Temporality in Psychosis: Loss of Lived Time in an Alien World

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This article presents a model of the temporal structure of psychic life. Time is a rule-guided process. A person’s psychic life, too, yields to an examination of necessary and regulated operations. To outline both the regular and the modified perception of time within psychic life, Sigmund Freud’s model of the drive interaction is brought to bear on Jacques Marie Émile Lacan’s understanding of psychosis. Both Freud’s and Lacan’s findings are explained with an eye on the temporal dimension of the psyche, temporal modifications manifested in states of psychotic delusion, and the role of time for one’s meaningful engagement with the world. Psychic time is nonlinear. The future, the past, and the present must be engaged simultaneously, albeit not in the same way, to yield the sense of temporal fullness. For Freud, the cooperative functioning of the drives accounts for the sustainment of the lucid psychic life, whereas modifications in the drives’ interactions signal psychic disturbances. Lacan (1955/1993) stresses the atemporal character of the nonexistent, negated, or lost reality that pressures an individual to enter a psychotic delusion. This article makes the assumption that the psychological states in which the reckoning with time is lost are the consequences of an unsuccessful incorporation of traumatic stimuli that are caused both by outside phenomena and by the actions of an individual’s inner drives. The findings of this article support the view that psychic traumas necessitate modifications to the sense of time. The findings also offer an understanding of the kinds of temporal modifications that occur in an individual’s psychic life and the way in which these temporal changes lead to the experience of radical otherness that is present in some cases of psychological disturbances.

Disruptions in one’s psychological well-being are reflected in one’s reckoning with time. Why does the temporal rhythm that marks the harmonized flow of life break apart in cases of psychic disturbance? What relationship is there between the temporal arrhythmicity, the psychic illness, and the dissolution of the common world that are present in psychosis? Why do the accounts of psychotic episodes show a recurring theme—alienation from the shared world ushered in by the attenuation of life’s temporal dimension? Studies of psychotic delusion show that in psychosis, time ceases to exist as a continuous, meaningful, lived time. Meaningless flashes and snapshots, rapidly and disparately changing pictures of life and of the world that are foreign and seen as if through a looking glass, alternate with states of delusional fullness and manic excess of uprooted meaning. Because the fullness of lived time is made inaccessible in psychosis, the meaningful dimension of life dwindles. Meaning is no longer rooted in living, engaging, and being with others, but is contrived and spread in a patchwork manner over an abyss of “serial disintegration” (Lacan, 1955/1993, p. 88).

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In this article, a concept of temporality in psychosis is constructed by aligning Sigmund Freud’s model of the drive interaction with Jacques Lacan’s analysis of psychosis. The psychic and the temporal dimensions of experience are brought together to show that the psychological states in which the reckoning with time is all but lost are the consequences of an unsuccessful incorporation of traumatic stimuli. The production of these excessive or traumatic effects on the functioning of the psyche is not limited to external events. An individual can be traumatized by powerful psychic stimuli that do not correspond to any worldly happenings. An analysis of the logic of psychic disturbances yields the argument that a linear progression of perceived time is not coincident with the unfolding of the primordial time of psychic events. There is, put simply, no linear time of the soul. There is no straightforward succession of past, present, and future as far as the psychic dimension of life is concerned. Robust, full, and meaningful time—time that is not drained of the sense of belonging to the world—is nonlinear. Consequently, a careful understanding of psychic pathology entails reckoning both with the notion of lived, nonlinear time and temporal modifications in states of psychic illness.

**FREUD’S VIEW OF A NONLINEAR DEVELOPMENT OF PSYCHIC EVENTS**

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920/2011) presents a mechanism of a retrospective build-up of anxiety in cases of trauma. The mechanism of retrospective coping with trauma is the key model for comparing Freud’s insights into the functioning of the psyche to Lacan’s (1955/1993) examination of psychotic delusion.

Freud (1920/2011) marks as *traumatic* an event that occasions “excitations from outside strong enough” (p. 72) to bring about catastrophically painful disturbances to a person’s psychological functions. Traumatic events are dealt with, according to Freud (1920/2011), by way of resistance to the painful shock. In response to the charge of the trauma, an opposing charge of energy is generated that, in “mentally ‘binding’” (p. 70) the invading charge, discontinues its destructive effects. To be capable of responding to a traumatic occurrence by resisting it, a person’s mental defenses must be raised. An individual must, as it were, anticipate the arrival of the trauma. Being mentally prepared for an experience of anxiety in the face of trauma, says Freud, is a crucial factor in overcoming the pain and harm inflicted by a traumatic event.

When the shock of a trauma is sudden, the person is not well equipped to respond to the traumatic occurrence by successfully resisting its harmful effects. Freud (1920/2011) identifies “terror” (*Schreck*) as the “necessary condition [for]...the absence of preparedness for anxiety” (p. 71). The suddenness of an unexpected traumatic shock is concomitant with the onset of terror. The simultaneity of trauma and terror is indicative of the fact that an individual was not anticipating the trauma through the onset of anxiety. In cases of an individual’s unpreparedness for the suddenness of a traumatic shock, a defense against the trauma can be built only after its occurrence.

Freud introduces the role of dreams in posttraumatic mastery of a painfully shocking event. Describing how anxiety is injected into a traumatized person’s life by means of dreams, Freud (1920/2011) writes the following: “After the fact...dreams seek to master the stimulus by developing anxiety, the lack of which was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (p. 72). Freud’s use of “after the fact” introduces the language of temporality. The time of a trauma is not to be thought of in terms of a determinant moment. Instead of regarding trauma as an event fixed in
time and place, a notion of trauma as a traumatic process should be adopted. The nonfixity of trauma allows for an understanding of the retrospective build-up of anxiety, which is difficult to account for if trauma is viewed as an event that can be traced back to some specific time. Freud’s analysis shows that dreams reach back to the onset of the trauma and awaken what was shocking about the stimulus in order to project and, as it were, represent the traumatic stimulus to the dreamer over and over again. Dreams, then, reach not only as far as the ever-fluctuating point of genesis of the traumatic event but, in effect, take the person further back—to the pretraumatic state. Dreams evoke and build anxiety retrospectively. What the psyche did not get a chance to accomplish prior to trauma (namely, raise its defenses through anxious anticipation) is being accomplished retrospectively. In this movement, the stimulus, which was subversive because of its force and the psyche’s unpreparedness to handle it, is being dealt with or “mastered” (Freud, 1920/2011, p. 72).

A retrospective build-up of anxiety—a psychic event—is accomplished via the work of dreams and thus occurs at the level of the unconscious. About the relation of such unconscious psychic events to time, Freud (1920/2011) says, “They are not ordered chronologically…time changes nothing in them…one cannot apply to them the concept of time” (p. 60). Freud’s claim can be challenged. Temporal structures can and do apply to the workings of the unconscious, but not in the same manner as do the traditional notions of time. Freud is rightly skeptical about the relation between time and the unconscious, if by time one means the concept of linear time.

FREUD AND LACAN ON TRAUMA AND PSYCHOSIS:
ANALYSIS OF PSYCHIC TIME

Freud’s discussion of the way in which the past affects psychologically traumatized individuals attests to the fact that time does not have a commonly sensed linear progression. In an unconscious attempt to master a traumatic stimulus, priority is given to the past. Yet, this past does not prevail in the ordinary sense of being prior. The past in which the self has to be reconstructed dominates the process of mastery of trauma by way of an unconscious projection of the painful stimulus (that has to be mastered). The projected, traumatic past dominates the temporal unfolding. The process of temporalization is transformed because of an unresolved, traumatic stimulus that has already shocked an individual’s psyche but that is yet to be mastered. The unresolved past looms over the palpability of the present and the enticing character of the future. Something is calling to the traumatized individual, but not in a manner that is engaging (unlike the promise of a future happening), nor in a way that is unavoidable (like the unavoidability of being present to a currently occurring event), but in a haunting, fantastic sense of something that went missing, that was left unnoticed, that was lost. In comparison to the allure of the projected trauma of the past, the significance of both the present and the future diminishes.

The past swells with the intensity of the saturated traumatic stimulus and gains temporary sway. The amplified past gains momentum and uses up the horizon of the future, as well as the fabric of the present to project into the world the traumatic disturbance, which must be retrospectively worked out. What lies in the future is not engaging in its own right. What concerns one in the present is meaningful only if it points to the way in which the yet-unanswered call of the traumatic projection can be answered—the way in which the world of trauma can be integrated into the lived world. What is most engaging, so much so that it takes hold of a person and keeps
a person hostage, is an overwhelming sense of anxiety. But this feeling, if Freud is to be trusted, does not come from anything in the future. It comes as an effect of what has not been appropriated in the past. Anxiety—trepidation on account of the unknown—points not to the threat coming out of the unknown future but to the terror over what was left silent and lost in the past. In other words, anxiety proper is not over something that is unknown and must remain so until it is made known in the future but over something that should have been already known but that, nonetheless, still remains inaccessible and unknown.

Lacan (1955/1993) thinks such a loss is a chance to make something known in terms of a beckoning void—in terms of an "emergence" that is both overfull and that is growing progressively emptier. The saturated character of the emerging loss—the character that is overfull with ineffable meaning—makes it impossible to integrate what was lost into the everyday experience. At the core of psychosis is the void that threatens not some part of experience, nor one’s relationship to particular objects, but the entirety of one’s life. Lacan (1955/1993) describes the ominous void as an "enormous meaning that has the appearance of being nothing at all" (p. 85). The apparent nothingness is the void’s engulfing emptiness. The enormity of meaning is its attractive force—the force of the pull of the abyss. In other words, in psychosis, no activity or object is exchanged for a linguistic articulation of an experience. A possibility to express what has happened is inaccessible. The psychotic trauma is ineffable. And yet, it insists on being expressed, even at the cost of a collapse of one’s personality. When the world cannot be told (neither linguistically, nor through action) about what happened, the world is remade in such a way as to conform to the ineffable. Psychotic remaking of the world is, put simply, delusion.

Lacan (1955/1993) insists on the need for a careful separation between Freud’s treatment of neurotic symptoms (such as are formed when a traumatic stimulus is repressed yet manifests symptomatically, that is, by means of a non-linguistic expression) and the "psychotic phenomenon" (p. 85) in which "what we are capable of bringing to the light of day in an articulated form" (p. 84) has been negated. Neurosis affects the logic of nonlinguistic expression. Neurosis is expressed symptomatically in a manner that structures one’s relation to, and being in, the world. Psychosis threatens the very capacity for expressivity. It subverts worldly relational structures. In psychosis, an individual is pressured to annunciate the world in alien and alienating ways (Lacan, 1955/1993). Stated succinctly, the difference between neurosis and psychosis is the difference between being haunted by the existence of something specific versus being witness to a modification of everything that exists. The difference is between existent and existence. The difference is not between doubting versus believing that something, namely the delusional state, is the state of things. Neurosis is distinguished from psychosis in the same manner as the relationship to a specific thing within the field of experience is opposed to one’s relationship to the entirety of the experiential field. The difference is between an oddly structured relationship to an object or experience (neurosis) and a structure of existence that is delusional (psychosis).

Lacan (1955/1993) is unambiguous about the status of psychotic delusion. He observes that "psychologists... don’t really keep company with the insane" (p. 75). The result is theory, which is not rooted in praxis. Theoreticians of psychosis raise the "false problem of why they [the insane] think their hallucinations are real" (p. 75). This is a worthless inquiry for Lacan who observes that, when venturing such questions, "one... exhausts oneself in deliberating on how the belief came about. [Instead] one should first specify what the belief is, since in point of fact the madman doesn’t believe in reality of his hallucinations" (p. 75). I take Lacan to mean that reality versus hallucination is not a part of a problem for a madman. There is not a distinction
between the two. Everything is reality. Maybe there are several realities, several layers of reality. As Lacan goes on to say,

Reality isn’t at issue for him [the psychotic person], certainty is. Even when he expresses himself along the lines of saying that what he experiences is not of the order of reality, this does not affect his certainty that it concerns him. The certainty is radical. The very nature of what he is certain of can quite easily remain completely ambiguous, covering entire range from malevolence to benevolence. But it means something unshakable for him. This constitutes what is called... delusional belief. (p. 75)

Belief—the common kind—suggests that it can be, at least in principle, questioned. It accepts examination. Belief consists in taking something up as a conviction and setting aside what opposes that conviction. The world of common belief is the world that admits of opposites, but only if they are said not to exist in the same thing at the same time. The world of commonly held beliefs is a world navigated on the basis of logic of noncontradiction. The kind of belief that a psychotic holds cannot be challenged. It is not descriptive of logically sound relationships that support the structure of everyday experience. Hence, psychotic belief is not a belief at all. It is a delusion. The address or concern of psychotic hallucination is what makes its reality undeniable.

Psychosis is imminent when “something else appears...[other] than what the subject experiences and seeks, something other than what the subject is led towards by the apparatus of reflection, mastery, and research” (Lacan, 1955/1993, p. 85). This something of psychosis does not have an objective character and, hence, cannot be presented or bound by the seeking of an object or the mastery of it. The relational logic of psychosis is not the same as the logic that structures common relations to objects in the world, to others, and to one’s own self. The breakdown of the worldly, object-driven and object-bound relational network dictates the necessity of another system of relations. The delusional system is not so much established by the subject as it is “raging from hallucination to interpretation—regards him” (p. 75). In psychotic delusion, a person is invoked, addressed by, and beckoned into an abyss. The abyss rises from “some time [when] there has been a hole, a rupture, a rent, a gap, with respect to external reality” (p. 45).

Both the experienced symptoms of neurosis and the nonexperiential void of psychosis are marked by excessive saturation of the past, by the diminishment of both the present and the future in view of a fantastic loss. However, the logic of a neurotic loss is that of not acknowledging a bit of a hidden, tucked-away reality that, nonetheless, exists. It is the logic of repression and substitution. According to the logic of nonexistence, which is the logic of psychosis, “reality itself initially contains a hole that the world of fantasy will subsequently fill” (p. 45). Psychotic loss of reality has a traumatizing character, but this trauma is unlike the one that comes from worldly events.

Psychotic loss is not an event and it is not worldly. Such an abyssal loss, such an emptiness that is overfull with meaning, is therefore more akin to the internal traumatic stimulus, to something that is from within and about the individual, “which for the subject represents something of himself” (p. 88). This “something” about the person that regards that person and structures that person’s psychic world—the reality lost to negation—is “unable to be integrated into what has already been put into play in the dialectical movement on which the subject has lived” (p. 88). The call of the abyssal loss, which is the most primordial of calls because it asks of the subject that it be verbalized, that it be put into language, “brings about a serial disintegration, a removal of the woof from the tapestry, which is known as delusion” (p. 88). An excess that cannot be integrated on the basis of common worldly logic, in accord with the existent rhythms of one’s life, is bursting forth in psychosis.
The effect of this excessive pressure is traumatizing. The traumatic effect, which a beckoning of an abyssal void of nonexistence has on the person, is captivating because it addresses that person in particular and takes over the lived time and the present world of that particular individual. It is not any faceless darkness, nor a general nothingness (although it may appear as such). It is the call of negation of the being of that very person that generates the psychotic delusion. It is, indeed, an existence negated, but an existence that should have been integrated into the play of positivity and negativity, the play of presence and absence, the logic of differentiation. It is the lost that should have been reckoned with and (at least peripherally) known as lost. It is the darkness that does not rise on the horizon of the common future of the shared world; it is a nothingness toward which the individual gravitates from out of his or her personal past. The force of such nonresolved past—a past to which one is held hostage—was described by Françoise Davoine as she recites the words of a bedridden patient. She introduces herself and in response hears the following: “I am an encoding of the anti-past” (Caruth, 2014, p. 24) says the man in lieu of the introduction. That is him; his name and his life story. Something cannot be let go of, because it is holding him, encoding him, marking him, and binding him. The past is not past. It is still there, completely dominating the present and making a meaningful future impossible. It is not-past, it is an abyss of the past, it should have been reckoned with and is encoded with it.

The differentiating play of presence and absence, which is fundamental to the arrival of temporal unfolding as well as to one’s having a place in the common world, must be reckoned with as a play, as something that is not simply instinctual but that is taken up by a person and, in its turn, takes and holds that individual up. Arrival of the human (as over and against the instinctual) is the arrival of the temporal. Arrival of the temporal, in its turn, is the entry into the differentiating play of presence and absence. It is a finding of the rhythmic rule of this play. Says Lacan (1955/1993):

The human being is not, as everything leads us to think is the case for the animal, simply immersed in a phenomenon such as that of the alternation of day and night. The human being poses the day as such, and the day thereby becomes presence of the day—against a background that is not a background of concrete nighttime, but of possible absence of daytime, where the night dwells, and vice versa moreover. Very early on, day and night are not experiences. They are connotations. (p. 148)

Day and night connote or underlie the experiential plane. The plane of experience only then becomes existent when the rhythmic alteration of presence and absence is taken hold of and when the presence—of things, of feelings, of surroundings, of others—is manifested. The engaging character of the world is dependent on one’s insistence that one’s lingering in the appearing presence, among the appearances of things, with the appearing others, is different from an absence thereof. When it is impossible to mark the significant difference between the presence and absence of appearances, when the rhythm of the temporal unfolding, which this difference marks, breaks down, then the empirical, palpable, necessary worldly relations, too, begin to fail. The call of the primordial darkness, of the abyssal nothingness, then, is rising from the pre- or atemporal and arrhythmic absence of the regulating play. When, instead of being a necessary background of presence, absence overwhelms existence and looms over it as an abyssal void, then the world of human relations ceases to address a person in a meaningful and engaging way. The disruption of the world’s significance is also a disruption of its temporality—both being characteristic of the unhinging of an individual’s temporal sensibility.

The order or the rhythmic play that marks the temporal dimension of the individual’s psyche and the relational logic of the individual’s world pulsates with the original tension of being and not being.
that is, with being present and being absent. Louis Althusser (1996) includes into the play of presence and absence the “temporal rhythms of feeding, hygiene, behavioral patterns, concrete attitudes of recognition—of acceptance and refusal, yes or no” (p. 26). He stresses that this differentiating play orders, synthesizes, and integrates the presence of being or the moments of presence into a continuity—into something that has a palpable existence. Existence continuously unfolds as the tension of the play. When the play ceases to modulate the tension of presence and absence, then nonbeing, non-existence is liable to break through the coherence of the given world. This “breaking through into the external world” (Lacan, 1955/1993, p. 162), Lacan says, “is not of the same order as what appears with respect to meaning or meaningfulness. It is a created reality, one that manifests itself well and truly within reality as something new” (p. 142), which Lacan refers to as a hallucination.

Psychotic hallucination is the reality of another world. This alien and otherworldly reality trembles over the abyss of nonbeing as the rhythmic tension of the differentiating play of presence and absence (which upholds the common, lived, and shared world) dissipates. The temporal rhythms of the person’s psychic life are disrupted under the pressure of the unannounced, lost, negated reality that, though non-existent, engulfs the person, bidding that individual to verbalize, to express, and to give temporal life to the abyssal loss. If existence unfolds in accord with the rules of temporal logic, then the atemporal nature of trauma, which engenders psychosis, does not preclude that trauma from being both real and non-existent.

MODIFICATION OF TEMPORALITY AND CESSION OF EGOIC CONTINUITY IN PSYCHOSIS

That an analysis of one’s psychic being cannot be divorced from an understanding of one’s temporal being is evident from a consideration of the codependency of the psychic and the temporal beings. Modifications in temporal structures presuppose changes to psychological makeup and vice versa. An example of how time functions for a psychologically disturbed individual is given by Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière (2004). In their book entitled History Beyond Trauma, the authors describes how the acquisition of lucidity upon the exiting of a psychotic state is accompanied by a newly acquired reckoning with time. The authors quote the words of a person who is suffering from a psychological disorder and is temporarily relieved from the psychosis. The relevant account is as follows:

Now I am entering time. Let this hour be, let June be, full as a month, not like an abstraction! Before, I was running after time; I lived in a non-time. I had no rest, never. I kept on wondering endlessly in the streets. The world of madness was flat. Everything was in black and white. I never stopped thinking. My only constant was cogitation. Words ran on without stopping, while I remained, flat, behind the windowpane. Cut off, with no contact with the world. My perceptions were considerably distorted. Really, I was the goddess: Isis, Kali, Lilith. I was the devil, the fallen angel Lucifer. Let no one say that this experience was nothing. Let no one erase this experience with medication. I got more out of it than I could bear. And I drank, to simulate myself. I was a zombie, but I never changed my name, Gilda. They all thought it was a false name. I always kept this last shred of identity. In the streets, so little of me was left. In fact, there was no me anymore. Only my wanderings across the ages. I was the Great Mother, the Earth, ready to kill her creation, this humanity condemned forever. Now I realize that this was a journey. Like Dante’s with Virgil, if that doesn’t sound too pompous. Since I’ve known you. . . In fact, our six years were a journey into and out of the hell of the streets, of madness, of alcohol and medications. (p. 30)
In this description of time, the commonly perceived concept of time as linear is the actual temporal dimension of a person. In psychosis, time is presented as nontangible, not as lived but as abstract or conceptual. Understanding the phenomenon of transition from a psychotic state to a state in which an individual is reflecting on her psychosis coincides with understanding the difference between abstract time and lived time.

Davoine and Gaudillière (2004) recount an incident of psychic disturbance in which the person is not immersed in the world and its temporal character. The world, the time, and the person are not thoroughly permeating one another. The individual is outside of time and outside of the world that appears “flat,” alien, and radically other. The stress in the account is on cogitation, yet this cogitation is not positively articulated. The cogitation could not have been about something that was encountered “in the streets” (Davoine & Gaudillière, 2004, p. 30), nor was the person cogitating about the means of exiting the psychotic state. Cogitation was persistent and yet the world remained “flat” and time nonexistent. What sort of cognitive state is this, then? How is one to understand this state?

To cogitate about something, one ought to encounter it first, and one must find something engaging—something besides cogitation—namely, that something that is thought. Thinking about thinking must be especially well grounded. It must be grounded not in a sporadic and dissevered reflection, but in a careful reflection. Thinking about thinking or analytic reflection is not the same as cogitation for the sake of cogitation, which is more akin to a reflexive function. Lacking a unitary and grounding engagement, cogitation subsists as an entangling vortex of persistent thoughts. These cogitations succeed one another without requiring a worldly referent. Building a system that is drawing singularly on its own material, psychotic cogitation does not rely on richness of perception but yields a “considerably distorted” (Davoine & Gaudillière, 2004, p. 30) view of the world. The person does not experience the world as engaging; does not sense time as passing or even as existing; does not see himself or herself as a human. The person becomes alien and other to the world and to the self, or, as Lacan (1955/1993) puts it, one “exempts [oneself] . . . from any real references” (p. 76).

To describe the manner in which a person divests from the world, Lacan’s insight into the psychotic state of alienation is brought to bear on the findings about the temporality of psychological processes. Lacan (1966/1977) explains that an individual enters a state of complete identification with the system that, according to a psychotic delusion, is capable of structuring the world by a set of rules that is not determined by, but instead determines, the worldly “reality.” Lacan (1966/1977) writes, “At the tip of hallucinatory effects . . . the trio of Creator, Creature, and Created . . . emerges. . . . It is from the position of the Creator, in effect, that we will go back to that of the Created, which subjectively creates it” (p. 203). Lacan’s point is that to map out the structure of the psychotic delusion, one must trace the relation of the world-ordering power to the world of the delusional subject. The subject, instead of abiding by the law of relational world ordering—the law that is ripe with the tension of presence and absence that structures appearances of being—posits and constructs a force that orders the world.

Because the differentiating play of presence and absence is disrupted and the dynamism of the temporal unfolding of being wanes, the subject’s own being is put into doubt. The vortex of abyssal nothingness makes the certainty of existence, being, and presence an issue for the person entering psychotic delusion. The desire for the identification of the psychotic person with the creating force, which does not abide by, but stands outside and even constitutes, the rules of the world, is exemplified by an identification with “the goddess . . . [or] the fallen angel Lucifer” (p. 30) of the patient in Davoine’s and Gaudillière’s (2004) account.
Also, Freud attests to the striving for a radical otherness that the psychotic person undergoes. Relating an experience of Dr. Daniel Paul Schreber, Freud (1911/1996) points not to a delusional construction of an entirely other world, but to a world-annihilating mode of otherness. Freud (1911/1996) writes about Schreber that “during his illness the world had come to an end” (p. 125). Schreber’s world—the world that was significant, meaningful, and engaging for him—had ended. However, the manifestation of this collapse of a personal engagement with the world is expressed through a delusional termination of the world at large. If the world ceases to exist, time, too, must stop. The thoroughgoing character of psychotic delusion coincides with the reconstitution of an individual’s temporality.


> A person in a state of hypermania...absorbs the external world...so avidly...that his psychic activity...is, through and through, a depraved activity. The contact [with the world] exists...but it is only an *instantaneous* contact. It lacks penetration. There is no longer any lived duration in it. What is lacking...is *unfolding in time*. A person in a state of manic excitement lives only in the now, and this is a now which limits his contact with the environment; he has no present any more, since in general he no longer experiences “unfolding in time.” The mental life in this case has submitted to a *subduction in time*. (p. 294)

As in the case related by Davoine and Gaudillière, in that described by Minkowski there are modifications to the structure of the temporal sense of the world for the person undergoing a psychotic experience. In one case, time is said to have stopped existing, and in the other, time is subdued or suspended and the individual is held hostage to this suspense. Minkowski’s account is also similar to Davoine and Gaudillière’s in its exposition of the person’s relation to the world. In the former case, the world is said to be flat, whereas in the latter the world is described as lacking in depth. This phenomenon of the thinning out of the world of the psychotic person is entwined with that person’s temporal sensibility.

Minkowski (1927/1970) helpfully states that if there is “only...now [then there is]...no present any more” (p. 294). The present must be given as a temporal unfolding. The present is absent where time is stilled into a snap-shot of a *now*. In effect, the common concept of time or linear time understood as a sequence of unrelated moments or *nows* becomes the thoroughgoing temporal structure for the individual in a psychotic state. The series of endless, severed, unrelated *nows* is exactly the working of time for a psychotic person. In a state of psychosis, the temporal process ceases to function as it usually does. If “usual” temporality designates the egoic unity, then in psychosis time operates on the basis of the progressive dissipation of the egoic continuity. Perhaps it is this dissipation of the egoic continuity that accounts for Freud’s analysis of Schreber’s world-annihilating propensity.

Schreber’s sense of self dissipates as his illness progresses. The process that underlies this dissolution of egoic unity is referred to by Freud (1911/1996) as a “process of decomposition [of the]...elements[,] the products of the condensations and identifications [of] which are effected in the unconscious” (p. 125). These elements are people and engagements that render the world as a place to which one belongs. A person’s belonging to worldly affairs is not
commonly questioned. It simply constitutes the background of the person’s relations with others, with the world, and with the self. When, as in Schreber’s case, the continuous sense of belonging to the world dissipates along with the elements that constitute this relation, the person enters a state of alienation. A sense of the world’s otherness reaches its apex, for Schreber, when the world must cease to exist for him to go on. Either Schreber or the world must become radically other, that is, non-existent. It is my claim that the temporal function of psychic processes is so thoroughly dislodged in cases like Schreber’s that a sense of non-existence, of being outside of time, a feeling of utter alienation manifests as a wish for the annihilation of the world and all relations with it.

I stress that it is important to keep in mind that temporality does not cease in psychosis. Temporal unfolding still functions, but it does so in a manner that does not allow for an engaging relation to the world. It is this temporal distortion that signals the cessation of the wholesome work of the drives. The shattering of the egoic identity, which is accompanied by the disruption of the work of dynamic temporality, can be the result of an influence of external and internal stimuli alike. I focus on the latter, showing how an individual’s own psychic forces can lead to traumas that can only be dealt with by that person’s becoming other to self, to the world, and to time.

**DISRUPTIVE FORCE OF UNBOUND PSYCHIC STIMULI AND PSYCHOTIC DELUSION**

By disruptive and harmful interior stimuli, Freud (1920/2011) means the ‘‘freely moving charge’’ (p. 71) of the ‘‘drive impulses’’ (p. 71). The energy or ‘‘charge’’ of the drive is essential for the sustenance of the person’s being. The interplay of impulses (understood as the motion of the drives) is responsible for the continual excitation of the person’s psyche. This excitation is necessary for the individual’s engagement with the world. The play of the drives occurs on the unconscious level, ensuring the psychic mobility and egoic consistency in accord with the rules of temporization. (When the play of the drives coincides with the temporization of the present out of the future oriented past, drives are ‘‘bound;’’ Freud, 1920/2011, p. 71; and operate in accord with temporal rules.) The problems for egoic subsistence arise when drives no longer adhere to the continuous processes of time. The discordant roaming of the drives is referred to by Freud (1920/2011) as their ‘‘unsuccessful binding’’ (p. 71). Because the drives’ force is coming from within a person’s own psyche, the effect produced by their unbound stimulus is ‘‘analogous to a traumatic neurosis’’ (p. 71).

Freud stresses that ‘‘disturbance of the libidoal processes may result from abnormal changes in the ego. Indeed, it is probable that processes of this kind constitute the distinctive characteristic of psychoses’’ (1911/1996, p. 151). Libidinal processes direct an individual toward engagement with objects when the latter appear as objects of attraction. The process of an ongoing reconstitution of an individual’s egoic unity, if disturbed, can lead to abnormalities in a person’s libido-driven interests and the dissipation of the significance of one’s belonging to the world. As with the case of an external trauma, so, too, in the event of the traumatic influence of an excessive excitation of a person’s own drives, an unconscious attempt is made retrospectively to master the painful stimulus. If the mastery of the painful stimulus is successful, the traumatic excitation is incorporated into the psychic world of the individual and the influence of the painful stimulus is mastered or bound. This mechanism of mastery does not always work in the same way for internal stimuli as it does for external ones.
The problem with unbound internal stimuli (the stimulating action of the drive impulses) is that such stimuli do not have an immediate worldly correlate. The stimulus comes from within the individual’s psyche. There is not a trauma, per se, that befell the person. Still, the roaming of the unbound drives is traumatic. In an attempt to sustain the person’s egoic continuity, the retrograde action of the drive to conserve keeps pulling out of the past phantoms that are irrelevant to the traumatic state in which the individual resides. For Freud (1920/2011), “conservative drives pressing toward repetition” (p. 75) account for the “re-encountering of identity” (p. 75). Instead of being pulled every which way, one’s self is gathered back up by a conservative drive that keeps on retracing the egoic identity to its “earlier state” (p. 77). This movement toward an earlier or prior state is not so much a movement to some original moment of ego-formation. Instead, the retrograde motion of the drive is identical to the process of temporal unfolding. The fullness of the present is unfolding as a return from the appropriated past that is oriented toward the horizon of the beckoning future. Similarly, egoic unity is only preserved through a drive to manifest the return to the desired image of the self with which one identifies. This return is rendered by Freud as a repeated movement toward the appropriation of the past.

The attempt to appropriate one’s past is irrelevant when out of that pastness rises an abyss of non-existence, which threatens to swallow the very time that is past and that seems to give rise to this abyss. Lacking the ordering play of integration, negated existence cannot be appropriated in the same manner as something that was structured according to the laws of world-organizing relations. Reality, certainty, presence, absence, being, world, others, time, life—none of these significations and categories carry the same meaning in the domain of a “bottomless void . . . limitless falling [and] . . . plunging into absolute annihilation” (Atwood, 2010, p. 338). Still, out of the abyss come forth the images that make up hallucinatory states of psychosis. These images that a psychotic individual is being presented with have a dual character. First, they point to the irrelevance of interpreting the traumatic state as having been incurred by some specific worldly event. The abyss of madness does not abide by the logic of world organization. It is senseless to trace the trauma marked by the negation of existence to some previously existent, temporal happening. Second, then, the irrelevance of the delusional images is in regard to the relation between trauma and its interpretation. The trauma is interpreted by the person as something that relates to the engaging character of the world—as something that still draws on the ordering structure of worldly relations. However, the difficulty of resolving the trauma in psychosis lies, precisely, in the fact that the traumatizing effect of the negated reality lies deep within the world of the person’s own psyche but not anywhere in the existent order of the world as such.

The projected images (images drawn from, but not existentially related to, the world) are only “relevant” in a negative sense—in the sense that they begin to be organized into a closed referential system of their own as a person is entering delusion. The negative (because not integrated into the existent order of the world) relational organization is accomplished by the psychotic subject as the latter assumes the role of the ultimate, world-order-establishing, generative, or divine power. The closed, otherworldly system of the psychotic delusion, Lacan (1955/1993) asserts, demands that the “delusional [becomes] . . . increasingly sure of things that he regards as more and more unreal” (p. 77). Hallucinations must be the more certainly existent the less probable and the less real they are. Ephemeral and fantastic, delusional images are—they exist for the psychotic subject, who conjures them up under the pressure of the call of nothingness. For a psychotic, reality is exchanged for the “certainty [that] is the rarest of things for the normal subject” (Lacan, 1955/1993, p. 74).
What do these findings about the effects of unbound inner stimuli and their traumatizing effect on the psyche of the subject have to do with temporality? Two things: (a) One can think about the work to be done in cases of psychotic delusion from the point of view of engaging that individual’s temporal awareness, and (2) one can ask questions about the function of the phantoms that make up the psychotic delusion. The hallucinatory images or the delusional phantoms are the strongholds of an individual’s resistance to the experience of the fullness of time that unfolds as the lived time of a dynamically ordered world. The dynamism of the world-organizing play of presence and absence ceases in psychosis, leaving the delusional subject hostage to the staticity of petrified, attenuated time. The time of psychosis is not grounded in the apparent presence of the world but hovers over the abyssal void of non-existence. Near the vortex, what prevents the person from being swallowed up by the darkness is nothing more than a succession of hallucinatory images. The present of the psychotic delusion is flattened out, attenuated, fantastically immediate, and incapable of opening up onto the world of meaningful engagements. In such a present, neither the world nor others within it are existent, properly speaking. In such a world, the person does not come to anything like a recognizable identity with the self. There is no longer an ‘I’ that has a past that belongs to this person, who I am. There is, instead, the ‘goddess: Isis, Kali, Lilith … the devil, the fallen angel Lucifer (Davoine & Gaudillière, 2004, p. 30). These otherworldly characters are identified with completely. In order to trust again in the engaging character of the world, the sense of a continuous, meaningful unfolding of lived time has to be regained. The entry back into life where others are present, and into a world that is engaging, is marked by the arrival of temporality. Time is allowed to unfold and the person’s psychic being, unfolding with it, takes sway over the suffocation of delusional cogitation.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR NOTE

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