

Bruce Fink

Notes on Temporal Tension

The logic developed by Lacan in dealing with the three prisoner problem (outlined in his article "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty", *Ecrits*, 1966) can be applied to a myriad of situations in which time plays a determining role, and others in which the instance of time seems conspicuously lacking. For the conceptual tools he hews in that context allow us to approach subjects such as castration, identification, and angst, to link his temporal logic to later logical operations known as alienation, separation, and foreclosure, and to situate clinical types in accordance with the range of strategies adoptable in handling temporal tension. We will only be able to briefly touch upon a few of these points here.

As laid out in his 1946 essay, temporal tension is generated by a situation in which subjects have to *identify* themselves at one pole or another of a *binary* opposition: black or white in the context of the "game" itself, male or female in the example Lacan provides at the end of the article. According to Lacan, the constraints of the situation (along with the desire ascribed to them to be released/freed) are such that the subjects are *forced* to *subjectivize* something, to come to a *decision*, to rule out one choice in favor of another.

Let us summarily define Lacanian alienation as the condition of someone confronted with an either/or choice, the two "alternatives" being the subject (or the subject's being) and the Other (as locus of language). This condition implies, however, what is really a forced choice entailing their fading (or "aphanisis") as subjects. The prisoners' black/white forced choice--forced in the sense that they can but conclude *correctly* that they are white (that they are what they in fact are¹)--leads to their alienation in language. Lest the *linguistic* nature of their alienation seem opaque, consider Lacan's claim that time takes

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on a number of different roles here--he speaks of temporal Instances ("agencies" would be the classical psychoanalytic translation)--signifying roles. He goes so far as to say that the two suspended motions, which occur as the subjects head for the door, function as *signifiers*, their role here being to disclose to the subjects something about what they do not see. Sense experience--sight in this case--gives way to signification, signifiers appearing here (as always) in close connection with absence, as stand-ins for what is absent. The subjects are required to stake their lives, or at least their immediate futures, on the two signifiers the situation leads them to unwittingly engender (call them S₁ and S₂). The "time for comprehending" thus entails the subjects' alienation in slipping under or within this rudimentary signifying chain² phenomenon associated with the Lacanian concept of symbolic castration.

Let us summarily define separation as a "no win" situation, one in which whatever one does one loses. It is clear that in concluding (that they are white), the subjects irretrievably lose something: one of the choices (viz. "black") is irreversibly excluded. Having correctly chosen, they are impeded from revising their conclusions; their choice can only be confirmed and reconfirmed from there on in.³ (After the act of deciding, there is no turning back, no retreat to a prior state of affairs. Substance has been lent to the "time for comprehending" once and for all.) That part of the Other which included the attribute "black"--the Other attribute, as it were--has been definitively eclipsed here.

It remains to be explained how the (being of the) subject--as the "second" of the two choices first presented in alienation--has also been eclipsed, how the subjects have suffered a sort of death--as--subjects in the process. This can be seen in the fact that while we could sustain (at the moment at which the subjects make for the door, each of them anxious to announce his subjective assertion, "I hastened to conclude that I was a white, because otherwise (the other whites) should have preceded me . . .") that subjectivization has taken place, that the subject has taken his/her place as full-fledged, responsible subject of the assertion, has totally accepted his/her position as castrated--at the same time we would be forced to admit that the three subjects are logically equivalent insofar as they identify themselves as white.⁴ Subjectivization is thus less on the order of the day than a type of impersonalization seen in the fact that the three subjects could also formulate their conclusion as follows: "One must know that **one** is white when the others have hesitated twice in leaving" (my emphasis).

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Lacan says that this latter assertion is desubjectivized to the utmost, i.e. the subject has been eliminated as far as possible, leaving as grammatical subject but the third person singular.⁵ Which is to say that insofar as identification has taken place, the subject "identifying himself" or coming to be identified with a particular signifier (viz. white), the subject has become frozen, nailed down, objectified and thus desubjectivized. Subjectification--the making into subject (or into a fullfledged subject)--ties the subject to the signifier, killing him thereby as subject. We might say that a part of his being has been transformed into language/signifier(s), the "rest" being left to drift anew until a further identification/subjectification takes place. The subject here is clearly split between his concretization through language and his subjectivity *qua* being (adrift). Part of his being has had to be sacrificed in the working out of the logical problem, and he has lost out on all counts. His being is now separated from language under which it had been slipping in the first moment, but that slippage returns with every new (forced) choice presented.

Separation's neither/nor brings to the fore a "new" function or operator: *object a*. The effect of this two-fold negation of the subject and the Other is a tying of the subject's being to the object in the fantasm (i.e. fundamental fantasy). But object *a* seems to have been operative prior to the "moment of concluding" in the "instant of the glance"--in the guise of the look that already temporalizes what classical logic takes to be an *atemporal* equivalence: "two blacks::one white". Object *a* thus anticipates here its "real" role which will only be "filled out" after something else retroactively seals its "first" emergence. Classical logic forecloses the Instance (the importance and role) of time here, suturing simultaneously the subject of psychoanalysis, the object as cause, and the whole question of *jouissance*.

Let us now turn to a more general discussion of temporal tension and anticipated certainty as seen in different categories of subjects. Bracketing momentarily considerations of "truth",⁶ what we hope to get at here is the way different clinical groupings of subjects operate. At certain moments I

try to suggest how they would deal with the three prisoner problem at hand, while at others my comments are broader they remain, in any case, totally tentative, involving somewhat gross generalizations.

Faced with a situation of grave import, the obsessive, taken as an "ideal type" (in the Weberian sense), endlessly runs alternative courses

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of action over and over in his mind, never seeming to be certain of one or another. Anticipated certainty is not, we might say, his forte. No amount of information or reflection can ever ensure the safekeeping of what for him is on the line. He can never really hazard a clear position, put himself to the test, or openly expose himself to criticism-sensing that if he did, the jig would be up: he would be revealed as a flop, a fake, a phony; he would be found out as inept, powerless, castrated. For such a subject, certainty can only be a gift of the gods-it can only come from the Other. Inductive leaps seem to him leaps into the unknown-and thus to be avoided at all costs. Temporal tension for him is unbearable, but to be borne nonetheless, as anything is better than laying it on the line. He eventually even gets to like it, and perhaps wouldn't even know what to do without it-it allows him to preserve his subjectivity, escaping the desubjectivization implied in concluding. Hoping to avoid castration, he unwittingly condemns himself to perpetual castration.

The paranoiac is just the opposite: the slightest little anomaly suffices to prove to him that "the President is out to get him for selling secrets to the Soviets" or that "the army has planted a transmitter in his brain and is ordering him to take revenge on . . . ". While certainty is, according to Lacan, always anticipated, the paranoiac gets the jump on everyone-investigation and cogitation seeming superfluous in his "race" to the truth.

The hysteric is convinced by something which strikes her fancy, being sceptical of the value of investigation and/or cogitation, but one can be sure that her conviction fits into her personal schemes, into the role she likes to see herself playing vis-a-vis others-she is pleased with it no end.⁷ That it may correspond in no way, shape or form with a logical conclusion of the kind required in the three prisoner problem, is no source of concern to her. Temporal tension throws her into disarray, getting in the way of her working things out for herself in her own good time. Her "untimely", because capricious, decision divests the Other of the power to force her hand, to finesse her, though at the same time she would in effect like to be forced, finessed, or tamed. She is the type who gets as far as the second suspended motion convinced she is a black, only reluctantly reversing her conclusion faced with the incontrovertible evidence of that second suspension. But secretly she is quite pleased with the outcome, and her feelings for the prison director are likely to be transference in nature.

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One could speculate about the reactions of a perverse subject in the three prisoner situation if we knew that the white discs had become fetish objects for him (one hypothesis being that the hiddenness of his own would drive him to heights of ecstatic frenzy)-or of a phobic subject for whom the discs had become sources of anxiety In each such case, the results of temporal tension could be fruitfully explored. An examination of temporal tension in the fetishist's "sexual act" (as well as in the very coming to be of the object as fetish), and in sexuality in general could prove to be a veritable goldmine in developing a logic of time. But leaving these directions for another occasion, let us turn to a brief discussion of time and the scansion of time in psychoanalytic practice.

The importance of time in the psychoanalytic session, has usually been glossed over, despite its obvious role in the ordering and structuring of the analysand's discourse. Whether in the course of the "standard" analytic hour (45-55 minutes, generally speaking) or of the variable-length session, one can hardly fail to notice that each analysand spontaneously adopts a certain strategy (albeit unconscious) in speaking, expressing what s/he has to say in a certain order-an order designed to achieve certain effects (these latter varying at different moments of the analysis). It has often been noted that in fixed length sessions, the analysand saves the best for last, but this can be true in variable-length ones as well where certain patterns have become discernible; the analysand may be led to try to second-guess the analyst's reactions, to divine at what point the latter is likely to cut the session, and thus to structure his/her discourse in such a way as to bring up that point only after certain others. This is only one strategy amongst numerous others, but it shows that a certain tension may develop between the rule of free association and the analysand's conscious or unconscious order of his/her discourse.

The interruption or suspension of the session in Lacanian analysis takes on a crucial role in the progression of therapy. In the scansion of the session, we can see separation in action: the cut puts an end to the subject's incessant sliding under/within the signifying chain while speaking, symbolic castration giving way here to separation through the cut that confronts the subject with the analyst as object, cause of his or her desire. It is primarily through the cut of the session-and all that it entails on the level of temporal tension-that the analyst is able

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to maneuver him or herself into the position of *object a* in the course of an analysis; without intervening directly upon time, in time, and by marking and objectifying time, it is hard to imagine how the analyst could ever come to occupy that position stipulated for him by Lacan. The variable-length session thus can be seen to be a *sine qua non* of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Footnotes

1. The male/female choice would seem, according to later Lacanian formulations, to be more complicated as anatomical "correctness" is not operative as an absolute criterion; that this choice may nonetheless be forced would have to be chalked up to other factors.

2. Though S, and S2 are only *properly constituted* by the suspended motions, they must be retroactively situated in the temporal phenomena which led up to them-as in the *point de capiton* (upholsterer's stitch or anchoring point) diagram provided in "The Subversion of the Subject", *Écrits*, Norton, 1977, N.Y., p. 303.

3. Except in the case of the subject who might have only realized he was black during the second suspension.
4. This is seen in the very fact that as one of them goes for the door, he is "escorted" by the other two-which is to say that none of them can ever be *singled out* by being freed, it having been stipulated that one and only one of the subjects could be released.
5. Lacan later distinguishes between the subject of the statement (or enunciated)-i.e. the grammatical subject-and the subject of the enunciation, viz. the speaking subject. He associates the latter with the subject in question in psychoanalysis.
6. Truth being primarily that, in a Lacanian framework, of the absence of *un rapport sexuel*, a relationship one would be justified in characterizing as sexual.
7. The feminine pronouns here are not inapposite as most, though by no means all, hysterics are female.