

Grandfather's compass.

Between Avantgarde and Anachronism: 21st Century Psychoanalysis and the Vicissitudes of Time.

To be a psychoanalyst in the 21st century bears certain difficulties. Some of which arise from a certain pressure to adapt to a ideology based on efficiency and on the production of return value, the practitioner often finds himself confronted with criticism which more often than not pertains to disqualify psychoanalysis on the grounds of adhering to outdated, antiquated methods, of being essentially anachronistic and ignorant of progress.

One of the problems of time in which historical change takes place is that dynamics and attitudes have a tendency to become politicised. A certain set of vocabulary, applied to a foreign other, pertains towards the difficulties that might be due to misunderstanding or more problematically due to cloaked aggression: Restorationism, anachronism, conservatism, progressivism, modernism, futurism, avant-gardism, nostalgia, rationalism, positivism. In all these there appears to be an inherent evaluation of things past, things present and things to come. Ideologies of development, expansion, revolution versus restraint, acceptance, stability.

What does it mean, or rather, how does it feel to be a psychoanalyst in the 21st century?

There are not many professions, which have managed to retain the use of the same tools which were in use some 100 years ago. Except maybe hairdressers. So psychoanalysis has something in common with hairdressers, which the scissors is for one, the Freudian model is for the other. In the meantime automated fabrication processes, power tools, artificial intelligence, other sorts of optimisations have made the surrounding landscape, in which hairdressers and psychoanalysts are set, completely over.

What I here want to explore, is how does it feel to refer back to Freud in this particular age, but also to be referred back to by those, who I introduce myself to. After all, time has it that Freud like Mozart, Einstein and others has become, maybe due to a chronic lack of attention span, an icon, a brand. Psychoanalysis yet has an insistence of working with time, mainly with time past and as such it also has to include being careful and attentive towards its own historic roots. In this sense, what I would like to do in the following, is to explore the practice of psychoanalysis from the viewpoint of craftsmanship. What this shift in perspective allows for is to understand models, theories, past and present, as tools or instruments, rather than treating them as vehicles of factual and absolute truth.

There is another thing that needs to be dealt with, being the ubiquitous fashion of adorning one's practice showcase with a Freudian quotation. The human, the symbolic thinking animal, has developed a penchant for icons to express certain messages. Professions, guilds did so as did clans and dynasties. The coat of arms, the standard, might be understood as a form of legitimation, license, a proof of belonging, and as such an elaborate version of the archaic totem. The carrier thus proves his affiliation to the group. In this sense the Freudian motive does exactly this: its carrier is identified as a more or less legitimate, as self proclaimed, affiliate of the Freudian clan.

Affiliation derives its meaning from Medieval Latin *affiliationem* (nominative *affiliatio*), noun of action from past-participle stem of Latin *affiliare* "to adopt as a son". In reverse what it does is to also legitimise and to reinforce Freud himself as the archaic father of the clan. This yet might create certain irritations in the outside viewer. Not many professions can or do claim to descend from a single paternal figure.

Grandfather's compass.

Between Avantgarde and Anachronism: 21st Century Psychoanalysis and the Vicissitudes of Time.

Everyone, who has in his life had the opportunity to craft something might hold this following statement as self evident. The tools one has at hand have a particular influence on the object to be crafted. Yet how so? The way the tool imposes itself can vary from subtle to substantial, and might in terms of aura or quality range from detrimental to essential. A blunt knife is as much a nuisance as working it is not only source of imprecision but is also dangerous. A hand saw will create distinct edges than a circular saw or even a table saw. Recently I have talked to a sculptor, who while ostensibly talking to me, embarked on a dialectic review of digital technology and hand made forms. Most of the arguments were the obvious ones: whereas modern technology allows for the sterile invariant repetition of patterns up to infinity, if only one bothers to look at ornaments of the last century, or even before, close enough, a myriad of small deviations within a given serial sequence come to the fore, and maybe, the argument continues, if we adopt a certain romantic perspective, these individual variations, imprecisions remaining below awareness for the everyday eye, are exactly that necessary ingredient through which the aesthetic experience is heightened and boredom turns into enchantment.

Truly enough, in his atelier I could see a 3D printer but also a Beethoven bust, one of those Biedermeier chimney top pieces and also some rather casts of rather archaic forms. Returning from his odyssey of words, he asked me if I am 'a Freudian' to which I nodded. What could I do, he left me to choose between 'Freudian' or 'Jungian'. The answer not only did not satisfy me but also, more embarrassingly, evoked him stating his preference for Kleinian object relation theory. I was puzzled, he caught me off guard — I had no other choice than to continue to nod. Yet the thing kept me thinking: Am I a Freudian? What does it mean to be a psychoanalyst and to refer back to Freud? How can I live with being perceived as a follower? Do I hold Freudian concepts as factual truth? Do I believe that people are really wired the way Freud and his contemporaries were suggesting? Reading psychoanalytic literature from the times of the great beginning, the use of technical terms suggests that indeed there must have been a certain level of 'belief', a shared delusion, that the metapsychology which they collectively constructed was a thought system to be taken literally, the mechanisms so construed taken for real, devoid of doubt, denied the space which somewhat later Lacan postulated to exist between the signifier and the signified. However, I am not to judge that, what I need to ascertain is what it means to me and my work, both clinical and theoretical.

Allow me to lay out some preliminary notes on things that are out of date. There are those nostalgics who for some private phantasy draw pleasure from being surrounded by antique artefacts. They can be seen driving old cars, they fancy antique furniture, might even have a preference for classical music and seem to be indulging in the taste of an other time. Then there are those, lets say musicians, who have a preference to antique instruments, in which they see a key ingredient for authentic performance of a certain composition from the corresponding epoch. Here the belief that the instrument and the composition are constituting parts of a larger 'Gesamtkunstwerk' might form the base of an overarching time travel enterprise.

To this I would like to add a simple and maybe modest example. Some years back I went to an exhibition at the chamber of architects in Barcelona. The theme of the show was the great local architects of classical modernity and their working tools. The postwar period in architecture could be likened to a great adventure, full of new possibilities, maybe even freedoms. New ways of construction, the advent of steel frames and concrete required a practice of design and of planning that could hold pace with the euphoria of the times. The crafting of plans was still limited to the predominant use of ink on tracing paper. New forms yet required the invention of appropriate design tools. Think for example of the adventure of having to construct circular arcs with the diameter of half a meter. The showcases of the exhibition were full of ingenious mechanic devices each of which to serve a specific graphic function. Coming from a time where the crafting of plans takes place in the scaleless sphere of the digital CAD software, where everything one can imagine is seemingly possible, more so done effortlessly, it struck me with awe how much creativity and invention those master architects have invested in fabricating drawing instruments suitable to their needs. They were a mixture of archaic improvisation and meticulous precision, using stainless steel, chrome, copper fixtures, hard wood beams and at times even some bakelite form pieces. And yes, there was a compass that would do exactly that: circular arcs of unthinkable sizes. Looking at architecture drawings from past times, they contain an aura that is difficult to describe. There is a condensation of time for example. It must have taken an exceptional duration in the course of which errors had to be avoided, one had to stay focused, disciplined, trained. The great invention of the undo-function was still nowhere. Compared to the playful back and forth of trial and error, of effortless tweaking of designs out of the digital space, the so executed plans carry gravity, are of a stoic expression and contain the weight of a person's lifetime and determination. Of course this is merely a personal reading, maybe my private nostalgia. Having had the experience of spending days and nights in developing digital drawing routines, form finding and optimisation scripts, production tools, in this sense I at a certain time not too long ago too had a chance of indulging in the art of crafting drawing tools, and in enjoying the satisfaction that comes from being able to master a certain problem, from having created a useful instrument.

Returning to my original intention, what I would like to arrive at is to pin down and to give evidence of the mindset I carry in the context of psychoanalytic concepts and also to find a satisfactory answer to whether I am a 'Freudian'. The moment I switch off my laptop and engage in the crafting of an object or a plan in the ways outlined above, that is by the use of ancient, old or outdated instruments, I begin to feel a certain resistance that at first appears unpleasant. Not only do things go more slowly but also I need to bodily adapt to the devices I use. Maybe I even need to practice a certain movement, need to be more attentive of my posture, of the way I make use of the weight of my body, the effective use of surfaces and space, tackle the need for sufficient and effective lighting. I might make errors, mistakes, would have to start again, would have to focus even more and so on. In one word, I would need to deal with and to accommodate a whole lot more uncertainty. One might say: how counter-productive or how inefficient or un-economic, such a folly, he is a dreamer.

On the other hand, one essential instrument of psychoanalysis is the interpretation of dreams. When a patient brings a dream, one is confronted with a riddle. Under the surface of the story that

is being recounted lie buried a myriad of wishes, phantasies, impulses. When I state this, I am already applying a model of space bounded by consciousness, an interface to external reality on one side and unconsciousness, as a lively but highly private reservoir of archaic cognitive activity on the other side. Thus I acknowledge the coexistence of that what is called primary process thinking and secondary process thinking. The first I understand as a sort of preverbal affective fantasising which is driven by the two main instinctual currents: preservation of the self and the preservation of the species. One can imagine a soup in which currents of emotions, contradictions, flows, tides and other dynamic events unfold. The second is a layer that is built around the first, presumably much later developed in the course of evolution, is characteristic of rational, strategic thinking and planning, formed and limited by the use of language. Yet, all of this I have not seen personally, I have never opened a skull or dissected a corpse but have acquired these notions by exposing myself to the psychoanalytic method, mainly by reading. What can be inferred from the brief exposition above is that the instruments I turn to are formally speaking tales and myths, belief systems, working hypotheses constructed on observation. The use of these capacitates the practitioner to extract certain parameters of local validity pertaining to psychic functioning such as the ability to self restraint, regulation of emotions, enduring and modification of frustration and the like.

When I conduct a treatment, I am confronted with a continuous phenomenon being the discourse of a patient or analysand. The presence of another, especially when presenting a suffering which needs to be ameliorated, creates a certain urgency. Facing helplessness and need the empathic other is urged to act, to do something not least to avoid to be contaminated by helplessness itself. In such a moment it is paramount to remain calm and to remain stable enough to find the right angle to begin the treatment. As a psychoanalyst I will never make a promise knowing that it would be promise that I cannot keep. Rather I would propose to jointly take a look at the issue and see what can be done. One of the evolutionarily latter developed cognitive capacities is the ability to bear uncertainty. Being rather a fresh patch in the domain of brain function, it appears to be especially vulnerable and in consequence it easily collapses, negatively affected by the urgency and calamity of psychic pain. The one suffering thus incapacitated, it becomes the role of the analyst to perform this function for the analysand until he or she is capable and ready to regain and reintegrate it into his or her autonomous self.

I am aware that certain nodes of the Freudian edifice are outdated and overhauled. Erich Fromm for example, in a lecture on psychoanalysis and humanism, has compiled a preliminary yet explicit list of items to keep and to discard. When I am engaging the discourse of the patient or analysand, some of the instruments I have at hand are a hundred years old while others shiny new. Sometimes the new ones come to be applied but at other times it is precisely the old ones which allow for that specific attitude which is mirrored in the image of crafting with grandfather's tools. Which is this attitude and why is it necessary? There is research which contrasts methods of psychotherapy in terms of sustainable long term effect. Results that have been evidenced by using follow up examination of treatment cases show that psychoanalysis yield significantly better results in symptom reduction compared to other methods in terms of sustainable long term improvement. Which brings the question to the fore, how come certain things have longer lifetime than others.

Here I return to the crafting metaphor as I hold true that it is more than just that, a metaphor, but it also carries a certain profound truth which can be transposed to the issue of working with ancient instruments in so called modern times in the realm of psychotherapy.

If I use tools which take more time as they are not artificially enhanced power tools but ones which rely on me as a person to be moved this has certain consequences. I feel the resistance of the material, I get a feeling for the pain of transformation and in consequence I invest a profoundly more effort in terms of energy and time to achieve a certain result. In this sense I will also in turn make sure to maximise the lifespan of the thing that I so craft by focusing on design solutions, details, of which I am convinced that are of superior intelligence. It is maybe not by chance that on the one end of the spectrum we have the pyramids in Egypt and on the other end we have that what is called design for planned obsolescence. Both represent certain economic ideologies in relationship with dispensability in relationship to the investment of personal labour. In between is that what could be understood as the passion of creation or simply as playful and creative construction. Now when two persons come together to work jointly on something, even if it something that is the mental wellbeing of one of the two, I would like to think that I have given an outline in what kind of spirit that encounter should take place. Aside of and beyond taking a stance on the substance of truth, of matter-of-factual reality in and of the Freudian model, I would shift the emphasis on its agency in the clinical setting, that is, how does it influence, define, even if constrain, works in the construction of a particular mindset, atmosphere or even spirit in which the work takes place. Grandfather's compass radiates a certain calmness, which helps to cope with the insistence and pressure created by circumstance. Its use provides the opportunity, the space and time, to develop a feel for what could be right, the right angle, the right posture and light. It is in the moments of silence and suspension where an earnest and profound deliberation with what can be achieved and how, what can be realised, what is realistic and what is reality and how to hone expectations from unrealistic demands to paths of realisation arriving at durable and lasting connection details, at the integration of something beautiful and firm. Be it a chair or a mind.

In my opinion to be a psychoanalyst nowadays is not less than being a chimera of 19th century grandfather and 21st century whiz-kid. Having said this, I need to advance a certain ambient notion that these two are tied together by a third. The 20th century mother.