, in my remarks here, to mark the limits our discipline assigns to subjectivity: namely, what the subject can know of his unconscious participation in the movement of the complex structures of marriage ties, by verifying the symbolic effects in his individual existence of the tangential movement toward incest that has manifested itself ever since the advent of a universal community.[17]

However, the Oedipus complex is not universal itself, but it is only one of the possible compositions of the myth accompanying the incest taboo. What is universal is the prohibition itself, which – according to Claude Lèvi-Strauss – determines the transition of man from the realm of nature to the realm of culture. Although Oedipus complex is a certain key to understanding the essence of neurosis (at least, in Freud's doctrine), it is at the same time "a very elementary key". Compared to other myths, the Freudian complex is "a rather thin joke".[18] Lacan follows Lèvi-Strauss quite faithfully, pointing out that the prohibition of incest is possible as long as it is embedded in the order of language (*langage*):

> The primordial Law is therefore the Law which, in regulating marriage ties, superimposes the reign of culture over the reign of nature, the latter being subject to the law of mating. (…) This law, then, reveals itself clearly enough as identical to a language order. For without names for kinship relations, no power can institute the order of preferences and taboos that knot and braid the thread of lineage through the generations.[19]

This identification of law and language leads to the recognition of psychoanalysis as a technique to explore the position that the subject occupies in the symbolic; to be more precise: in the course of an analytical treatment, the point would be for the subject to historicize his individual being. The unconscious, however, is not the *locus* where this history is "stored". This history is created during analysis, when *analysand* inscribes his history into the symbolic. We arrive here at the fundamental issue – the unconscious' meaning in

[17] Ibidem, 229.
[18] Lacan, *Seminar. Book I*, 90.
[19] Lacan, *Écrits*, 229–230.

Lacan's doctrine. And the question should be raised whether Lacan is more Freudian or structuralist in this matter.

First, the unconscious is transindividual – it always transcends the individual being of the subject; for "the unconscious is that part of concrete discourse qua transindividual, which is not at the subject's disposal in reestablishing the continuity of his conscious discourse".[20] The unconscious is what is universal in the subject. It is not some hidden content in which we find the animal drives, nor is it in any way the unconscious of the poets of the Romantic era nor – despite its transindividuality – the "collective unconscious" of Jung. Additionally, the unconscious is de facto a **condition of the possibility** of human experience, it "is of the same nature as ideational functions, and even of thought".[21]

At first glance, Lacan's vision of the unconscious seems to have more in common with the structuralist method than Freudian theory – this aspect of Lacan's teaching has become the object of criticism, according to which Lacanian unconscious could not be identified with Freudian unconscious, but with preconscious. This criticism focused primarily on the fact that Lacan, identifying the unconscious with the symbolic, excluded to some extent its affectual and individual aspects. For Gerard Mendel, both Lèvi-Strauss and later Lacan denied the existence of the "concrete unconscious".[22]

The Problem of Language

As we know, structuralist inspiration in Lacan's theory was not limited to anthropology. The influence of structural linguistics of de Saussure and Jakobson seems even more important. This, however, was not so obvious and unambiguous at the beginning of Lacan's teaching. Although there are quite clear references to structural linguistics in the text of *Function*, these references seem rather accidental, chaotic, and not so frequent in comparison

[20] Ibidem, 214.
[21] Ibidem, 215.
[22] Dosse, *History*, 116.

with the anthropological ones. We can even presume that at that time (the first half of the 50s), it was only an indirect inspiration, the source of which for Lacan was not linguistic works of de Saussure, but Lèvi Strauss' reference to these works. This thesis is certainly supported by the fact that Lacan does not refer directly to the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure outside the anthropological context: when he speaks of speech, it is in the context of the law which is to be identical with it.

But what about this oddly long title of *Function*? In English translation of *Écrits*, there are two terms – "language" and "speech". However, it seems to be a translation vagueness. In French text these terms are, respectively, *langage* and *parole*. That seems to be a clear reference to de Saussure's *Course of General Linguistics*. But *langage* cannot be identified with the English term *language*. It is a more general term denoting all linguistic phenomena including both language (*langue*) and individual speech (*parole*).[23] However, the term *langue* seems to be absent in Lacan's distinctions; he used it only to denote specific languages (i.e., *langue francaise*). Yet, the way he treated the term *langage* suggests that he attributes to it the characteristics attributed by de Saussure to language. But let us leave these terminological inaccuracies aside for a while and look at what these terms actually mean.

Lacan understood speech (*parole*) basically in the same way as de Saussure – as an individual manifestation of *langage*. The distinction between *langage* and *parole* is for Lacan the background of the dichotomy of what is universal and what is particular. This dichotomy is expressed in three paradoxes. The first of the paradoxes relates to the situation of the psychotic subject, whose speech "has given up trying to gain recognition".[24] The psychotic performs his discourse without seeking affirmation or negation from what is universal. At the same time, however, his speech is not an autonomous act: he is "being spoken", and this speech is devoid of all dialectics and ambiguity, it is fixed and rigid. The second paradox is a neurosis in which the subject's speech is "driven out of the concrete discourse that orders consciousness".[25]

[23] We should understand the term *langage* as "the human faculty of communication". Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, transl. Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 9.

[24] Lacan, *Écrits*, 231.

[25] Ibidem, 232.

In other words, the source of suffering is the incompatibility between individuality and the universal.

The third paradox is related to the general diagnosis of the modernity: in this case, it is about the situation of the subject of a scientific civilization, in which he is lost as an object. This is a situation like that of a psychotic. The contemporary subject seems to be spoken by public discourses – the most recent example may be discourses of personal development. But what is the role of psychoanalysis in resolving these paradoxes? Undoubtedly, the aim of psychoanalysis as a specific practice is to create an opportunity to overcome these tensions. It is all about articulating the desire in "full speech" that will be free from narcissistic "empty speech" serving only to maintain the illusion of ego.

It is, therefore, a proposition that cannot be unequivocally assigned to structuralism, which is limited to the study of structures, and not necessarily the individual's entanglement in these structures; not to mention that structuralism is not about "recognition". This term is rather a manifestation of – as Lorenzo Chiesa put it – "pseudo-Hegelian dialectics"[26] inherent in Lacan's teaching during the early fifties. It is also a major "non-structuralist" element in his teaching, especially visible when he attempts to reveal the fundamental nature of speech and symbol. Speech is not a mere communication tool. When I utter a sentence, my unconscious intention may go far beyond my conscious intention to provide information – I may, for example, unconsciously seek recognition for my opinion. "Recognition" is the key word here, pointing to the Hegelian character of understanding of the language in the work of "early Lacan". However, Lacan's Hegelianism should also be understood as extremely limited – it does not result from some in-depth reading of Hegel's oeuvre, but from the fact that Lacan was an attendant of the famous seminars of Russian emigree Alexandre Kojève. These lectures were focused primarily on the reading of *Phenomenology of Spirit*. And it is *Phenomenology* that constitutes for Lacan the basic (though mediated) source of Hegelian inspiration.

[26] Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness. A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge–London: MIT Press, 2007), 44.

It seems that *Phenomenology* was one of the sources of inspiration during Lacan's work on the mirror stage theory. This becomes especially clear when we look at the Hegelian deliberations on self-knowledge:

> Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self.[27]

Self-consciousness, like the ego, tends to "supersede the other independent being in order thereby to become certain of itself as the essential being", which would inevitably mean annihilation of itself, since "the other is itself".[28] Recognition and "supersedition" are inherently related to reciprocity – one self-knowledge does what the other does. Recognition, however, must become an asymmetrical relation. This is how the intersubjectivity of the master and the slave manifests itself. Self-consciousness that is ready to sacrifice its life becomes the master; it is recognized but does not recognize a second self-consciousness that values life more than recognition. Lacan in *Agressivite en Psychoanalyse* stated that Hegel ("before Darwin") provided a definitive theory of "the specific function of aggressiveness in human ontology".[29] Like self-consciousness, the ego established in the mirror stage in relation to the other ego tends to overcome the otherness of the other. More precisely, the subject, to whom the ego provides a holistic form, feels a permanent threat of disintegration, simultaneously he perceives the other as totality. And this totality is the primary aim of the human desire.

Here, we come to the question so crucial to psychoanalysis. In his reading of Hegel, Alexandre Kojève stated about the human desire, that what distinguishes it from the animal desire is that it is directed at another desire in itself, not at a specific object that satisfies the animal desire:

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[27] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. Arnold Vincent Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111.

[28] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 111.

[29] Lacan, *Écrits*, 98.

> (…) for the herd to become a society, multiplicity of Desires is not sufficient by itself; in addition, the Desires of each member of the herd must be directed-or potentially directed-toward the Desires of the other member.[30]

Same for Lacan, the subject's primary position, the pre-linguistic situation, is that in which his desire "exists solely in the single plane of the imaginary relation of the specular stage, projected, alienated in the other". It is the fact that the subject sees the desire only in another, unable to articulate it, leads – as Lacan repeats after Hegel – to the possibility of "the destruction of the other". However, as we know from Hegel, such a situation is impossible, insofar as the annihilation of the other would be the annihilation of the subject itself, since he recognizes himself only in the other.

But, luckily, "**the subject inhabits the world of the symbol**"[31] – this is where the psychoanalytic function of recognition comes in. This function can only be realized by speech, which allows recognition: the subject is able to declare "what is mine and what is yours". However, this is not a permanent situation, Lacan stated that the tension between the imaginary aggressivity and the symbolic field of speech is a permanent state. Any intersubjective relation can transform into a state of hostility.

The question of this pseudo-Hegelian ontology of symbol seems to be the key to Lacan's early teaching. The starting point of his consideration on the status of reality is not, however, purely philosophical; he finds the image of how man builds his world in Freud's work. Lacan repeatedly refers in this context to the famous passage from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which Freud describes a half-year-old child who was enjoying a very specific game. This boy was throwing "little objects" away from him into hidden places: corners, under the bed. And when he was doing it, he "gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o'".[32] This "o-o-o" was interpreted by the boy's mother as a "fort" (German "gone"). Another form of this game was to lower a wooden reel behind the edge of the bed. This time the boy used not only "fort" – when

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[30] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, transl. James Nichols Jr. (Ithaca––London: Cornel University Press, 1980), 6.

[31] Lacan, *Seminar I*, 171.

[32] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, transl. James Strachey (New York–London: WW Norton & Company, 1961), 8.

he was letting the reel down – but also said the word "da" (here) when he was pulling the reel in.[33] Freud interprets this play as an exercise in the presence and absence of the mother, paradoxical in terms of pleasure principle. But Lacan reads this game in strictly Hegelian terms:

> Fort! Da! It is already when quite alone that the desire of the human child becomes the desire of another, of an alter ego who dominates him and whose object of desire is henceforth his own affliction.
>
> Should the child now address an imaginary or real partner, he will see that this partner too obeys the negativity of his discourse, and since his call has the effect of making the partner slip away, he will seek to bring about the reversal that brings the partner back to his desire through a banishing summons.
>
> Thus the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject's desire.[34]

How to understand this "desire of another"? Lacan proposes a fairly common-sense explanation here – this other interprets the 'subject's cry; and only *via* the other, the content of the desire is agreed. But human desire is not only the desire for the other, but it also arises from the absence. Desire has two basic dimensions: spatial and temporal. At the first moment of this movement, the subject deals with an object that occupies a specific space. It is a purely imaginary dimension – the primary ontological situation for the subject is the situation in which, by differentiating itself and the external world, he projects itself onto other objects. In other words, the ego unity that the subject obtains through identification is projected onto external objects, the ego's unity is a condition for their unity: "The image of his body is the principle of every unity he perceives in objects".[35] However, what characterizes both the ego and the objects is an inertia – the ego and the object occupying a certain space cannot by themselves be established as something permanent. Whenever they change, they become a different object. When they disappear from sight, they completely disappear. Here, we remain somewhat in line with Berkeley's

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[33] Freud, *Beyond*, 9.

[34] Lacan, *Écrits*, 262.

[35] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, transl. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York–London: WW Norton & Company, 1998), 166.

considerations – who sustains the existence of an object when there is no subject perceiving them? Lacan replies:

> (…) In order for the symbolic object freed from its usage to become the word freed from the hie et nunc, the difference resides not in the sonorous quality of its matter, but in its vanishing being in which the symbol finds the permanence of the concept.
>
> Through the word – which is already a presence made of absence – absence itself comes to be named in an original moment whose perpetual recreation Freud's genius detected in a child's game. And from this articulated couple of presence and absence (…) a language's [*langue*] world of meaning is born, in which the world of things will situate itself.[36]

According to Lacan, the concept has a greater causative power than just the presentation of the object in the perception by the subject. The fact that a concept appears in the human vocabulary allows for much more than if a person would face the subject of that concept face to face. Lacan gave a semi-humorous example: the concept of an "elephant" as an element of human discourse determines the existence of elephants as real animals to a much greater extent than a direct contact with them. Animal protection institutions can make decisions about an elephant's life without having to deal with the elephant directly. And this fact of indirectness does not mean that the elephant will not be affected by this decision.[37] Hence, time is opposed to space – Lacan repeats after Hegel (basically after Kojève) that "the concept is the time of the things".[38] Kojève stated: "'Time is the negation of Space";[39] in other words, time annihilates resisting material space, "sinking it into the nothingness of the past".[40] At the same time, however, "as long as the Meaning (…) is embodied in an empirically existing entity, this Meaning or Essence, as well as this entity, lives".[41]

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[36] Lacan, *Écrits*, 228.
[37] Lacan, *Seminar I*, 178.
[38] Ibidem, 242.
[39] Kojève, *Introduction*, 137.
[40] Ibidem, 137.
[41] Ibidem, 140.

In this context, Lacan speaks of the "creative function of speech" – while the imaginary is able to differentiate the subject and the object, only speech rooted in the symbolic is able to constitute human reality:

> Before speech, nothing either is or isn't [rien n'est, ni n'est pas]. Everything is already there, no doubt, but it is only with speech that there are things which are – which are true or false, that is to say which are – and things which are not.[42]

The symbolic introduces the possibility of differentiating between truth and lies, presence and absence – even being as such is not possible in other way than on the basis of speech. But what kind of relationship is there between the concept and the thing? Since the basis for the emergence of an object-as-concept is not "the sonorous quality of its matter"[43] but the difference between presence and absence, then "the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing".[44]

Lacan follows faithfully in the footsteps of his philosophical master; for Kojève "conceptual approach to reality" is tantamount to killing; for a concept to detach itself from its thing, that thing must be finite or mortal, so that the entity is annihilated "every moment of its existence" by departing into the past. This permanent negation of reality by the subject constitutes, according to Lacan, the essence of human desire – in this matter, he is not only faithful to the Hegelian formula of desire as a desire of the other, but also borrows from Hegel through Kojève the very understanding of how desire is embedded in human reality – it is a "desire of the absent"; for something to be desired, it must be absent. Desire does not really exist, it is – as Kojève says – a hole in this space. As in fort-da play, which is an ideal psychoanalytical model of human desire, the subject with his "away" annihilates the existence of an exiled other, at the same time immortalizing the desire for his presence. If human cognition were reduced to the perception of an object by a subject, the evoked other would constitute a set of different perceptions, symbolization allows, however, for conveying the essence of the other or an object.

[42] Lacan, *Seminar I*, 228.
[43] Lacan, *Écrits*, 228.
[44] Ibidem, 262.

Hence, we can say that for Lacan, the Berkeleyan formula "esse est percipi" should become "being, it is to be spoken".

"Being-toward-Death"? – Conclusions

It should be noted, however, that Lacan is not a metaphysician, his considerations about reality are not intended to build a philosophical system but are to constitute the foundation of the clinical practice. In that case, what is the purpose of this quite bizarre combination of Hegel (or rather Kojève) and Lèvi-Strauss? There must be a meeting point between the two distant characters. It seems that Lacan saw this convergence in the issue of the tension between the particular and the universal, and in the issue of possible reconciliation of these two orders. In psychoanalysis, this reconciliation could be attained by providing the (particular) subject with a (universal) language in which he is able to articulate his history. In other words, the goal of analytical therapy would be to historicize desire, making this desire articulable. The unconscious is not – as we have shown – some place where hidden human drives are manifested, but it is the instance which, having a trans-individual character, is a condition of cognition as such. What causes neurosis is discontinuity in this essentially universal unconscious. The tensions between speech and language, which we mentioned earlier, are, therefore, tensions between the universal and the particular – to put it simply: the aim of the analysis of the neurotic would be to symbolize the trauma, place it in the context of what is Universal.

But are we not overestimating the hypothetical Lacanian Hegelianism here? After all, the key to Hegelian *Phenomenology* is the concept of self-consciousness. Can there be anything more distant from self-consciousness (*das Selbst-Bewusstsein*) than the Freudian unconscious (*das Unbewusste*)? After all, the core of Freud's discovery was to break the self-transparency of the cogito – the subject was not supposed to have access to some truth about himself. Lacan, however, equates this *Spaltung* (split) of the subject into the conscious and the unconscious with "the fundamental identity of the particular and the universal". The aim of the analysis according to "early" Lacan

would, therefore, be to reconcile these two orders in the subject, in other words, to express the particularity of speech in the universality of language. For Slavoj Zižek, who tirelessly searches for Hegelian motives in Lacan's work, also in those points where they are not explicitly Hegelian, the end of Lacanian analysis would be some form of absolute knowledge.[45] This knowledge would become the subject in the future imperfect, argued Alexandre Kojève:

> Thus, this I will be its own product: it will be (in the future) what it has become by negation (in the present) of what it was (in the past), this negation being accomplished with a view to what it will become.[46]

Lacan seems to repeat this formula:

> What is realized in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the perfect as what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming.[47]

In the analysis, the subject does not recreate his history one-to-one. The analysis is a secondary historicization, providing meaning to events already past, leading to the emergence of some future subjectivity. Subjectivity is forged in the act of speaking – when I speak, I define what I want; I agree and potentially gain recognition by placing my desire in the broader context of the symbolic.

The truth of the subject becomes relativized, forged only in the process of analytical interpretation; it is not the correspondence between the thought and the thing, since the thing itself is the result of an agreement between the subject and the universal. Lacan, however, does not shy away from formulating some "primary truth", which constitutes the essence of subjectivity and human existence. The inspiration from Kojève's *Lectures* turns out to be the key again. As we know, Kojève's project was quite specific – for him, Hegel was not a master of panlogism but a philosopher of negativity. Ethan

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[45] Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London–New York: Verso, 2012), 507.

[46] Kojève, *Introduction*, 5.

[47] Lacan, *Écrits*, 247.

Kleinberg describes this reading as, on the one hand, focused on the end of history (so it would be the Marxist/political aspect of this reading) and, on the other hand, on anthropocentrism, which was based on Heidegger's philosophy expressed in *Being and Time*. According to Kleinberg, this inspiration was so significant that Kojève used Hegel to read Heidegger, as he used Heidegger to read Hegel.[48] For Kojève, Human finitude reveals itself in those situations in which human life becomes endangered; even in the master and slave dialectic, where it is the fear of death that determines the position of the self-consciousness: being a master or being a slave. The latter "underwent the fear of death, the fear of the absolute Master. By this fear, the slavish Consciousness melted internally; it shuddered deeply and everything fixed-or-stable trembled in it".[49] At the same time, the slave would understand ("without realizing it") that even being the master does not "exhaust human existence". So, paradoxically, there is freedom in death – if I am finite, I have a choice:

> (…) If, then, some being, and in particular some human being, were infinite in the sense that it lasted eternally (= as long as Time lasts), and if it did not realize certain possibilities of Being, these possibilities would be impossibilities for it or in relation to it. In other words, it would be rigorously determined by these impossibilities in its being and in its existence, as well as in its "appearance": it would not be truly free. While existing eternally, a being will necessarily realize all its possibilities, and will realize none of its impossibilities.[50]

Thus, immortality eliminates the possibility of transcending one's own nature. A man "can be individual and free only to the extent that he implies in his being all the possibilities of Being but does not have the time to realize and manifest them all".[51]

Therefore, we find freedom and individuality in human, insofar as the totality of the realized possibilities does not include all possibilities; in human existence, the infinity of possible realizations meets the finite nature of

[48] Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation existential: Heidegger's philosophy in France, 1927–1961* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[49] Kojève, *Introduction*, 21.

[50] Ibidem, 249.

[51] Ibidem, 251.

his being. It is a rather peculiar understanding of Heidegger's being-to-death. But it should be noted that there is a significant discrepancy between the philosophers – while for Heidegger, the anxiety (*Angst*) is the moment when the *Dasein* can accept its own finitude, Kojève would be more concerned with overcoming that anxiety.

Like Kojève, Lacan refers to death as a master when he posits that the subject should grasp his own mortality. To free oneself from narcissistic fixations, the subject must "tear off" the masks to reveal the face of the "absolute master: death".[52] It is the finitude that constitutes the most primordial truth about human existence: "the first symbol in which we recognize humanity in its vestiges is the burial".[53] But Lacan seems to suggest – unlike Kojève – to accept mortality: recognize that many aspects of human existence are in fact attempts to escape from its own finitude.

Undoubtedly, this approach – despite its focus on finitude – is optimistic, far from Lacan's later (fundamental for reception of his work) approach to the subject as an almost passive element of the structure, "subject of the signifier" that escapes any sense or truth. When Lacan undertakes an independent – not through Lèvi-Strauss and unfiltered by Hegelianism – reflection on language, he excludes the possibility of expressing subjectivity through speech, condemning him to the metonymic continuation of the desire-to-be. At the source of Lacan's optimism lays the tacit assumption about the possibility of the adequacy of the elements of language: signifiers and signifieds. To express the particularity of the subject in the universality of speech, there must be some correspondence.

A few years later, Lacan reformulated this thesis in a text entitled *Instance of a Letter in the Unconscious and Reason since Freud*, stating "I am not, where I am the plaything of my thought; I think about what I am where I do not think I am thinking", which should be understood as the subject's impossibility of being grasped itself – the subject always escapes the possibility of being grasped by signifiers.

These radical differences between the "Hegelian" (or, as Lorenzo Chiesa would like, pseudo-Hegelian) subject-as-meaning and the "subject of

[52] Lacan, *Écrits*, 289.
[53] Ibidem, 262–263.

signifiers", embedded in Lacan's revised paradigm of structural linguistics, require a revision of the traditional approach to the perception of his "theoretical identity". Despite the superficial "structurality" of Lacan's work in the early 1950s, the vision of the subject he proposes is a surprisingly classic one. The mere inspiration of Claude Lèvi-Strauss' anthropological theories did not make Lacan a structuralist author – we can assume that he needed anthropology only to define the field of the universal.

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show the influence of Claude Levi-Strauss' structural anthropology and kojévian Hegelianism on Jacques Lacan's early teaching. However, this is not just about showing the similarities between these theories, but also about how these influences defined the shape of Lacan's theory. It turns out that the influence that kojévian Hegelianism had on Lacan is not just a theoretical curiosity, but it constitutes the essence and the aim of Lacan's clinical practice. The final conclusion of the article is the thesis that the essence of the early period of Lacan's teaching can be defined as more Hegelian than structuralist. The essence of this theory is not so much focus on Symbolic understood anthropologically, but reflection on the tension between the Universal and the Particular. In the article, I first describe the problem of the unconscious and Universality in Lèvi-Strauss's teaching. Subsequently, I explain how Lèvi-Strauss' concept of the unconscious influenced Lacan's theory. Finally, I present Hegelian aspects of Lacan's clinical theory and ontology.

Keywords: Lacan, psychoanalysis, structuralism, Hegel, Kojéve