

Alenka Zupančič*

Construction in Traversing the Fantasy¹

Keywords

fantasy, drives, construction in analysis, primal repression, fundamental fantasy

Abstract

Jacques Nassif's commentary on Freud's analysis of the fustigation fantasy ("A child is being beaten") offers several incisive points of entry into Freud's conceptualization of fantasy and its relation to other central notions of psychoanalysis. This text examines its connection to the drives, as well as the distinction between the structural, the individual, and the singular in fantasy formation, emphasizing Freud's notion of "construction in analysis" as pivotal. It highlights the difference between the "fundamental fantasy" and the so-called "original fantasies," and proposes an articulation of the relation between drives and fantasy grounded in the concept of primal repression (*Urverdrängung*).

Konstrukcija v prekoračitvi fantazme

Ključne besede

fantazma, goni, konstrukcija v analizi, prapotlačitev, temeljna fantazma

Povzetek

Komentar Jacquesa Nassifa k Freudovi analizi fantazme tepeža ("Otrok je tepen") ponuja več prodornih vstopnih točk v Freudovo konceptualizacijo fantazme in njenega

101

¹ This article is a result of the research programme P6-0014 "Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy," the research project N6-0286 "Reality, Illusion, Fiction, Truth: A Preliminary Study," and the research project J6-4623 "Conceptualizing the End: Its Temporality, Dialectics, and Affective Dimension," which are funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

* ZRC SAZU, Institute of Philosophy, Ljubljana, Slovenia
alenka.zupancic@zrc-sazu.si | <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9499-0647>

odnosa do drugih osrednjih pojmov psihoanalize. Besedilo preučuje njeno povezavo s pojmom gona ter razliko med strukturnim, individualnim in singularnim v formaciji fantazme, pri čemer poudari Freudov pojem »konstrukcije v analizi« kot ključen. Izpostavi razliko med »temeljno fantazmo« in tako imenovanimi »izvornimi fantazmami« ter predlaga artikulacijo razmerja med goni in fantazmo, utemeljeno v pojmu praprotlačitve (*Urverdrängung*).



Jacques Nassif's text offers a remarkable reading of Freud's analysis of the "A child is being beaten" fantasy. "Remarkable" because of what it manages to bring out not only in relation to the Freudian text itself but also to the broader question of the formation of fantasy. What is at stake here is the formation of individual fantasy. Yet from a Freudian perspective, the "individual" is never simply the opposite of something more general or "structural." For example, the fantasy of castration is said to be the "bedrock" of the beating fantasy. But to say it is the bedrock does not mean that it constitutes the *phantasmatic core* of this particular fantasy. The latter is something different, and can only emerge through a "construction in analysis." It is this latter dimension that is also at stake in Lacan's notion of "traversing the fantasy," which marks the end of analysis.² We will re-

² There seems to be some terminological confusion in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis between the terms *fundamental fantasy* and *original* or *primal fantasy*. Nassif uses both terms when referring to the castration fantasy, but I am inclined to argue that the more appropriate term here would be *original/primal fantasy*. In their famous 1964 paper "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," Laplanche and Pontalis, following Freud, speak of three *original fantasies*, which are also *fantasies of origin*: the fantasy of the primal scene (being present at one's conception), the fantasy of castration, and the fantasy of seduction. Like myths, these fantasies all concern origins: the primal scene pictures the origin of the individual; seduction fantasies stage the origin and upsurge of sexuality; castration fantasies picture the origin of sexual difference. See Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Fantasme originaire, fantasme des origines, origine du fantasme," *Temps Modernes* 215 (1964): 1833–68; "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49, no. 1 (1968): 1–18.

I would suggest that these *original fantasies*—which, moreover, are usually not entirely inaccessible to consciousness (they are often brought into analysis and recognized there)—should be distinguished from the phantasmatic core which, according to Freud, can only ever be a *construction in analysis* and never something directly assumed by the analysand in the course of analysis.

turn to this distinction between structural or “original” fantasies and the phantasmatic core of fantasy later, but the main focus of our study, following Nassif, will be on the relationship between the temporal and the atemporal aspects of fantasy as a dynamic interplay between structure and history.

It would be too simple to view the relationship between the “structural” and the individual merely as the way in which an individual, on account of her particular subjective history and circumstances, forms her own version of the “structural impasse,” her own—more or less complicated—way of dealing with it. Nassif identifies a third level, which he calls the “archaeology of fantasy,” that makes it possible to think about breaks or cuts in the succession of phases.

What is at stake here is neither simply a historical succession or development of fantasy through different “phases” or formulations (Freud identifies three), nor simply a disclosure of what in these phases is “structural” (atemporal). Rather, it is what Nassif calls *permutations*. The curious feature of these permutations is that they do not merely twist around some inflexible core structure, but seem to induce change in the structure and its relations themselves. The permutations can be said to take place at the level of historical development, but they are not reducible to it, since they also introduce something like a transformation of the structural relations.

As Freud already put it:

A systematic application of [psychoanalysis] shows that fustigation fantasies have a historical development which is by no means simple, and in the course of which they are changed in most respects more than once—as regards their relation to the author of the fantasy, and as regards their object, their content and their significance.³

103

Another crucial difference is that the primal or original fantasies, according to Freud, are universals. By contrast, the “fundamental fantasy,” as understood by Lacan, is singular for each subject. I will return to this distinction in more detail in the second part of this text.

³ Sigmund Freud, “‘A Child is Being Beaten’: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of the Sexual Perversions,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955–74), 17:184.

Nassif proposes a detailed analysis of what occurs on three levels: that of content (the clinical manifestation, of which the fantasy is only a symptom), that of the object (the person—or rather the sex—of the beaten subject in the fantasy), and that of signification (the connection the subject establishes between beating and loving or hating). He concludes by asking whether, without simply abandoning the “archaeological foundation” of castration, another fantasy might not form, articulated through a different verbalization.

Fantasy and Drives

Let us start by some basic clarifications concerning the notion of fantasy.

First, fantasy in the psychoanalytic sense is not some subjective scenario waiting and wanting to *get realized*. It participates in reality and sustains it exactly *as fantasy*. In this sense fantasies are not the opposite of reality, but its support. What prevents fantasy from being fulfilled is not simply our fear (“lack of nerve” or other considerations), but above all the fact that fantasy fully fulfils its role *such as it is*, as fantasy.

If fantasy is the substitute for the impossible/forbidden enjoyment,⁴ it has the capacity to transform the enjoyment in question into something not only “possible,” but actual—something taking place. The “substitute” is not a next-best replacement for what one cannot have; it is *a way of having what one cannot have*, and of enjoying it. There is no way the subject could access this enjoyment without the screen of fantasy (except, perhaps, in certain cases of perversion). In other words, fantasy—in its final, “monolithic” form (to use Nassif’s term), in our case “*A child is being beaten*”—is what sustains and provides enjoyment, rather than something that merely imagines or fantasizes about it. It manifests as libidinal excitation, which most often finds its outlet in masturbatory acts.⁵

As Nassif—and Freud before him—show very clearly, the seemingly “neutral” and “abstract” nature of the final formula (it is neither clear who the beater is nor who the beaten child is) is far from simply neutral or abstract. For the verbalization to function as a fantasy, it must in some way carry within itself the

⁴ Freud, 17:189.

⁵ Freud, 17:189.

breaks (shifts, substitutions) so meticulously analyzed by Nassif. Nassif's choice of the term "archaeology" is hardly arbitrary. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud famously compares the unconscious apparatus to the city of Rome, in which several different cities and civilizations coexist, superimposed upon one another.⁶ In his text "Constructions in Analysis" the archeological metaphor is even more prominent.⁷ Nassif's particular use of the term aims at formulating a model of a singular mixture of the temporal and the atemporal: "*we are dealing with a temporal–intemporal mix where the relationship to the origin is not thought in terms of cause and effect, but in terms of resemblance and difference.*"⁸

This last point is crucial: resemblance and difference take the place of the temporal cause-and-effect relation, yet this does not mean that the temporal dimension, or "history," simply disappears. Rather, we could say that it continues to exist as a kind of "frozen history" that endows these resemblances and differences with their specific libidinal charge.

Perhaps this archaeological model or comparison is especially apt as a model of fantasy (even more so than of the unconscious in general, as Freud suggested), since it resonates strongly with Freud's decomposition of the beating fantasy into three sequences and the permutations between them, as analyzed by Nassif. However, in a footnote to this passage, Nassif goes a step further: he recalls Freud's reflections in the essay "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," where drive activity and its effects are given yet another metaphor — this time "geological" rather than archaeological.

Perhaps, however, it is permissible to look at the matter and represent it in yet another way. We can divide the life of each instinct into a series of *separate successive waves, each of which is homogeneous* during whatever period of time it may last, and whose relation to one another is comparable to that of *successive eruptions of lava*. We can then perhaps picture the first, original eruption of the instinct as *proceeding in an unchanged form* and undergoing no development at all. The next wave would be modified *from the outset*—being turned, for instance, from active

⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," in *Standard Edition*, 21:69.

⁷ See Sigmund Freud, "Constructions in Analysis," in *Standard Edition*, 23:259–60.

⁸ Jacques Nassif, "Fantasy in 'A Child is Being Beaten,'" trans. Holden M. Rasmussen, *Filozofski vestnik* 46, no. 3 (2025): 9–32, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.46.3.01>.

to passive—and would then, with this new characteristic, be added to the earlier wave, and so on. If we were then to take a survey of the instinctual impulse from its beginning up to a given point, the succession of waves which we have described would inevitably present *the picture of a definite development of the instinct*.⁹

Here we have the image of successive eruptions of lava, each homogeneous in itself, remaining as it is and undergoing no further development, with each new wave already beginning as a modification (“modified *from the outset*”) and then adding itself to the previous one. The final result, referred to by Freud as a *bestimmter Entwicklung* of the drive—not so much a “definite development” as a “determined” or “specific development”—thus suggests that the elements of the drive are mechanically bound or glued together, rather than organically integrated. It is an image that appears anything but dialectical; the constitutive elements undergo no transformation, no proper movement in their relation.

Lacan seemed to appreciate this image. The French translation of Freud’s *Trieb* as *pulsion* by Laplanche and Pontalis had already emphasized the aspect of pressure or push, to which Lacan added the idea of a pulsatory movement, “erupting” in waves. Furthermore, he proposed his own notion and image of this “mechanical” coalescence of the different elements of the drive: namely, *montage*.¹⁰ But let us remain with Freud’s image.

First, we need of course to take into account that, in the passage quoted above, Freud speaks of the *drives* (and their vicissitudes), as does Lacan when talking

⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” in *Standard Edition*, 14:130–31; my emphasis.

¹⁰ “The *montage* of the drive is a *montage* which, first, is presented as having neither head nor tail—in the sense in which one speaks of *montage* in a surrealist collage. If we bring together the paradoxes that we just defined at the level of *Drang*, at that of the object, at that of the aim of the drive, I think that the resulting image would show the working of a dynamo connected up to a gas-tap, a peacock’s feather emerges, and tickles the belly of a pretty woman, who is just lying there looking beautiful. Indeed, the thing begins to become interesting from this very fact, that the drive defines, according to Freud, all the forms of which one may reverse such a mechanism. This does not mean that one turns the dynamo upside-down—one unrolls its wires, it is they that become the peacock’s feather, the gas-tap goes into the lady’s mouth, and the bird’s rump emerges in the middle.” Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 169.

about *pulsion*, and drives are not the same as fantasies. In this sense it would be questionable to treat the different sequences/phases of fantasy discussed by Freud in his fustigation fantasy essay as different “layers of lava” from the image he proposes in his essay on the drives. And yet, there seems to be a connection. In the Freudian take, and to put it simply, fantasy is what mediates between drives and reality.

In what follows I propose to pursue the quote that appears in Nassif’s footnote, and use it to raise the following question: What exactly would be the relationship between, on the one hand, the subsequent “eruptions of lava” in Freud’s model of drives and, on the other, fantasy? This is indeed a key question, and a complex one.

We can begin with the drives and the way Freud presents them in the quoted passage. Freud’s formulation is in fact more dialectical, or at least more dynamic, than it may appear at first sight. We are not simply dealing with successive eruptions of lava that are connected only in a purely external, mechanical way. First, these eruptions seem to have the same source: they arise from the same pressure, they originate in the same place. In this sense they are clearly connected. Second, something also occurs at this very source that *alters the texture and composition* of each layer. (“The next wave would be modified *from the outset*—being turned, for instance, from active to passive.”) In other words, although the layers remain as they are and undergo no subsequent change or development, they nonetheless embody change: they are like *frozen frames* of a certain development or permutation. They themselves do not change, but they do constitute change. The key feature of this “development,” if we can call it that, is that it takes place through cuts, not through linear, continuous motion. The pressure (*Drang*) of the drive is constant, as Freud insists, but its formations are not; they come in waves.

What is it exactly that induces the modification or difference? Why does the drive not just repeat the same, unmodified “eruption”? Moreover, we also have to bear in mind that a repetition with a difference can very well be the repetition of the same, and does not *necessarily* mean that something has effectively changed at the source (“from the outset” of each eruption). In psychoanalysis, repetition is involved not only in a stereotype of behavior, but also takes place as a repetition in relation to something always missed, as a repetition of a failed

encounter, and the encounter can fail in different ways. We also—and crucially—need to bear in mind that that “failure” in this case does not simply imply a failure of the satisfaction, it does not mean that the satisfaction is missed, and that this is what motivates and drives subsequent attempts. On the contrary, the lesson of the drives is exactly the opposite: they always find satisfaction. The point is not that the repetition involved in drives springs from the fact that drive is never satisfied, never gets its thing. The point is rather that it always gets it, because its “thing” is to return to the circuit, to repeat the repetition. This is what Lacan articulates by distinguishing between the drive’s aim and its goal. Drive makes its tour around the impossible object of satisfaction, and it is this tour that *satisfies it*.¹¹ In this precise sense, and in spite of its “failure” or “missed encounter”—or, rather, through it—drive repeats the satisfaction, it is the repetition of some satisfaction that “drives” it, not its lack.

We could say that drive is indifferent to what and how it repeats (hence its “plasticity” or, better, *flexibility*), but it would seem that something else is not so indifferent to what goes on here. Drive is constitutively linked to and, hence, affected by the unconscious. Not only does it (that is to say, its representatives) become subject to repression, *Verdrängung*, but Freud also links the drive to his hypothesis of a *primal repression*: a kind of original hole of the unconscious that fixates the latter and becomes the condition and basis of all subsequent repressions, that is of what we usually call repression.¹² The constitution of the unconscious does not simply coincide with the first thing we repress, there needs to already be something in place that receives, and even “attracts” (Freud’s term), this repressed thing. Primal repression, writes Freud, befalls “the psychical (ideational) representative of the drive.” It is here that Freud introduces the famous term *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz (des Triebes)*.¹³

108

Lacan makes a point of translating this as “that which takes the place of the representation” (*le tenant-lieu de la représentation*), or something that “stands for representation.”¹⁴ As already emphasized, the latter differs, according to Freud, from the “second stage of repression,” which “affects mental derivatives of the

¹¹ Lacan, 178–79.

¹² Sigmund Freud, “Repression,” in *Standard Edition*, 14:148.

¹³ Freud, 14:149.

¹⁴ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 60, 110.

repressed representative”¹⁵—or, to comply with Lacan’s translation: which affects mental derivatives of the repressed stand-in for representation. The point of Lacan’s emphasis, I would venture to say, is to mark out the singular character of primal repression: what is repressed is something that does not even have a “representative,” something that takes place of a missing representation. We could even say that it takes the place of an “originally missing representation,” in the precise sense that it is not missing because repressed, but *missing before it is repressed*, so to speak. In *Urverdrängung*, we repress not only its stand-in, but also that fact that a representation is missing from the outset.

This doubly twisted topology is indeed crucial if we want to appreciate the Freudian and Lacanian theory of the drives and their relation to the unconscious, and particularly their relation to fantasy. We could put it as follows: The primal repression as repression of the *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* splits and follows two destinies (which nevertheless remain intertwined). One follows the representative stand-in, its repression, and the subsequent repression of its derivatives—which further implies the movement and the dialectics of the unconscious and its formations, gives place to symptoms, neurosis, etc.—whereas the other becomes fantasy, a “fundamental fantasy,” which provides the coordinates of desire and fixates the enjoyment for the subject. Due to its tie with the missing *Vorstellung*, it could perhaps also be called a “phantasmatic *Vorstellung*.” In this sense, a fundamental fantasy is precisely the “impossible” *Vorstellung*. As such, it orchestrates and organizes the drive, particularly its “vicissitudes” or, to use Freud’s image, it’s volcano-like eruptions.

The fact that fantasy has itself a “history” and can be broken down in different phases, is not to be confused with permutations that take place at the level of the drive which it orchestrates; these are two different things. The montage of the drive, and its openness to reversibility, is not the same as superimposition of the different phases that constitute the fantasy. They are, however, *related* in the sense that the fantasy, once constituted, directs and affects both the pulsations of the drive and the enjoyment derived from it. It is also in this way that fantasy could be said to mediate between drives and reality.

¹⁵ Freud, “Repression,” 14:148.

“Traversing the Fantasy”

Let us return to the notion of “primal repression”: an element of the missing (“repressed”) representative of the *Vorstellung* continues its life as a “fundamental fantasy,” to borrow Lacan’s term, which does not refer to the monolithic verbalization that provides and sustains enjoyment for the subject (“A child is being beaten”), but instead relates to what Freud claims can only take place as a construction in analysis.

Bringing Freud and Lacan together in this way, we could say that fundamental fantasies are *correlates* of primal repression, or even that they are one with it; they are like *transcendental frames* that structure desire and its relationship to enjoyment. This is precisely why they are not exactly repressed, or “unconscious” in the common sense of the term. We cannot perceive them, or become conscious of them, because everything we perceive, we perceive through their frame. We could also say that—in the particular case or example we are discussing—they constitute a missing link that holds together the three phases of the fustigation fantasy according to Freud (1. “My father is beating the child, he only loves me”; 2. “My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father)”; 3. “A child is being beaten”). The middle phase is not, and can never be “conscious” or “experienced,” because it constitutes the constitutional frame of the other two which, in contrast, can eventually be brought to consciousness.

We also know that a great deal is going on *behind the scenes* of these different phases of the fantasy, which indeed appear as frozen frames of all this happening (things get repressed, accents shift, sexes change, etc.). Nassif brings all of this out very meticulously; not in order to fill out the blanks, but rather to demonstrate how these additional elements are in fact vehicles of several cuts (their repetitions), rather than providing something homogenous and continual.

110

As suggested above, the non-homogeneity of this space is emphasized by the significant difference that Freud makes between what we could call the “ontological status” of the three sequences or “phases” of the fustigation fantasy. He points out that one of them (the second phase: “I am being beaten by my father”) has never been actual but is a “construction” of analysis.

The second phase is the most important and the most momentous of all. But we may say of it in a certain sense that it has never had a real existence. It is never remembered, it has never succeeded in becoming conscious. It is a construction of analysis, but it is no less a necessity on that account.¹⁶

As a matter of fact, we could probably even say that it is the only one which is “a necessity” strictly speaking, whereas the others may well depend on contingencies. In what follows, I focus on the particular modality of “constructions in analysis” that concerns the “fundamental fantasy,” and set aside a discussion of the broader—though intriguing and indeed central—topic of the necessity of analytic construction.¹⁷

To the ambivalence or, rather, oscillation between love and hate that Freud highlights (the signification of “being beaten” oscillates between “being loved” and “being hated”) Nassif adds the connection between “beating” and “fucking,” which makes “loving (me)” resonate with “making love (to me),” thus making the incestuous layer of the fantasy more explicit. As Nassif writes,

Being beaten, needless to say, is an arduous bodily experience for the child, and it could well be, more generally, that “to beat” means “to fuck” [*“baiser”*] for him, since in any case he has no word at his disposal to recount a strictly amorous relation, and that is what it is all about really.¹⁸

However, this *does not* simply mean that it is because of its link to incest and its social prohibition that this second phase is repressed to the extent that it never, not even in analysis, becomes conscious and can only remain a construction. What Freud suggests is rather that this sequence is of a different order, situated on a different level, which escapes the opposition “repressed–not-repressed” (or conscious). It is, we could say, what sustains, holds up the subject who represses something, or not. It is a criterion for repression, not its content.

¹⁶ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:185.

¹⁷ For important discussion on this broader level see Tadej Troha, “The Objective Construction: Freud and the Primal Scene,” in *Objective Fictions: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Marxism*, ed. Adrian Johnston, Boštjan Nedoh, and Alenka Zupančič (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 198–216, and Jacques-Alain Miller, “Marginalia to ‘Constructions in Analysis,’” *Psychoanalytical Notebooks* 22 (2011): 47–74.

¹⁸ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 17.

Let us illustrate this with an example from another register: Jonathan Glazer's film *The Zone of Interest*. In order to live their idyllic family life next to the extermination camp, the Nazi family simply did not see certain things and horrors around them (they did not see them even when they looked at them; in this sense, they "repressed" them). But, in order to be able to do so in the first place, they had to tell themselves a certain story, one that provided the frame and conditions for repression to take place. This story that "they told themselves" is not something they could consciously think about; it is never present to them in that way.

The story we tell ourselves when repressing certain things (or in order to be able to repress certain things¹⁹) is not the same as a "rationalization"; it is something else entirely. It is not a conscious narrative, but a framework that structures repression itself. Moreover, it is precisely this "something else" that can only appear through a "construction in analysis": not a fabrication, but rather a mapping of the "transcendental constitution" of a particular subjective destiny, or of a specific chain of repressions.

Psychoanalysis is particularly "unforgiving" and non-comforting in this respect, because for it to "work" it sooner or later confronts us with the paradoxical fact that we are responsible for our own "transcendental constitution"; that, albeit not in any empirical moment of time, we have in some way chosen this constitution, and in this sense have "chosen our unconscious." It is at this level that what is called the "traversal of fantasy" unfolds at the end of analysis. It is important to stress, however, that to be "responsible" for one's transcendental constitution is not equivalent to being irremediably *guilty*. Guilt is something else; it is a form of subjectivation, a way of inscribing oneself into one's particular history or destiny.

112

Earlier, I suggested that the missing representation involved in *Urverdrängung* splits and follows two intertwined destinies. One line follows its representative substitute, its repression, and the subsequent repression of its derivatives

¹⁹ For we must bear in mind that it is not that simple, or obvious, to repress something. *Cela ne vas pas de soi*, as the French idiom has it—this "doesn't just go by itself" or perhaps "it doesn't go without saying"—whereby the "saying" in this case would be precisely the hole of primal repression as framed by the fantasy. I cannot just decide, "Okay, I'll repress *this* so that it will make my life easier."

(which further implies the movement and dialectic of the unconscious and its formations, giving rise to symptoms, neuroses, etc.). The other becomes fantasy—a “fundamental fantasy”—which provides the coordinates of desire and fixates enjoyment for the subject. In analysis, these two paths correspond respectively to interpretation and to construction. As Slavoj Žižek puts it,

an interpretation is a gesture that is always embedded in the intersubjective dialectic of recognition between the analysand and the analyst; it aims to bring about the effect of truth apropos of some particular formation of the unconscious (a dream, a symptom, a slip of the tongue . . .): the subject is expected to “recognize” himself in the signification proposed by the interpreter, precisely in order to subjectivize this signification, to assume the proposed signification as “his own” (“Yes, my God, that’s me, I really wanted this . . .”). The very success of interpretation is measured by this “effect of truth,” by the extent to which it *affects the subjective position of the analysand* (stirs up memories of the hitherto deeply repressed traumatic encounters, provoking violent resistance). In clear contrast to interpretation, a construction (typically that of a fundamental fantasy) has the status of a knowledge which can never be subjectivized—that it, it can never be assumed by the subject as the truth about himself, the truth in which he recognizes the innermost kernel of his being. A construction is a purely explanatory logical presupposition.²⁰

I would suggest that already in *Seminar XI*, Lacan makes room for this distinction (often associated with the so-called “late Lacan”) when he differentiates between alienation and separation, insisting on the importance of the latter. Alienation corresponds to, and constitutes the space of, interpretation, i.e. the pursuit of the metonymy of desire. This includes identifying the fantasies that sustain desire or narrate its originally lost object. At this level, the subject is led to “find” her desire, to establish its unconscious mapping, and to subjectivize the mishaps and oddities encountered along this path. Yet this is not enough; and, it is precisely in insisting that this is not enough that Lacan distinguishes himself from, what was at that time, mainstream psychoanalysis. In this sense, we could say that this is how and why he “returned to Freud,” remaining more faithful to him than many “Freudians.”

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 35–36.

Separation, on the other hand, introduces and marks the “greatest possible distance”²¹ between *I* (the ego ideal as point of identification) and *a*, the object of the drive, that element in the subject with which she can never identify and never recognize as her own. At the end of analysis, the subject is not required to assume this object regardless (that would rather constitute the properly Sadean structure of perversion). However, she is “forced,” or perhaps invited, to *live with it*. This unrecognizable object has to appear at the end, and the subject is led *not* to subjectivize it, but to map her relation to it.

It is in this precise sense that the end of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* is one of the best renderings of the end of analysis and of “traversing the fantasy” as a form of separation. I wrote about this extensively some time ago,²² but let me briefly repeat the gist.

At the end of the tragedy, when everything is revealed (that he killed his father and married his mother), and when everyone expects him to kill himself, as befits a tragic hero, Oedipus refuses to do so. He does not *subjectivize* his destiny. He does not make himself the “hero” of this destiny by retroactively recognizing his desire or subjective being where, in truth, he was nothing but a toy in the hands of destiny, decided in advance. He quite literally did not know who his father and mother were (the latter took particular care to ensure that). Oedipus “takes his destiny upon himself,” or accepts responsibility for it, in a very different way: he blinds himself.

How should we understand this gesture? He explains that he did not see the people around him for who they really were (his father and his mother), and so he insists that he is not guilty of parricide and incest. At the same time, he acknowledges that he nevertheless committed these acts in which he cannot recognize himself. What he assumes, then, is not his destiny as such, but the “thing” in him that made the realization of this destiny possible: his particular blindness. In effect, he says: “I did it, and I accept responsibility, but I cannot subjectivize it (and in this sense, I am not guilty).” Here guilt would be an easy way out through an early exit; it would be a way of avoiding the full traversal of the fantasy. Instead of ending his life alongside Jocasta, as everyone more or less

114

²¹ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 273.

²² See Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 175–81.

expects him to do, Oedipus ends up as the *object/abject* of his tragedy/destiny, and continues his life in that “separated” form, which is indeed Sophoclean stroke of a genius.

The sequel, *Oedipus at Colonus*, is one of the strangest and most unusual tragedies—calling it “unusual” is actually quite an understatement. It does little more than depict Oedipus’ life as a blind outcast. Nor is it a “tragedy” in the strict sense. He wanders about, accompanied by his daughter Antigone. When, due to another prophecy, he suddenly becomes a precious object rather than an abject one (an oracle predicts prosperity for the city in which he will be buried, so the Thebans are now eager to forgive him and take him back before he dies), he refuses, and at the end he miraculously disappears without a trace. That is: without a dead body from which this or that political regime could profit, and which would also restore some (political) glory to him, Oedipus.

In *Seminar XI*, when discussing his notion of “traversing the fantasy,” Lacan also wonders what comes afterwards, after analysis:

[N]othing is ever said as to the outcome of the analysis, that is, after the mapping of the subject in relation to the *a*, the experience of the fundamental phantasy becomes the drive. What, then, does he who has passed through the experience of this opaque relation to the origin, to the drive, become? How can a subject who has traversed the radical phantasy experience the drive? This is the beyond of analysis, and has never been approached.²³

If *Oedipus Rex* gives us a near-perfect dramatization of the end of analysis—of “traversing the fantasy”—then *Oedipus at Colonus* can be read as staging what comes afterward: the strange temporal zone that Lacan calls “the beyond of analysis.” Oedipus’ existence as a blind, wandering remainder—neither reintegrated into the polis nor simply excluded from it—offers an uncanny dramatic figure for the subject who has passed through the fantasy and now lives, so to speak, on the other side of it.

For Sophocles, this “after” is not redemption, but a transformed mode of being: a life no longer organized by the fantasy but by something closer to the drive’s

²³ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 273.

insistence, resistant to appropriation. And—perhaps paradoxically—in his case, as a figure of the remainder that no social order quite knows what to do with, is not simply an object, but precisely its *disappearance*. For even as an outcast object, he is still eligible for trade; there is still a way to incorporate him into symbolic or political exchange. It is the disappearance of this object that marks a limit that neither tragedy nor politics can absorb. In this sense, the miraculous vanishing of Oedipus' body at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* is perhaps the most genuinely “materialist”—that is, emancipatory—ending. He does not become “bodiless” or “discorporate”—this would be an “idealistic” reading. No, his body becomes: unavailable.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

References

- Freud, Sigmund. “‘A Child is Being Beaten:’ A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of the Sexual Perversions.” In *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, edited by James Strachey, 175–204. Vol. 17 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.
- . “Civilization and Its Discontents.” In *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents, and Other Works*, edited by James Strachey, 57–145. Vol. 21 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1961.
- . “Constructions in Analysis.” In *Moses and Monotheism, An Outline of Psycho-Analysis, and Other Works*, edited by James Strachey, 255–70. Vol. 23 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1964.
- . “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes.” In *The History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*, edited by James Strachey, 109–40. Vol. 14 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1957.
- . “Repression.” In *The History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*, edited by James Strachey, 141–56. Vol. 14 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1957.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998.

- Laplanche, Jean, and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis. "Fantasme originaire, fantasme des origines, origine du fantasme." *Temps Modernes* 215 (1964): 1833–68.
- . "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49, no. 1 (1964): 1–18.
- Miller, Jacques-Alain. "Marginalia to 'Constructions in Analysis.'" *Psychoanalytical Notebooks* 22 (2011): 47–74.
- Nassif, Jacques. "Fantasy in 'A Child is Being Beaten.'" Translated by Holden M. Rasmussen. *Filozofski vestnik* 46, no. 3 (2025): 9–32. <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.46.3.01>.
- Troha, Tadej. "The Objective Construction: Freud and the Primal Scene." In *Objective Fictions: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Marxism*, edited by Adrian Johnston, Boštjan Nedoh, and Alenka Zupančič, 198–216. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022.
- Zupančič, Alenka. *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan*. London: Verso, 2000.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997.