

## **A Resident of the World**

### **Forgetting the Past**

The question of “history” will be approached from two different perspectives in this paper: the history as every individual’s description of their life and history as the history of the parlêtre (Lacan, 1975). The former concerns any individual(s) in singular or collective form, while the latter focuses on the particularity of each subject’s self-created history.

*History* includes all biographies as well as autobiographies, looking through the lenses of the apparent reality of events and occurrences and the repetition of these events in a cyclical format. Time within *History* is mathematically linear and the impact of socio-political events on collective individuals’ lives is included in it. However, in *subjective history*, the question of the eventuality of impact is seen from a different angle. This angle takes into consideration the subject’s choice. The subject chooses to put happenings into perspective according to a certain subjective arrangement. In this respect, *subjective history* is a testimony. The spatial and temporal elements do not follow the rules of physics. In fact, *subjective history* finds meaning in topology. It ignores the laws of predictability and it is differentiated from what is perceived as cyclical repetition in *history*. The two conceptions of history outlined above follow trajectories which run in parallel yet are not fully independent of one another. There will be points of convergence - points from which the subject forms her/his testimony. Partly as a result of *History*’s impacts, the subject tells her/his version of story/history.

*History* is concerned with the past and with time that is passing. The eventuality of the future is considered based on the patterns in the past. Here, the question of choice becomes a limited one due to the fact that there is a dyadic and linear relation between cause and effect. An incident is or is not likely to happen depending upon past experiences. The probabilities are much discussed and negotiated once we face the question of the past, present and future in the

realm of *History*. Monuments, artworks, museums, history books and novels are all attempts at not forgetting, of remembering or of preserving the past, with little attempt to answer the question of why the past should not be forgotten or how it is remembered.

For many, the Channel sea and its cliffs can be a reminder of a historical event at Dunkirk: the evacuation which took place in the early 1940s. Meanwhile for a subject, for example, it could be a reminder of a much earlier event in childhood, such as the experience of overwhelming anticipation as she awaits her/his rescuers. In the latter, the impact of the event is registered as an invisible mark. It is this invisible mark with which psychoanalysis is concerned. In psychoanalysis, we create a potential for every single individual to explore her/his *history* in order to create a *subjective history* beyond the story of her/his life or what is taken to be their destiny.

However, the parlêtre of our civilisation can never be independent of the Other; the Other of *History*: the effect of *History* on her/his living body. In other words, the Other of the body and language are inevitably affected by *History*.

### **The Past**

A while ago I re-experienced the mark of *History*'s effect, a reminder of what remains under one's skin, at an unexpected time. I was preparing for a talk at a conference on "The effects of contemporary socio-political events on individuals' mental suffering" when I received a phone call from a solicitor working for one of the immigration offices, dealing with a never-ending application. A minor typing error on my accounts, a radical decision was made. Despite my certainty of "I am staying", an enforcement letter was due to take away all I had built up in the previous years. The solicitor was saying something on the phone which I could not register and cannot recall. I was absent from real-time and suspended from a subjective temporality. A "no matter what" decision was made. A file, a number, a label: you, one of thousands in the queue, were waiting for a decision to become de-suspended. I do not wish to go into the details of this

challenging process and the suffering resulting from it. In the mode of suffering, the subject is and always will be alone.

It took me nineteen days before I was able to put those few moments into words for the first time. Yet I did not feel successful enough in fully exhausting the meaning of what I really felt in that particular moment. I had survived the momentary suspension again. The outcome of my efforts to describe the momentary feeling is as follows: in a frozen fraction of a second, when all the movements around you suddenly stop and you have a panoramic view and a clear sense, nothing seems to be registered. You struggle with a feeling of whether it is only you feeling what you are feeling. You are absent in your own presence. You push to return, to come out of the void. You first hear a constant ticking sound and the next thing that you hear is a banging noise exploding in your head. You are suspended from nowhere; suspension is the experience from which you want to survive. You make your choice and you are back; back to your usual senses and time resumes its passage.

Back to my senses, I realised that I was in the middle of writing a book and had a deadline with a publisher. I had my talk in a couple of weeks, which I could not possibly imagine cancelling. I had my notes prepared but they needed to be written as a paper if someone else was to volunteer to give the talk in my place. Above all, I had a line of patients arriving in less than an hour. It seemed that I had momentarily forgotten one aspect of *History* which does not include the subject. I was focused on what I was doing and I was aware of the paradox.

I took a cold shower and started my clinic. During the night, I re-prepared my talk as a paper to be read in my place by a colleague. I also noticed how my second language was escaping me all that day and for a good few days afterwards. The written works in my hands were in my mother tongue and had a great pacifying effect in those moments. I seemed to believe that I had fought and defeated all the suspensions in my life up until then. I had assumed that I would have become a survivor by doing so.

*History* is already there when an individual is born. Everybody in my generation was born into a discourse affected largely by big social events: revolution and war. Before my arrival on planet earth I had my first experience of suspension: my mother spent three days in labour. It was not safe to step outside. It was wartime. My mother feared for her life; that she may lose it and I was fearing to have it. Life seemed to be too much of a responsibility to take on. Besides, this delay of birth had found an expression in my mother's narrative. She used to refer to the date of my birth and blame the prolonged labour for making me wait for another year to start the primary school. Schools in Iran used to start on the first day of autumn and my date of birth meant that I had to wait until the following year to start school. My symptom of being in rush to finish and graduate from school originated from her equivocal expression of "being late".

For many years, I avoided speaking about many unusual experiences in my life: from revolution to war, from surviving a terrorist attack to immigration and exile. I did not want to escape the reality of the past, of *History*, I was very conscious of not reducing suffering to certain "buzzwords". I wanted to preserve this suffering from the Other's enjoyment. The suffering in and from the past had a priceless value. I was adamant to keep it subjective; a private matter to be used in a way so that the Other's unnecessary intrusion is bypassed. When a much earlier event leaves an irreversible mark on you, you become wary. A second chance would not be your first thought before making a choice. Besides, surviving becomes a mode of being. The past, however becomes revisited.

After the 1979 revolution in Iran, suppression in every sense of the word was brought upon the country. Culture, more than anything else, became the target of the attack. Everything was turned upside down overnight. My generation's *subjective history* is intertwined with *History* of major social suppression as well as war. The sound of a passing train or the noise of the fireworks on New Year's Eve were felt differently in later years as a result. The subject of

analysis becomes able to enjoy travelling by train and watching spectacular fireworks over the Thames but, still, a suffering is recalled.

What happens outside a family can play a fundamental role on affecting a family discourse. It cannot be detached or avoided. *Subjective history* does not function totally independently from *History*, as we have said. No matter how much parents tried to protect the new generation of infants from the war by keeping the rituals of everyday life in place, closing the curtains, playing loud happy music to muffle the sounds of bombardment, the war was felt out there from every possible angle. Schools were closed and children were home-taught. The anxiety of the mother was felt in her palpitations and the way her made-up smile was undone. All the made-up arrangements of ordinary life would function as little others, with pacifying effects on the children of the war. However, the invisible impact was still active in leaving its mark.

### **Neverland**

In my *subjective history*, more than any other element in my life, the land beneath my feet has been highly valued as much as it has been transitional. Many of us enjoy moving, a symptom generating a mode of jouissance for each subject in a particular way for a particular reason. It gives a sense of freedom to many. If the element of freedom is stripped away from the concept, it takes a very different turn: one becomes an exile, entangling the subject in a closed circuit. The subject would not be able to go back to where s/he has started her/his journey as a point of reference: her home. Those who have experienced an earthquake know very well that more than being concerned about something falling from above, it is the shaking ground beneath one, which generates a horrifying sense of instability, an overwhelming sensation of anguish. From and through *History*, I had learnt not take the ground under my feet for granted, to the extent that this uncertainty became a mode of being. From an individual to a psychoanalytic subject, I eventually found a way to create a *sinthome* out of moving (Lacan, 1975), out of the symptom. However, you remain conscious of the shaky ground beneath. You will be reminded,

long before your interaction with any immigration offices or borders. Every single time you hear about a war somewhere in this world, every single time you hear about an incident in Calais or Dunkirk, at the asylum seekers' camps, you are catapulted into both *History* and your *subjective history*. We have not reached a full century after the Dunkirk evacuation nor the Nazi concentration camps and yet today we hear about "the jungle", a name given to the camps at Dunkirk and Calais by Syrian refugees. It has never been a question of identification with the people there for me, as I do not share the same or similar experience in the past. A decision is made by a group of individuals who cause disasters which could have been prevented, as is the case with any social major changes such as revolution and war.

It is true that an oeuvre comes from a suffering. The trauma of the recent history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first and second world wars, left marks on the formation and on the continuity of psychoanalysis from Freud to Lacan. The major contributions of the Jewish community to science and to new fields of research, such as cybernetics, in the wake of the Holocaust are undeniable. In the face of major social trauma and suppression, of any kind with an intensity, each subject will deal with it differently. However, the suffering resulting from massive social disasters can also cause turmoil and unnecessary regression rather than nurturing the subject's creativity. It can produce a perverted power structure, which interrupts the exploration of the unknown. It suppresses art and inflicts a survival mode instead of developing and encouraging new work. In such circumstances, what can one do and how can one deal with one's suffering, with one's symptom? *Savoir-y-faire* (Lacan, 1975) would not be the first priority of a subject whose primary concern is simply to survive everyday life. Survival mode goes against any form of constructive development.

In the earlier vignette of my experience of suspension, a decision-maker had, again, shaken the ground beneath me. It was an unnecessary interruption which reduced, once again, *subjective history* to *History*, which was written on a piece of paper: a descriptive identity. It felt like an

alienation. On paper, you are reminded of a past which you have gone beyond. This question becomes more urgent when the law treats certain identity papers differently. The identity paper which decided the fate of a young Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, in September 2015 did not involve a subjective choice. He was a three year old Syrian boy with Kurdish ethnic background. His family had fled Syrian war and tried to reach Europe amid European refugee crisis. Alan, his family and many others decided to flee an imposing civil war. He was drowned along with his five year old brother and his mother. The war circumstances had led his family to try to obtain entry to Canada. Except the father of family, none of the family survived the dangerous sea. The war and the decision of some politicians in power repeated a past which could have been avoided.

From Holocaust to Islamic radicalism, from war to terrorism, from racism to xenophobia, *History* affects *subjective history*. Personal choices - coming from somewhere beyond cognition or the ego - individuality and the opportunities to nurture humanity will be washed away from contemporary history when the past is forgotten.

### **Dunkirk: The Shore of Anticipation**

In the light of both history and psychoanalysis, I would like to evoke “Dunkirk”, a movie by Christopher Nolan with a score by composer, Hans Zimmer, whose music in this movie inspired and helped me to write down what I could not talk about for a long time.

The Dunkirk evacuation could not be imagined nor narrated subjectively any better than it was in this blockbuster movie. The narrative followed three strands, putting the individual in the position of a subject in the mode of “suspension” and “survival”. Nolan pinpoints the “difficult choices” and “paradoxes” brought upon a subject by their situation (Nolan, 2017). Using the visual and sound effects, the sense of unpredictability in such conditions is transmitted to the audience. The narratives are stripped from the plot, allowing the emotional effect of the art to transcend the rationality of the intellect.

The plot focuses on the subject's momentary choices and responsibilities, which are brought upon her/him. *History*, as described earlier, involves a linear and mathematical duration of time. However, in Nolan's movie the momentary nature of coming to a conclusion - the urgency to make a choice for a subject - is taken into consideration and depicted.

When I was researching the history of the Dunkirk evacuation and its aftermath, I found two differing approaches to the event from France and Britain. The touristic memorial sites in Dunkirk have brochures in both languages, in which, again, you find the traces of a duality towards *History*. The duality, however, serves the same purpose: to keep remembering the past. If one version of the story sees the whole event as a defeat and a retreat - as Churchill called it a "colossal military disaster" (Churchill, 1940) - the other version is the story of resistance. This illustrates again how the position of the subject matters, when looking into a history.

This movie's particular perspective aims at the subject, regardless of nationality or language, which are key components of *History*. The difference is highlighted at the level of the subjective choices made in a battle field, on the ground or in the sky. In the three parallel narratives, what is addressed is not the question of triumph or defeat. The effect of every individual's decision, from a military commander to an ordinary Dutch citizen longing to escape, causes the saving or the loss of lives. Another example is the fisherman with a sailing boat who must decide whether to go ahead with his own plan or to stop and rescue a drowning pilot. In the face of the Real of the event, where all the political and military strategies seem to be collapsed, a civilian sailor decides not to seek safety: "there is no hiding from this, son." The law of wartime, would condemn him due to having disobeyed the rules, yet he transgressed and chose to follow his own interpretation. "There is no hiding from this" also echoes the moment of conclusion which each subject comes to in the course of analysis marked by an urgency.



In this movie, Dunkirk with its 400,000 trapped men, became an event in *History*, involving the *subjective* interpretation of the situations during wartime. Hence, the movement of the story takes us from a militarily disastrous defeat to the triumph of humanity.

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