

## The analyst as an historian: truth, interpretation and perplexity

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**Abstract:** This article discusses History's role in Psychoanalysis as well as its possible consequences within analytical theory and praxis. First, we turn to two Freudian texts that provide paradigmatic notions about History: *Moses and Monotheism* and *Constructions in Analysis*, in order to emphasize Freud's different notions of History. It is demonstrated how the psychoanalytical notion of History can allow us to rethink concepts such as *truth* and *materiality*. Then we analyse the place given to History by Lacan to indicate its centrality, proposing a tripartite distinction between different levels of historicity – real, symbolic and imaginary. Lastly, we present the clinical unfolding of a comparison made by Lacan between analyst and historian.

**Keywords:** transference, history, truth, psychoanalysis.

Articulating the past in a historical manner does not mean recognizing it “as it was”. It means taking possession of a memory when it comes as a flash in a moment of danger.

Walter Benjamin

The notion of History in psychoanalysis is commonly disregarded. Comparing, for instance, publications of an interdisciplinary nature in psychoanalysis, there is a much wider range of texts in other areas such as linguistics, philosophy and anthropology. Much of this disregard towards the discipline within psychoanalytic constructs stems from an assumption that history brings events with a certain linearity, resulting in a causal relationship that would not allow the contingent or even a homogenization of clues, making them coherent among themselves and concealing enigmas, which are necessary for the emergence of the subject in the process of analysis. History, therefore, would be part of an imaginary aspect of subjectivity and should be removed, to the detriment of notions such as structure and formalization<sup>1</sup>.

However, one should recall that Freud, in “Moses and monotheism” (1937-1939/1988), presents not one, but three different notions of history: *Geschichte*, *Historie* and *Historisch*<sup>2</sup>. *Geschichte* refers to historical events, to real and objective history; *Historie*, to conjectural history

or history reconstructed from experience; and *Historisch* would be experiential history, that is, the way history happened for every man who experienced it.

History, within these differentiations presented by Freud, relates to the notion of temporality which is related to experience. Thus, past and present are articulated through successive (not necessarily chronological) events, generating three layers of meaning: *the historical event*, distant and unattainable, is conditioned by *conjectural history* with regard to *experiential history*. It is from these last two terms that we can assume the constitution of the *Geschichte* of the past, in its experiencing – based on the composition of past itself – and future, conditioned by the present time.

It is based on this distinction of History that Freud undertakes the separation between material truth and historical truth in that same essay. If the first concerns concrete events, based on a rigorous, unambiguous analysis of documents and facts getting at the *Geschichte*, historical truth, on the other hand, would start from legends, constructions of myths, religions as well as from speech and language (*Historie* and *Historisch*). More than that, historical truth would obey the logic of repression, whereas material truth would be guided by the principle of an identity with itself.

Contrary to material truth, historical truth does not dwell on what is manifest and literal, historical truth contains something veiled, hidden, therein must deciphering be conducted; in addition, historical truth always has in its scope a return of the past. (Couto & Alberti, 2013, p. 91)

Thus, historical truth would be a kind of modification, misrepresentation of material truth – analogous to that between manifest content and latent content.

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1 Exception being Certeau's essays (2011), which propose a return to History in psychoanalysis based on the assumption that its clinical technique has narrative aspects and, especially, analyzes the relation between both academic fields from the perspective of the historian. The aim of the present article, however, is to discuss up to which level does History provide models for hearing and positioning during transference.

2 The distinction between the terms is presented in a footnote of the *Obras Completas* of Freud, translated by José Luis Etcheverry and published by Amorrortu Editores. In the version published by Imago, there was no differentiation between the terms.

Hence, this is the relationship that we would like to subvert to begin our argument. In analogy to Lacan's maxim of the inexistence of sexual intercourse (Lacan, 1985), it is possible to temporarily support the following postulate: *there is no historical relationship*. In other words, material truth and historical truth, in principle, cannot be related. Firstly, there would be no proportion of historical truth to material truth, in the sense that they would be two distinct regimes of truth – where material truth would be linked to truth with regard to Aristotelian logic, and historical truth would be closer to what Martin Heidegger (Batista, 2005) rescued through the idea of truth as unveiling, *aletheia*. Thus, the very idea of a historical truth that would unveil the individual is incompatible with a conception of material truth that would serve as a model of adequacy. More than that, material truth could only be updated in parts based on historical truth, that is, its “materiality” would only be possible if based on the field of experience of the individual as related to its traits, unique imprints of that experience.

Secondly, in addition to this disproportionality of the nature of its truth regimes, there would be a proper non-relationship between the aforementioned material and historical truths. A concept not considered only at a metapsychological level, but on an experiential level as well. What is the role of a reality – namely, that of material history – in the clinic? This is a difficult question to answer, not because analysts ignore the everyday life of patients, but because analytic work is figured as one of constructing and deconstructing fantasies, thus having no relation to this reality, since it is built from the replay modality at risk during each transference<sup>3</sup>. In other words, there is a difference between *real* and *reality*, as Lacan conceived them (Bousseuyroux, 2007)<sup>4</sup>. The same kind of separation is valid for transference: it is clear that a car accident can prevent an analyst from reaching the session, but it is not this “material truth” that must be considered in the analytical work, but rather a transferential movement in a given moment of treatment. Operationally speaking, constructive and interpretative actions giving the event its real status is a task carried out through the analytical process. That is, when one thinks of the analytic process and its articulation with history, one refers to the position occupied by that event and in which way this position articulates with other positions, generating signifying relations intermediated by transference.

Returning to the issue of history in Freud, in a text similar to “Moses and monotheism”, such a discussion will have another role, properly of more clinical nature. However, it seems that Freud, somehow, will still insist

on traces of the importance of material truth for the constructions of historical truth. That is what happens in the text “Constructions in analysis” (1937/2017), in which Freud compares the work of the analyst with the work of the archaeologist. As far as interpretation is concerned, Freud will even state that “construction” would be a much more appropriate term than “interpretation”, given his well known analogy comparing the archaeologist and the analyst: “Both have the undisputed right of reconstruction through complementation and junction of the preserved remains” (Freud, 1937/2017, p. 368).

That is, no matter how much emphasis is placed on the importance of the so-called historical truth, here, there is the idea of remains, a material truth to which historical truth should fit. Analytical practice would consist of “liberating that part of historical truth from its deformations and connections [*Anlehnungen*] with real present, bringing back that part of the past to which it belongs” (Freud, 1937/2017, p. 378). This idea will also be present when Freud compares, in the same text, neurosis and psychosis based on the idea of constructions (delusional or symptomatic) made from a material fragment lost in the past, whose restitution would fit the work under analysis.

In a sense, it is as if Freud were assuming, based on the notion of historical truth, the important role of temporality in a clinical construction scenario. This means that redefinitions of positioning regarding the past and present would occur from manipulations in the temporality of events, restoring their memories and adding to them their psychoanalytic time. In the words of the protagonist André, of the novel *Lavoura Arcaica* (Nassar, 1989): “Only proper measuring of time provides the proper nature of things” (p. 55). Freud performs this ethical dimension of temporality in clinical practice based on the notion of historical truth, from which “the proper measuring of things” is cut out and located in its temporal aspect.

Here, it is relevant to introduce a radicalism of Lacan's return to Freud, which will elevate negativity to an ontological status. From the critique of concrete reality of primary satisfaction to the primacy of the signifier, passing through the anteriority of the Other with regard to the subject, Lacan seems to be concerned with underlining the illusory character of what appears to be a solid reality, although hidden and/or repressed. That is why, shortly before commenting on “Moses and monotheism” of Freud at the seminar on “*The other side of psychoanalysis*” (1969-1970 / 1992, p. 106), Lacan states that truth *is* repression itself. In other words, given its symbolic structure, the truth, in its psychoanalytic sense, can only be considered based on its own mechanism of concealment.

It is then possible to refine our argument regarding the non-existence of historical relationship, based on a different set of coordinates. This relationship is not by all means completely impossible, as in Lacan's proposal

3 It is possible to think of a contemporary example of material truth in the clinic: when the patient proposes to read snippets of conversation or messages that he exchanges with someone via software application during their session, at first there is an allegation of a supposed materiality of history that, however, meaning nothing if they do not act as evidence of articulations with historicity regimes suitable to the case.

4 Considering the effects of confusing these two dimensions, as in Ernest Kris's so-called “homem dos miolos frescos” (Lacan, 1954/2008).

of non-existence of sexual intercourse. It is about two distinct registers of truth, one connected to the imaginary – material truth – and another which has a symbolic nature – historical truth. Thus, if material truth were to refer to a type of concreteness related to a total and linear and mirrored unification, historical truth would be that which is properly signifying, wherein truth is not reduced to a single image, but is instead the very effect of concealment and its related unveiling.

The relation between historical and material truth would then be analogous to that between symbolic and imaginary: they are dimensions that do not overlap but depend on each other, functioning as reciprocal boundaries. Returning to the three notions of history that Freud presents to us in “Moses and monotheism” (1937/1988), it is as if we were investigating the relations between *Historie* – conjectural history – and *Historisch* – experiential history. Conjectural history, in its symbolic nature, refers to the structure of myths, to the way in which we collectively salvage remains, differing traits of our culture, as Freud did in writing “Moses and monotheism” (1937/1988). On the other hand, *Historisch* – experiential history – encompasses the imaginary aspect of the historical legacy: how these differential marks are experienced, how we organize it and how we stand before this cultural legacy.

A gap, however, is drawn to those familiar with the intellectual journey of Jacques Lacan. If there is an imaginary and a symbolic regime of truth, what would be the equivalent to real truth, then? A detour through a field which until now has remained little explored and much more inferred is required in order to answer that: History, or, as Freud (1937/1988) points out in “Moses and monotheism”, *Geschichte*.

## The history of Lacan

Lacan’s effort to introduce linguistics as a key discipline for psychoanalysis is well known. His maxim “the unconsciousness is structured as a language” (Lacan, 1965/2008, p. 882), condenses this kind of cornerstone in the construction of its conceptual edifice. On the other hand, in addition to structural linguistics, mathematics – especially topology – will increasingly appear in his teaching as one of the indispensable fields of knowledge for his subject theory. From his early seminars to the development of the so-called “final Lacan”, his effort seems to invariably orbit around a formalization that seeks to fend off any essentialist notion of the subject. Linguistics and mathematics would thus not be just “scientific” corroborations for psychoanalysis, but knowledge that would replace the structurally unconscious facet of the Freudian experience back to the order of the day.

However, what would be the function of history if we had a very complete grammar theory of the subject? More than that: would the mistrust towards History not be linked to its necessarily imaginary nature? In other words, what is the space of History in Lacan’s psychoanalysis?

A passage in “The Freudian Thing or the Meaning of the Return to Freud in Psychoanalysis”, a text from Lacan that is contemporary with the seminar on psychoses may be able to clarify some aspects in this regard. “An initiation in the methods of the linguist, of the historian and, I would say, of the mathematician, are what must be studied now, so that a new generation of clinical practitioners and researchers will rescue the meaning of Freudian experience and its drive” (Lacan, 1955/2008, p. 436, emphasis added). That is, alongside the linguist and the mathematician, there is, curiously, as a partaking model in the formation of the analyst – the historian.

In an important text of the same period, “Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”, when analyzing logical time, Lacan evokes History as a discipline which, like psychoanalysis, would consider “subjective reproduction of the past in the present” and, more than this, “the example of history also dissipates, as a mirage, recourse to the lived reaction that obscures our technique and our theory” (Lacan, 1953/1998, p. 289). Still in the same text, Lacan (1953/1998) is literal in asserting that anti-historicism would be the “diametrical opposite of psychoanalytic experience” (p. 246), and state that “What we teach the subject to recognize as his unconscious is his history – that is, we help him make the present historicization of the facts that have already determined in his existence a certain number of historical ‘twists’” (Lacan, 1953/1998, p. 263). Moreover, in this text, the notion of history is so central that Lacan will even propose a distinction between primary (staged history) and secondary historicization (repression) precisely by comparing psychoanalysis and history as “sciences of the particular” (1953/1998, p. 262).

For what reason, then, has the relation between psychoanalysis and history remained only punctuated and not carried out, as was the case with mathematics, anthropology, and linguistics? Possibly, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s anti-historicism and the hegemony of structuralism in the French academic debate in the 1960s would have pushed Lacan away from the historiographical discussions of the *Annales* School and the so-called “New History”, even though they were not alien to them. Lacan refers to Lucien Febvre, for instance – one of the founders of *Annalles* –, as a “great historian”, and even tries approaching his interpretive movement to the style of Marguerite Duras (Lacan, 1965/2003). Moreover, he presents him as someone who would have denounced the deception in the classic reading of Navarre’s *Heptaméron*, deception of which would create a barrier to the truth of the text. Once again, we find here the exercise of history as an unveiling of truth beyond appearance and, more than that, of a truth attached to what is *written*.

However still, would history not conceal the imaginary in the background? Even with the reformulation of narrative<sup>5</sup> by the *Annales* School, what would be the

5 We have an exclusion of the narrative in the first and second generation of the *Annales* due to the construction of materials with long duration. The narrative returns to the *Annales* School in its third generation, with

space of this discussion in Lacan? In 1975, at Yale, when asked directly about the place of the imaginary in history, Lacan (1975) is categorical: “[History] is a particular type of symbolic order; one that articulates what is real through what is written” (p. 21).

Surprised by the psychoanalyst’s response, his American interlocutors insist on the imaginary character of the story, whereas Lacan will emphasize that everything that arrives to us only came through written records. More than that: “People write about what has already been written. That is why written documents are required. One cannot make history except by writing in second-hand about this subject that is already written elsewhere” (Lacan 1975, p. 20).

### The analyst: a historian?

It may be objected, however, that such approximations in Lacan would be no more than purely methodological references, unrelated to analytic experience. Is there any clearer indication of the relevance of history for the psychoanalytic clinical practice?

In his seminar on identification, when discussing precisely the importance of what is written in the relation between the neurotic and the signifier, Lacan will approximate the analyst to the historian or, more precisely, will produce a condensation of the two.

For some time now I have begun to make you apprehend what is written in the case of the signifier, with regards to original writing. It must, nevertheless, have come to mind that it is precisely that which the obsessive has to see all the time: “*ungeschehen machen*”, making it so as if this has never happened. What does this mean, what does that refer to? Of course, this is perceivable in his behavior: *what he wants to extinguish is what the analyst writes throughout his history, the annalist with two n, writing what he has on the patient. It is the annals of the case that he wants to erase, scrape, extinguish.* (Lacan, 2003, p. 135, emphasis added)

Homophony thus allows the *Annaliste* – with two *n*, synonymous with “historian”, popularized precisely due to the tradition initiated by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, with the *Revue des Annales*, in 1929 – to acquire a double meaning: analyst/historian. Moreover, it would be possible to reverse the traditional logic that considers the analyst as a mirror or blank page because, based on this excerpt, an analyst would also be the one who writes with the transference ink, something that occurs throughout the history of an analysis. But what writing would this be, since we can assume that it is not a flow of meanings that starts from the analyst towards the

neurotic plot, nor a “good enough hand” that would serve as a calligraphic support for the subject, repairing his slips, omissions, incongruities?

When we return to the excerpt from 1975, we recall that Lacan’s definition of history is that of a symbolic order that articulates the real through what is written”, caused by a second-hand writing. Now, what other definition, if not that of interpretation, leads us to this kind of action that – in both history and psychoanalysis – produces the new based on the resumption and rearticulation of abandoned writings, erased from the annals of the case? Interpretation would then be the effect of an envelope, the palimpsest itself produced between histories that the subject tells himself and the symptomatic erasures that the analyst/historian circulates, strikes through, scribbles. Interpretation – unlike the Freudian analogy of construction – would be closer to the concept of deconstruction of the evident meanings present in a revised and expanded edition of the discontinuities of self. Lacan (1953/1998), in stating that “interpretation is coextensive with history” (p. 604), is pointing out that, without access to this historical truth, articulated at the moment of transference, analysis becomes unfeasible. As analysts/historians, we are interested in the draft, the editorial policies of exclusion and inclusion, childhood records, footnotes of adult life, and, in short, everything that the self believes is not part of official history. But what is the truth criterion of this type of deconstructive writing? It is certainly not that of the adequacy of the material truth to historical truth, nor the unveiling of a structural logic of an original repression itself that, in the limit, would banish the narrative dimension of experience. It is rather the possibility of multiple interpretation and the polysemy of meanings<sup>6</sup>. Let us turn to History again.

The historian Hayden White, known for his criticism of the *Annales* School regarding the narrative dimension of history, in a 2007 interview, gives precise meaning to what he considers the purpose of interpretation for history: “We want that questions be open-ended. We want to create an archive, so to speak, that allows for a wide variety of interpretations, all equally plausible. Since the purpose of interpretation is to create perplexity with regards to the real – not to clarify it” (White, 2007/2013, p. 591).

His definition is precise and again shows that, as far as interpretation is concerned, the analyst’s position is analogous to that of the historian: by writing over other writings, interpretation is what makes a dent in the meaning by exposing the completely contingent character of the real. Thus, his criterion of truth is that of a perplexity which is given by the character of the variation of truth, condensed by Lacan (2017) in the term *varité*, a variable truth, that which is variable in truth. Let us not forget that what is at stake here is not a normative ideal of action by the analyst, who oftentimes produces

short-lived history analyzes. The dialectic of temporal duration thus allows the reformulation and the return of that narrative within the studies of history (Luiz, 2016).

6 According to Benjamin (1936/1994), art of narrating is precisely in avoiding explanations so that interpretation is open, without the imposition of a priori psychological context (p. 201).

the most stupefying interventions in the name of the purity of a “clinic of the real”. Rather, they are criteria for the validation of interpretation which, of course, occur only in the aftermath. Thus, it is possible to argue that an interpretation is effective not when it questions a certain meaning, but when it calls into question the very possibility of extracting single truths from an archive. More precisely, the idea of such an interpretation questions the very notion of archive as such.

Derrida – based on Freud and his readings in “Moses and monotheism” – was the one who took this idea further from his text *“Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”* (1995/2001). In this essay, Derrida criticizes the conceptual role of the “medium” represented by the archive, deconstructing the positivity and materiality assumed in the archive. For Birman (2008), in his reading of Derrida, “the archive is not restricted to the observational statement, but also unfolds in the records of performative utterances and enunciation” (p. 116). That is, the alleged materiality of the archive is not only an illusion, but the product of a performative act, of an enunciation. This meaning of material truth would not be related to the adequacy nor to the unveiling of a structure, but to the deconstruction of its meaning itself. It is worth recalling the insistence of Lacan (1985) in pointing out that psychoanalysis is not an idealism, but a *materialisme* (p.12), a materialism of the word, of the written word.

The actual record of history would therefore be approximated from that which can only be apprehended by writing, i.e., as Derrida (1995/2001) asserts, the writing of

pure difference. According to the author, this writing has no identity, but differential markings, which, during analysis, would be apprehended from the transference repetitions in the “second-hand writing” of the position provided by the subject to the analyst. The historical event, as Freud asserts, can only be apprehended in a documentary manner, in the same way that the psychoanalyst did by conjecturing the foundation myth of the Jewish people from Moses, thus perceiving the bible as documentation that could point to indications of myth in the foundation of Jews. The archive, in this sense, is mere performativity, a construction of narrative by means of clues that are structured according to their differential relation.

Thus, at the end of our trajectory, the subversion between material truth and historical truth must give way to an inversion. What is sought to produce in an analysis is not a reconstruction of historical truth from a material truth, but the reverse. Through the historical truth, marked by the signifier of symptoms, faulty acts and, especially, transference, it is possible to arrive at the radical hole of the archive, to the necessary truth/variety of the word and to the materiality of the erasure of the letter. An analyst is, therefore, one who performs the role of a historian by seeing primary sources not as ruins, but as writing of the impossibility of satisfaction, as archives of fiction. This way, by marking the inexistence of the historical relationship, the role of analysis is that which allows the emergence of a story that – from the perplexity caused by the policy of erasure of its archives – does not cease not to write itself.

### **O analista é o historiador: verdade, interpretação e perplexidade**

**Resumo:** O artigo discute o estatuto dado à história pela psicanálise bem como suas possíveis consequências no interior da teoria e da prática analíticas. Recorre-se, em um primeiro momento, a dois textos freudianos que aportam noções paradigmáticas sobre a história: *Moisés e a religião monoteísta* e *Construções em análise*, a fim de sublinhar diferentes noções freudianas de história. Apresenta-se de que maneira a noção de história em psicanálise permite a reformulação de conceitos como os de *verdade* e *materialidade*. Passa-se, então, à análise do lugar dado à História por Lacan, com vistas a demonstrar sua centralidade, propondo uma distinção tripartite entre diferentes regimes de historicidade – real, simbólica e imaginária. Apresenta-se, por fim, desdobramentos clínicos de uma aproximação feita por Lacan entre o analista e o historiador.

**Palavras-chave:** transferência, história, verdade, psicanálise.

### **L'analyste en tant qu'historien : vérité, interprétation et perplexité**

**Résumé :** Cet article traite du rôle de l'histoire dans la psychanalyse et ses possibles conséquences dans la théorie et la pratique analytiques. Premièrement, on se tourne vers deux textes freudiens qui apportent des notions paradigmatiques sur l'histoire : *L'homme Moïse et la religion monothéiste* et *Constructions dans l'analyse* pour souligner des différentes notions d'histoire chez Freud. On présente comment l'histoire en psychanalyse nous permet de reformuler des concepts comme la *vérité* et *matérialité*. Ensuite, nous analysons la place donnée à l'Histoire par Lacan pour démontrer sa centralité, en proposant une distinction tripartite entre des différents régimes d'historicité – réel, symbolique et imaginaire. Enfin, on présente les développements cliniques d'une comparaison fait par Lacan entre l'analyste et l'historien.

**Mots-clés :** transfert, histoire, vérité, psychanalyse.

## El analista es el historiador: verdad, interpretación y perplejidad

**Resumen:** El artículo discute sobre el estatuto que el psicoanálisis da a la Historia así como sus posibles consecuencias en el interior de la teoría y práctica analíticas. Se evoca, en un primero momento, dos textos freudianos que aportan nociones paradigmáticas sobre la Historia: *Moisés y la religión Monoteísta* y *Construcciones en Análisis*, con fin de subrayar diferentes nociones freudianas de la historia. Se presenta de que forma la noción de Historia en psicoanálisis permite la formulación de conceptos tales como los de la *verdad* y *materialidad*. Pasamos, entonces, al análisis del lugar concedido a la Historia por Lacan, intentando demostrar su centralidad, así como se propone una distinción tripartita entre diferentes regímenes de historicidad –real, simbólico e imaginario. Se presenta, al fin, los despliegues clínicos de una aproximación realizada por Lacan entre el analista y el historiador.

**Palabras clave:** transferencia, historia, verdad, psicoanálisis.

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