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Viso.

**Poéticas do Fort-Da:
Guerras de Elefante
no inconsciente semiótico**

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RESUMO

Poéticas do Fort-Da: Guerras de Elefante no inconsciente semiótico

Baseado nas leituras críticas de Gilles Deleuze e de Félix Guattari dos trabalhos de Sigmund Freud e de Jacques Lacan, este ensaio tem como objetivo elaborar tanto clinicamente quanto filosoficamente as forças que compõem o inconsciente semiótico. Junto do filme *Elefante* (2003) de Gus Van Sant, o texto empreende uma discussão pragmática a respeito da máquina de guerra. Propomos uma nova conceptualização do *Fort-Da* com o termo imagem-morte enquanto um curto-circuito entre as categorias de real e de imaginário. Complexificando problematizações sobre temas contemporâneos como a violência juvenil e a educação no ensino médio, trabalhamos com o entrelaçamento de prática e de teoria, sublinhando questões sobre a teoria da libido, agencimentos, a produção de conceitos, micropercepções, e castração simbólica como trauma.

Palavras-chave

inconsciente; pulsão de morte; Fort-Da; psicanálise; esquizoanálise

ABSTRACT

Poetics of Fort-Da: Elephant Wars in the Semiotic Unconscious

Based on Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's critical readings of both Sigmund Freud's and Jacques Lacan's works, this essay aims to clinically as well as philosophically elaborate on the forces composing the semiotic unconscious. With Gus Van Sant's film *Elephant* (2003), the text undertakes a pragmatic discussion concerning the war machine. We propose a new conceptualization of the *Fort-Da* with the term death-image as a short-circuit between the categories of the real and the imaginary. Complexifying problematizations about contemporary themes such as youth violence and high school education, we work with the entanglement of practice and theory, underlining questions about the theory of the libido, agency, the production of concepts, microperceptions, and symbolic castration as trauma.

Keywords

unconscious; death drive; Fort-Da; psychoanalysis; schizoanalysis

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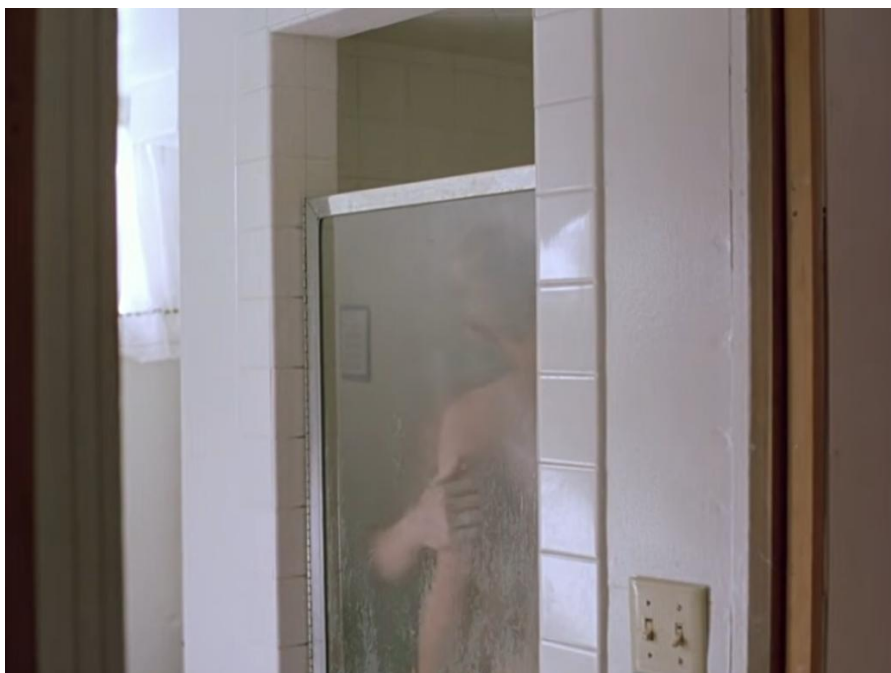
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Elephant (2003), directed by Gus Van Sant.

The counter-signifying semiotics: here, overcoding is assured by the Number as form of expression or enunciation, and by the War Machine upon which it depends; deterritorialization follows a line of active destruction or abolition.
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari¹

Introduction

In Gus Van Sant's film *Elephant* (2003), two young men approximate death and queer sexuality with their unexpected kiss. They say to each other "I guess this is it. We're *gonna* die today", "Yeah, I've never even kissed anybody. Have you?", before going to their high school with bombs and guns to execute their plan. Gus Van Sant creates a fictional scene of two young men kissing in the shower while conducting a pragmatic analysis of the 1999 Columbine mass shooting. How are kissing and killing superposed in these characters' lives? What does the superposition of the kiss over the killings propose as conceptual production when we try to clinically work with these characters: when listening to or being present for their anxieties and discontents?

This essay puts forth a hypothesis that *Elephant* runs with the tense vitalism of the war machine², conducting the analysis of the unconscious in *graphic*³ practices that deal with the

destruction or abolishment of a regime of signs based on *signifiers*. *Elephant* is fiction, but it is non-representational fiction. The film is composed of a *mise-en-scène* that investigates a libidinal territory, the high school, in a moment of violence. It alerts to the forces at play in the concept of the war machine. To analyze both *Elephant*'s undertaking and epistemology, we must operate pragmatically, with precaution, because the war machine is a post-structuralist approach to the productions of the unconscious that *assembles weapons to manifest desire*.

An alternative to apprehending the unconscious with the transcendent structure of the symbolic – which uses signifiers to voraciously interpret trauma in relation to castration –, the film directed by Gus Van Sant is a *counter-signifying* weapon that confronts the regime of substitutions underlined by metaphors or, more specifically, the phallic order of representations. The film reorganizes the war machine's violence when it creates – with a fictional movement – a semiotic association between kissing and killing. *Elephant* harnesses the forces of the war machine to invent a clinical methodology, or a poetic *mise-en-scène* that works clinically, to study both the libidinal *detritorialization* of the high school with the body and the *overcoding* of traumatic narratives. Yet, these traumatic narratives concern the characters' processes of individuation that led to the shooting. When the film overcodes the characters' narratives with the fictional kiss, it creates a new *fold*⁴ in their processes of individuation. This fold explores these characters' inscriptions onto a libidinal territory. Gus Van Sant's overcoding problematizes their processes with the perspective of desiring bodies affecting and being affected at high school, in its hallways, dialogues, and classrooms. With its violent force, the war machine creates weapons to transform a *striated space* of representation into a *smooth space* of nonrepresentation.⁵ Gus Van Sant *maneuvers* the war machine's transformative force to conduct a clinical analysis which graphically discusses violence with moving images and sounds, mapping out an existential territory.

Libidinal territories

Elephant vibrantly works the analysis of the unconscious as the immanent infrastructure of the sexual body which traces semiotic maps and creates its machines. We propose to connect Sandor Ferenczi's *Thalassa*⁶ to Félix Guattari's *Chaosmosis*⁷ when using cartographic signs – instead of signifiers that claim for extrinsic interpretations – in the discussion about the queer kiss superposed to the killings. As an intersection between psychoanalysis and its critique produced by schizoanalysis, the graphic elaborations of libidinal fluxes of genitality in relation to existential territories may compose new universes of reference. These universes of reference, we aim to explore, entangle the body, images, and the production of concepts – where the body is not a coded effect of language, but an active *desiring machine* conducting cuts and attachments, creating lines of force which may overcode and deterritorialize semiotic spaces.

The queer kiss before the killings raises questions concerning the sexual body in relation to the evolution of species, symbolic inscription, reproduction, and the mythological introjection of Jacques Lacan's *lamella* – the unreal organ that the psychoanalyst defines as the libido. The lamella limits the body's agency, confining the libido within the Oedipus Complex and subsequent interpretations.⁸ Because of the questions raised by the queer kiss followed by the killings, we propose a reconceptualization of both the theory of the libido and the *Fort-Da*. Based on the production of desire, the new *Fort-Da* is not a coping mechanisms organized by symbolic castration. Instead of facing Jacques Lacan's understanding of the libido as the lamella or Sigmund Freud's concept of the *Fort-Da* through the lens of the *epistemology of the lack* – where metaphors are substitutions mastered by the *pleasure principle* –, we call for a new term which is the *death-image*. Death-images are short-circuits between the categories of the real and the imaginary, diverging from both the hermeneutics and the phenomenology of symbolic mediation. Death-images recompose the ambiguities of a *polymorphous perverse* body when it confronts the symbolic order. As a conceptual novelty interfering in the

works of the *Fort-Da*, death-images may contribute to the creation of both new philosophical discussions and new psychoanalytic/schizoanalytic clinical approaches to unconscious production.

How does Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* launch our theories and practices of psychoanalysis toward a semiotic unconscious? Over two decades have passed since the film was screened at the Cannes Film Festival, winning the Golden Palm and the best director award. Produced by HBO Films, *Elephant* influenced a whole generation of filmmakers and film scholars. *Elephant* – in its enigmatic title that allows us to think of references that are not simply figures of speech, for instance: Is the film a restaging of Alan Clarke's 1989 *Elephant*? – opens psychoanalysis to a contemporary fictional approach that is not mythological. The question of this essay is posed in that way: How is *Elephant* a new aesthetic paradigm for the processual psychoanalytic entanglement of art and health, liberating life in its relationship with the death drive? The question comes after the investigations of Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze when elaborating on both the pragmatics of schizoanalysis and the transversal queer occupations of *nomadic* libido against the State.

Why does the kiss between two teenage men has to be followed by the mass shooting at their high school? The fictional scene of the kiss clinically displays an unexpected journey to the character's libidinal *drives*, recomposing the ambiguity of these teenage men's bodies. What did we miss that Gus Van Sant was able to aesthetically show? *Elephant* is a film that happens mostly in the perimeters of the high school – either inside the building or in the neighborhood, where a drunk father tries to drive his son –, or in one of the teenagers' houses – where the killers play the piano and a first person shooter videogame, watch a documentary on Hitler in the living room, eat, read, sleep, and receive through the mail a package with weapons, trying them in the garage. As its actions *unfold*, the film counts with outdoors scenes which depict the sky in time-lapse, showcasing

a certain existential restlessness that would fit the expression *under the weather*.

In *Elephant*, we analyze the unfolding of the narrative leading to the shooting associated with the *folding* of the space of the high school onto the characters' own bodies. Each new teenager, followed for some minutes by the camera, inscribes onto their bodies, with the rhythm of their movements, a personal cartography of the high school. Gus Van Sant highlights these rhythms of libidinal inscription through various techniques: poses for photographs, the use of classical music, slow motion, repetition of sequences from different points of view, and panoramic takes where *time* yields to *space* its intensity, creating moments of contraction and vibration via *microperceptions*.⁹ Folds, in the *monadic* spaces of singularity assembling the lives of each teenager followed by the camera, compose with contractions and vibrations the multiplicity of an individual's desiring body. Each body, driven by libido, moves around the high school and produces its own individuation through fluxes, stoppages, cuts, and attachments. Nevertheless, from all the collective *gatherings* and *dispersals*, the kiss was the most unexpected – since the shooting was the basis for the film, and we expected it. The kiss intensifies insoluble questions. It is fiction: creating an *event*, a moment of *anti-memory* that overcodes a known story. Characters' stories change because, in its processes, the film underlines *haecceity*¹⁰ as a cinematic action. This event overcharges or overcodes the narrative; it transforms both the narrative's clinical and philosophical courses. The kiss, because it is an event, reconfigures our conceptual production, complexifying the analysis of unconscious investments.

Gus Van Sant's film is a semiotic journey composed with *trans-monadism*¹¹ – namely: a transversal exploration of a territory filled with its character's singularities and assemblages. This territory is a space of inscriptions, circuits, and expressions where different individuals collect or create the *gears* of their own desiring machines. With this consideration, it is important to connect *Elephant's* trans-monadic journey to both the camera

style and the story minimalism generated by 3D technology in videogames launched between the years 1990 and 2000. Contemporary to the film's characters, these videogames have players moving around digital architectures and landscapes. Players explore the space: finding objects, armors, and weapons, interacting with other characters, solving puzzles, and killing enemies.

Elephant begins in the margins of the school and a teenager, John, is driving himself in a car because his father was too drunk in the morning. Minutes later, we meet another student, Elias, who is taking a picture of a couple in the front outdoor green area of the school. This couple just asked him if he wanted to take the pictures while naked with them. Some teenagers play and exercise on the football field until one of them, Nathan, leaves the team, puts on a sweater, and enters the building, exploring it. Nathan – the football player and lifeguard –, alongside his girlfriend Carrie, will be found by one of the shooters during the attack; the film will end with a perverse children's rhyme while the killer decides who would be shot first, Nathan or Carrie. The camera follows these characters, introducing them by their first names with white letters on a black screen, when each sequence starts. These are some of the rhythms of the school which are violently deterritorialized by the two young men, Eric and Alex, entering the building with tactical and camouflage clothes. They tell John that "Some heavy *shit* is going down". When they enter the building, the film adds the flashback to its composition. Starting with a bullying scene, we then follow the two teenage men's earlier circuits as students in a space of representation: the high school that they will attack.

How is it possible to translate from one regime of signs to another, or from the smooth to the striated and vice versa? Working with the semiotic unconscious, how does one operate the transition from interpretative or phenomenological signifiers based on symbolic mediation to counter-signifying signs of non-representative inscriptions or folds? *Elephant*, when harnessing the violent forces of destruction and abolition of the war machine by turning them into a clinical weapon, proposes an aesthetic

elaboration that uses counter-signifying semiotics. The counter-signifying regime appears when Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are mapping out fields of intensity produced by unconscious assemblages. In the plateau "On Several Regimes of Signs"¹², they analyze conflicting graphic forces clashing against mythological limits organized in readings, phallic experiences, and meanings. The counter-signifying semiotics is an immanent conceptual novelty grounded on the graphic productions of the body. Composing the unconscious, it enters the fields of intensity against the transcendence of the *barred Other* as the unreachable truth of Jacques Lacan's chain of signifiers. For Lacan, the symbolic – which we may as well call by the terms *Other*, language, and culture – is the main structural element of the unconscious and counts with both *meaningful verbal voice* and *identification* to conduct analytic practices. Yet, these fields of intensity composing the unconscious are full of signs in which overcoding comes up as a jargon that is both a threat and an opportunity – on the strength of new complexities producing themselves from chaos and battling known references to immanent compositions. Overcoding, though, is a pragmatic dilemma. Depending on how it is conducted, overcoding may lead to the construction of new capture devices, to the violent destruction of spaces, or to the creation of runaway underground autonomy via emancipatory feelings and thoughts. In its force, overcoding runs with numbers (*numérique*) which are geocoordinates to *virtualities*, to unforeseen worlds, to new Earths or enunciative territories, and to both unexpected assemblages and expressions.

Aesthetics, the body, and the unconscious

How does *Elephant* conduct analysis? *Elephant* is analysis in its aesthetic exploration of both libido and territory. The film is a clinical practice. It uses aesthetics to analyze transversal lines that pass by, stress, and cross each other in the fabric of the school, of bodies and their complexities meeting and getting lost, of small conversations, of photographs in the yard, of flirting, of the strange intimacy, violence, impositions, and the vulnerability

of the days of being a teenager, of two young men kissing for the first time. Analysis, in its aesthetic paradigm of critic and clinic, recognizes the vectors of desire in these scenes as a *search for production*. Desire is the production of more desire: it launches the body into expeditions that look for more production. What do the characters start with their libidinal agency? Also: What is restraining their desire?

Desire, as it is defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*¹³, is revolutionary: a process that occurs beyond the transgressions conceptualized by the chained *master-slave* evolutive understanding. In a different direction – which aims to create a *non-Hegelian* agency to the productions of the unconscious –, Deleuze and Guattari specify desire as a manifestation of the war machine reconfiguring regimes of signs. Instead of working with neurotic desire subverting the master signifier in a continuous chain, as proposed by Freud and Lacan in their comprehensions of hysteria, schizoanalysis underscores psychosis and its detachment from the master signifier ordering representations as the common ground for both the clinic and the theory of the unconscious. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is the production of more desire, where the *impossible* is not the real, but the symbolic.¹⁴ They alter the inputs of Jacques Lacan's categories and give to the body the agency to both assemble semiotic compositions and to liberate its graphic expressions on the strength of violent decoding and overcoding. What suffers decoding or overcoding is the formulation of the unconscious as the barred Other. As a barred Other, the unconscious is transformed into a transcendent structure composed of chained signifiers. For Lacan, the signifier represents the subject to another signifier: covering with phallic representation a missing link to the impossible real, to one's own materiality, to the body and its erogenous zones. Nevertheless, in the meta-philosophical elaboration of schizoanalysis, the immanence of the body, alongside the vitalist perspectives of the war machine, is what drives life beyond symbolic mediations, into the creation of new complexities. Thus, desire is productive difference, mutation, or discontinuity in the repetition of the symbolic, creating a line of flight which is immanent to the body.

The symbolic, now the impossible, is the virtual; it is what is yet to come, a new universe of reference. Immanent graphic expressions are new creations of the body which escape the chains of signifiers; they display singular, yet multiple, processes of individuation, folds, and *disorganized organs*.

The death drive is mixed with the life drive in the vitalist war machine, listening to sounds of transformation, aiming to superpose memory as a key to a signifying chain. Because of their powerful forces of destruction and abolition that focus on producing desire from desire – not from the *lack* –, psychoanalytic practices and theories affected by schizoanalysis require both attention and rigorous precaution. A new aesthetic paradigm – where aesthetics is psychoanalysis and schizo journeys are mapping out the violent poetics of the war machine – works by actively destroying or abolishing the chain of signifiers, in other words: the identification to the master's discourse, or the *name-of-the-father*. The war machine operates with psychotic *foreclosures*, deterritorializing the libido so the drives can run free from chained destinations, producing their own courses, and making their own curriculum. With the nomadic war machine, each individual may be their own *master of metamorphoses*¹⁵, outside of a chain.

The objective of schizoanalysis is to work with the non-masculine trajectories of the libido, dismissing phallic hermeneutics that name and explain things, and determine experiences in the world. Sigmund Freud, composing his paradigm for psychoanalysis, declares in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*¹⁶ that the libido is masculine. His paradigmatic composition will also include Oedipus and the divide between nature and culture. Culture that finds in the human sexual reproductive myth of the libido/lamella its strongest bond or capturing device. Thus, we investigate queer activities in the concept of the unconscious so we can preserve or restore the wild existences of ambivalence, ambiguity, and uncertainty when facing the composition of Freud's paradigm. This is an opportunity as well to relate aesthetics and transference: when libidinal semiotic investments in the clinic –

from analysand and analyst – go beyond both language and structural paradigms, in a clash of unpredictable results between regimes of signs.

Aligned with human reproduction, the myth of the lamella intimately comprehended death as what must be domesticated when listening to human sexuality, setting up a mastered chain (S1 – S2) of familistic substitutions contained in the system of representation which uses signifiers. In this regime of representation, the symbolic is the reproducer of circumstances and regulations in which family – the mother, the father, the son – are the constant interpretative default of organisms: limiting their existences, creations, and libidinal investments. Aesthetic experiences and practices of the body are framed in memory as Jacques Lacan considers it an effect of language; and pleasure, after Sigmund Freud, is a principle of *belonging* in culture – not a trajectory of *becoming* something with the body itself, in its schizo possibilities. The schizo possibilities of the body are precisely the poetics of the war machine.

The lamella – the introjection of the myth of Oedipus – occupies the body and organizes sentences for the *barred subject*. For Lacanian psychoanalysis, only because individuals are barred by the representation of phallic signifiers they can start their folding processes. In neurosis, individuals exist because they speak: because they pick up signifiers to be represented to other signifiers in a chain programmed by the symbolic. The lamella constrains the notion of libidinal investments by attaching the libido – as well as its movements of investment and occupation conceptualized with the term drives – to the figure of a blade, separating the *object root of desire* from the subject, programming the pleasure principle and instituting both symbolic castration and the impossibility of the heterosexual relation. For the theories and practices of psychoanalysis that structure the unconscious with language, the breast of the mother is separated from the baby's mouth by the myth when it occupies the body, and pleasure is to be found in substitutive objects. Thus, on the strength of symbolic castration, the sexual

relation is always an impossibility, reached only in a metaphorical realm.

Yet, for schizoanalysis, the body is not a captured heterosexual force constrained by the reproductions of both familism and the human species as it is articulated by the myth of the lamella. Instead, the body is a queer producer of other bodies and worlds from its own materiality, preserving its schizo multiple perspectives that move in planes of composition. There are unknown foreign populations existing in a body.¹⁷ And the human body is not exclusively in the human form, it may become something else because it keeps in itself the whole history of the evolution of species, as we read in Sandor Ferenczi's study of the *Thalassa* and the origins of genitality. The *Thalassa* is not a myth because it is a creative concept of vitalist theory that challenges the myth. The *Thalassa* – in its immanence, *animism*, and heterogeneic autopoiesis – is elaborated in an inverse intellectual trajectory compared to the trajectory that was taken by Jacques Lacan when conceptualizing the lamella. Instead of going from the symbolic to the body, the *Thalassa* goes from the body to the symbolic; the *Thalassa* calls for the word *multiplicity*; it is a concept, a clinical tool created by Ferenczi to elaborate on unconscious forces which gather the forces of both subject and object at the same time, where both the libido and semiotics are secretions of a body as well as sweat, tears, and ejaculation. The body and its secretions sexualize the world, they produce the world – fragmenting, recreating, and reinventing it constantly with the drives – because there are intensities of worlds in the insides of the body. It is not the lamella and the myths of the symbolic that are occupying the body as if it needed to be sexualized from the outside; the body is already sexualized by both its own vitalism and expressions of desire. A body defines a world. The *Thalassa* of a body is the Other that inmixes itself to the world; it is not the Other, as we read in Lacan, that inmixes itself to the body as a prerequisite to any multiplicity. The multiplicity of the unconscious is the body in its *patchwork* of real and imaginary, not the symbolic structure of language which colonizes it.

Psychoanalysts must ask: How can we be neighbors of the characters in *Elephant* during their processes and experimentations, attentive to both the novelty they may produce and to what tragically suffocates them? We must investigate graphic signs in images, not signifiers in a chain, using synesthesia. The discipline of psychoanalysis, invested by the critique elaborated by schizoanalysis, needs to *listen* not only to the sounds, but to the moving images of characters walking in circuits created within a territory. Intensities, transported in the air, may invade our ears. Bodies vibrate and contract with the cartographic images and sounds of a territory. Seeing, in the film *Elephant*, is much more *haptic* or *caleidoscopic* than it is the one-point-of-view observation employed by projective interpretation. *Cartographic listening* is a matter of entangled life and death drives in which the imaginary, to produce its resounding images, is in direct contact with the real. Which other eyes do we find when “organisms with upright posture,” or “eye animals”¹⁸ – humans – walk differently around the world, assembling machines to exist in other ways? What happens when we face the task of listening to the graphic productions of a body, using synesthesia to confront the impossible symbolic? Sandor Ferenczi, in the *Thalassa*, mentions the case of a homosexual teenage man who starts living underwater. Inside of a bathtub, inventing techniques and using materials he found at home, the homosexual teenage man may have produced other eyes for himself. He may see differently because he lives differently with his inventive aquatic machinic drives, seeing underwater. Or: because he could see different, he created his desiring machine. What the homosexual teenage man assembles is a weapon of the poetic war machine, manifesting desire. He *becomes* something else – where *becoming* is not metaphor or representation, but a point of negotiation between complexity and chaos. With the agency of his body’s unconscious immanence, producing folds and assemblages, the homosexual teenage man “installs an interface between the sensible finitude of existential Territories and the trans-sensible infinitude of the Universes of reference bound to them”.¹⁹ Gus van Sant may have these eyes, seeing different as well.

Between complexity and chaos, listening to images is the *hallucinatory* act that may provoke mutations in the body. Synesthetic hallucination puts forth an embryology of microperceptions – which uses the concept of the fold in relation to the contractions and vibrations triggered by the production of images. The cartographic composition of moving images and sounds invading the ears creates sensations beyond symbolic mediation. These sensations stress mass and energy in both categories of the imaginary and the real, bypassing the symbolic. As Sandor Ferenczi and Félix Guattari propose after Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis elaborates on the phylogenetic existence of the unconscious infrastructuring the body in relation to materials of the world.²⁰ These relations are animistic, where the genetic phylum is intermingled with the machinic phylum, writing mutations within ecologies when a body creates tools. Tools, which vary from swords and sabers, to paintings, sculptures, songs, and concepts. Images, in their libidinal immanence, are semiotic productions of the body. Dreams, symptoms, and acting outs, for instance, are images: graphic expressions of the body beyond representation. In that regard, we arrive at a possible definition of the death-image. Death-images are weapons of the war machine produced by the body in battles against the orders of the symbolic, disturbing language in its signifying structure. Death-images are images that counter-attack the interpretative coercions of the symbolic. Death-images are not mythological. However, they are poetic in their concrete meetings of technological vitalism with materials in the world, *processually* mixing the history of materials with the history of the body. Namely: the poetics of death-images, alongside the war machine, works with the inorganic of materials and the organic of the body. This new concept is a productive tool for the clinic that focuses on animistic neighborhoods: it aims to create *zones of emergence* outside the symbolic order organized by both chains of signifiers and Hegelian evolutive oppositions. These images do not metaphorically substitute the undecipherable with meanings, transporting or confining intensities to hermeneutical limits or known experiences which separate subject from object. Death-images stay with the *all at*

once new organs of the primordial soup, not with the traumatic primordial scene.

A new *mise-en-scène* of the *Fort-Da*

On the strength of elaborating on libidinal territories and unconscious assemblages, it is important to debate a new conceptualization of the *Fort-Da* while problematizing Jacques Lacan's sentence: "The best image to sum up the unconscious is Baltimore in the early morning".²¹ Working at the intersections between psychoanalysis and schizoanalysis, we must explore possible conceptual articulations that short-circuit the categories of the real and the imaginary via libidinal practices: where the symbolic is the impossible. For that, we need to rethink the plane of composition of Baltimore in the early morning by questioning its semiotic relation with the myth and its symbolic castration. When working with the multiplanar composition of the cityscape, we must underline the schizo poetics of the body in the assemblages of the *Fort-Da*.

Why is it important to problematize Jacques Lacan's sentence that defines the unconscious as Baltimore in the early morning? We will crash this definition against a new semiotic possibility for the clinic of the unconscious we reach with libidinal cartography. In a talk called "Of Structure as the Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever" given by Lacan in the city of Baltimore, USA, in 1966, he proposes – in two different moments during the presentation – definitions that seem contradictory if we positively misunderstand them. We must work with these definitions contaminated by the critics and transversal operations within the debates of both philosophy and psychoanalysis promoted by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Jacques Lacan says:

Myths [...] are also structured as a language, and when I say "as a language" it is not as some special sort of language, for example, mathematical language, semiotic language, or cinematographic language. Language is language and there is only one sort of language: concrete language — English or

French for instance – that people talk. The first thing to start in this context is that there is no meta-language. For it is necessary that all so-called meta-languages be presented to you with language. You cannot teach a course in mathematics using only letters on the board. It is always necessary to speak an ordinary language that is understood.²²

The psychoanalyst makes clear his position concerning language, attaching myths to a cultural structure while dismissing semiotics, cinema, or mathematics as autonomous intensive activities which graphically work within the immanent unconscious of a body. Under that structuralist umbrella of *understanding*, Lacan looks for cultural or familistic meanings as the bases for the productions of the unconscious. After Sigmund Freud, he conceptualizes the clinic of dreams, symptoms, and acting outs with the preponderance of symbolic mediation. In the case of myths, Lacan's attachment to language is organized in a transcendent *Moebius strip* in which a stable mythological fiction, structured as language, is the first element in a signifying chain colonizing the body. This first element, the *S1* – the master signifier or the name-of-the-father – triggers a line of representation that limits associations, imposes laws, grounds movements, and restrains rhythms to a gravitational force: the lack. Within this framework, the body – which loses a piece of its own flesh to enter the symbolic, in other words: the fall of *object a* as the result of *castration* – is an effect of language, of the encounter with the Other. In French, *Autre*: where the surplus of this encounter is the object *autre*, the root of one's own desire as the desire that comes *from* the Other, metonymically. Object *a*, in a Hegelian fashion, has the evolutionary function of subverting the signifying chain, but staying in it: contributing to its progress, working for its development. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, questioning Lacan's comprehension of the clinic and the theory of the unconscious, propose that the body is an affecting force of unexpected expressions capable of creating *other Others*, other universes of reference detached from the chain of signifiers.

During that same presentation, Lacan produces the poetic image of Baltimore's cityscape in the early morning, graphically conceptualizing the unconscious:

When I prepared this little talk for you, it was early in the morning. I could see Baltimore through the window and it was a very interesting moment because it was not quite daylight and a neon sign indicated to me every minute the change of time, and naturally there was heavy traffic and I remarked to myself that exactly all that I could see, except for some trees in the distance, was the result of thoughts actively thinking thoughts, where the function played by the subjects was not completely obvious. In any case the so-called *Dasein* as a definition of the subject, was there in this rather intermittent or fading spectator. The best image to sum up the unconscious is Baltimore in the early morning.²³

Can we have poetics or fiction without the stability of myths and the chain of signifiers? How to write without the structures of myth-driven language? We look for trajectories and *becomings* that both energize and make vibrate in unpredictable ways the multilayered landscape of Baltimore in the early morning – stealing this image, transforming it with our thoughts, practices, and feelings into a multiplanar superposed possibility for a new conceptualization of the unconscious. The superpositions, simultaneities, in-betweens, and intervals of this aesthetic cartographic composition that is Baltimore in the early morning must be underlined and strengthened by psychoanalysts, artists, and philosophers; they must steal Lacan's image and mutate his definition. In his graphic image of the unconscious created with the compositional plane he sees in Baltimore's cityscape, Jacques Lacan produces a poetic movement. The unconscious as a cityscape in the early morning can be folded into a new territorial conceptualization – one that is not metaphorical, but rhythmic or machinic, and depicts a body inscribing itself onto the multiplanar image of a vibrant port region.

For Jacques Lacan, the unconscious *is*, but the verb *to be* in his sentence has the representational quality of substitution – of *like*, or *as* –, dismissing the possibilities of other universes of

reference composed by *non-verbal* expressions; Lacan looks for extrinsic references – the Other – to give meaning to bodies. Lacan unquestionably considers language a structure in relation to culture, opposed to nature. The nature-culture *divide* rules the pleasure principle, a problem Lacan inherited from Sigmund Freud. When Freud conceptualized the death drive he talked about staying in the proximity of a child, his grandson, while his daughter was away. Freud observed the child play, being excessively scientific in his translations of the child's psychic activities. Sounds and movements in the room were turned into operations of the pleasure principle that were later conceptualized in the term *Fort-Da*. There is violence in Freud's interpretation once he instrumentalizes the grandson's agency, fitting his play into a theory. We propose rescuing the *Fort-Da* from both the institution of family and the cultural achievement of being a representation in the chain of signifiers.

What did Sigmund Freud not listen to? Freud listened, but he interpreted too much instead of simply mapping out the movements of his grandson. Freud's interpretations muffled the potency of sounds by making them words. Nevertheless, he left in his text what he listened to before his interpretations. Here is Sigmund Freud's extract from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

The child was in no respect forward in his intellectual development; at eighteen months he spoke only a few intelligible words, making besides sundry significant sounds which were understood by those about him. But he made himself understood by his parents and the maid-servant, and had a good reputation for behaving properly. He did not disturb his parents at night; he scrupulously obeyed orders about not touching various objects and not going into certain rooms; and above all he never cried when his mother went out and left him for hours together, although the tie to his mother was a very close one: she had not only nourished him herself, but had cared for him and brought him up without any outside help. Occasionally, however, this well-behaved child evinced the troublesome habit of flinging into the corner of the room or under the bed all the little things he could lay his hands on, so that to gather up his toys was often no light task. He

accompanied this by an expression of interest and gratification, emitting a loud long-drawn-out – “o-o-o-oh” – which in the judgement of the mother (one that coincided with my own) was not an interjection but meant “go away” (*fort*). I saw at last that this was a game, and that the child used all his toys only to play “being gone” (*fortsein*) with them. One day I made an observation that confirmed my view. The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string wound round it. It never occurred to him, for example, to drag this after him on the floor and so play horse and cart with it, but he kept throwing it with considerable skill, held by the string, over the side of his little draped cot, so that the reel disappeared into it, then said his significant “o-o-o-oh” and drew the reel by the string out of the cot again, greeting its reappearance with a joyful “Here!” (*Da!*). This was therefore the complete game, disappearance and return, the first act being the only one generally observed by the onlookers, and the one untiringly repeated by the child as a game for its own sake, although the greater pleasure unquestionably attached to the second act. The meaning of the game was then not far to seek. It was connected with the child’s remarkable cultural achievement—the foregoing of the satisfaction of an instinct—as the result of which he could let his mother go away without making any fuss. He made it right with himself, so to speak, by dramatizing the same disappearance and return with the objects he had at hand.²⁴

What escaped from Sigmund Freud and became the possibility of a new aesthetic paradigm? *Fort-Da*, as we read in his text, is the agency of a child for *the child’s own sake*. *Fort-Da* is the “O-o-o-oh” itself, not the meaning that Freud imposes upon the sound’s vibrations, mastering the grandson’s production with words. “O-o-o-oh” is a new aesthetic paradigm. The acts Freud understands as the representation of the mother’s appearance and disappearance are actually playful movements of autonomy conducted by the child against symbolic castration, promoting questions raised by the death drive that go beyond the pleasure principle. “Go away, mother. Go away, grandfather.” – the family members must hold their interpretations. The death drive introduces a mutation to both the commonsense of death – as

the commonsense strangles death in a connection to the familistic myth based on heterosexual reproductive sexuality –, and to the pleasure of agency – as pleasure is orthodoxically understood by psychoanalytic theory and practice: namely, the caretaker's substitution linked to symbolic perceptions of cure by the acceptance of symbolic castration. Does the child introject the lamella by masochistically organizing the body? Or: Does the child cruelly play with sadism by disorganizing elements that compose life? Death, in the sadistic proposition, is mixed with life in the waters of the primordial soup – not in the traumatic separation of the mother; the concept of the death drive is the destructive articulation of psychoanalysis' enterprise against the symbolic.

What elements – feelings, thoughts, different narcissisms of bodies and worlds – are at play in the *Fort-Da*? *Fort-Da* is multiplicity, *it is not* a subject looking for a lost object: it is the paradoxical activity of to be *and* not to be at the same time, in proto- and trans-individualities. The child *becomes* the assemblage that is the wooden reel and the string. This is the scene of a film in which assemblages allow the child to “never stop diving into an umbilical chaotic zone where he loses his extrinsic references and coordinates, but from where they can re-emerge invested with new charges of complexity”.²⁵ Sigmund Freud, writing about his grandson, exercises castration against the child's machinic practices of becoming wooden reel and string. Acting in the name-of-the-father, Freud tries to *subject* his grandson's psychic activity and make of the *Fort-Da* what Jacques Lacan considers the S2: the signifier that follows the master S1 in a chain of castration.

Beyond the pleasure principle, the death drive transforms pleasure into productive desire by *becoming* an interwoven ambiguous composition of life and death, of Eros and Thanatos. *Fort-Da* is a point of negotiation between complexity and chaos that appears with desire in a well-behaved child's play who speaks only a few words and finally provokes troublesome acts by throwing his toys all over the room and under the bed while making sounds. The grandson's *mise-en-scène* is neither life

drive nor death drive: it is the constant negotiation of definitions in chaotic ontological texture. In *Fort-Da*, desire is not the lack in relation to the missing mother: it is movement facing the consequences to representation of going beyond the pleasure principle. Desire, when it is productive desire and not the lack – namely, the lack being the result of castration –, damages representation. *Fort-Da* is not a pleasurable coping mechanism, it is a machinic assemblage of symbolic entropy that puts at risk the system of language, a regime of signs based on signifiers; it is sounds, not words. The wooden reel and the string are the body of the child – not a metaphor. Freud and the family are the ones listening to language in the child's interjections. The child, on his side, for his own sake, is producing his own territory with movements, displacing toys, and making sounds: his own circuits of libidinal investment.

Instead of *belonging* in culture, schizoanalysis works with *becoming*, aesthetically, something else with one's own aquatic or *Thalassean* body, when sexual instincts – or, we must say, *drives* – are not in relation to familistic substitutions or cultural and civilizational myths. How does a body move? Which sounds does a body make? How does a body produce circuits in a territory? What does a body, in its trajectories, assemble to live and to die? What novelties does a body organize that are not reproductions? What images will appear when death is not the commonsense that puts sexuality in relation to the reproduction of the human species? The production of desire comes from the intense aquatic primordial *Thalassa* of genitality present in the ecologies of a historical body in the world – opposed to myths that focus on familistic reproductions occupying the body. Queer multispecies productions of a body clashing against symbolic heterosexual reproductions are operations of desire. Sigmund Freud encouraged us to problematize, to pose these questions, and to listen to unspoken problems. We must, even beyond Freud himself, endure the improvement of his radical listening.

Psychoanalysts are active listeners not only to what analysands talk, but to images and non-verbal signs that enter the practice without extrinsic references: even if the practice is outdoors, in a

film shooting or in the hallways of a high school. The trajectories of the libido – when joint forces of the real and the imaginary are *playing* instead of *representing* – are the most important lines of force in the clinic of the unconscious because mapping is a dynamic journey and exploration conducted by psychic activities.²⁶ The “O-o-o-oh” we hear in Freud’s text is a map, the psychic activity of a child’s existential cartographic journey, his expression of desire and aesthetic exploration. He is mapping out a territory with the radicality of not using words.

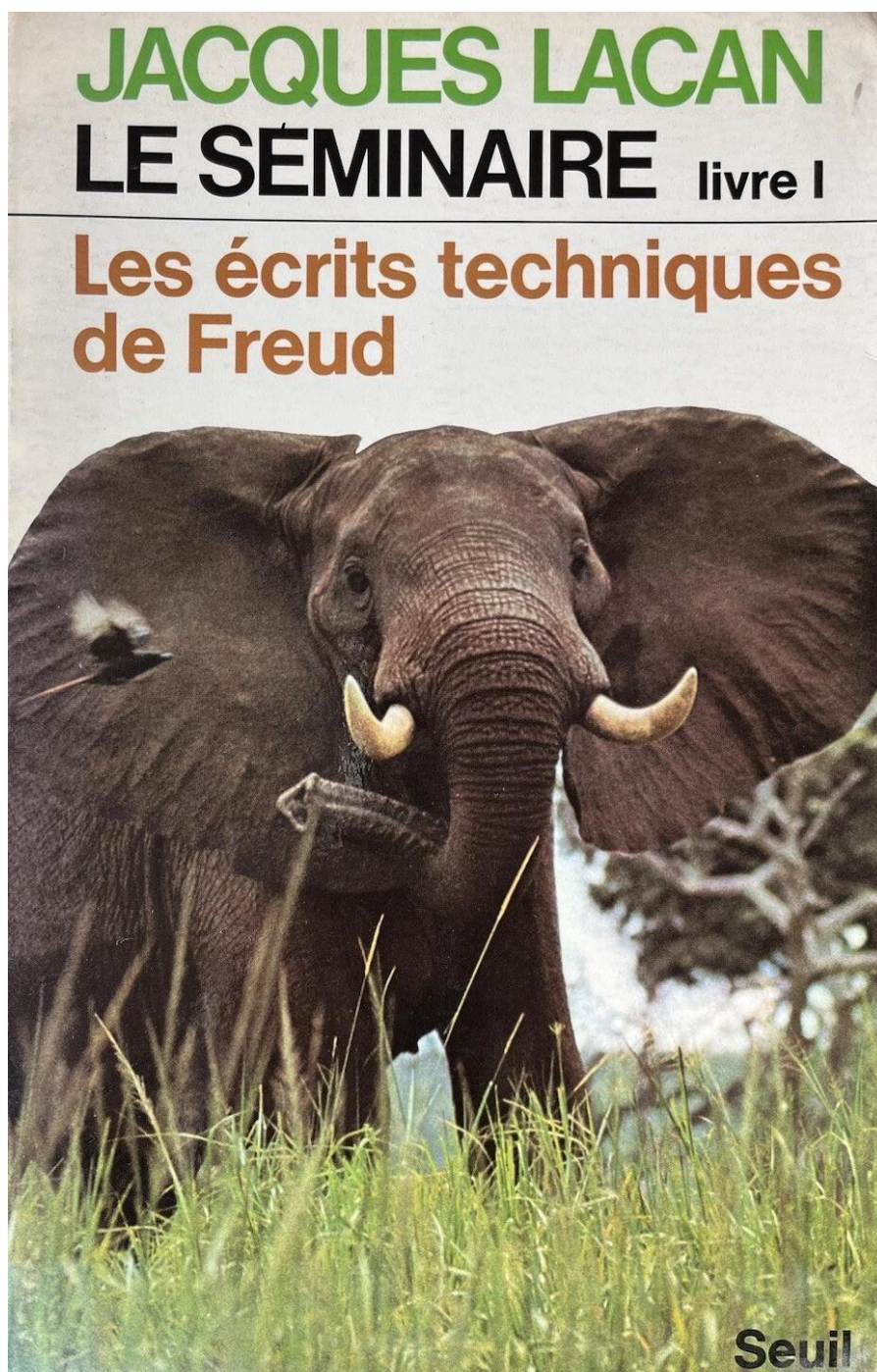
“O-o-o-oh” is “O-o-o-oh,” that is “O-o-o-oh,” that is “O-o-o-oh.” “O-o-o-oh”: a concrete poem, wind, a blow of air in movement exiting from a body; it is sound reverberating in materials, filling the room; it is secretion. What other images can be produced by the sound “O-o-o-oh”? The clinic is not an exclusivity of words and signifiers. Images, gestures, and *mise-en-scène* are psychoanalytic processes as well, on the strength of both their cartographic and aesthetic approaches to the forces at play in the unconscious, investing in existential spaces. Playing is not only for children; it concerns processes of assemblages unsure of their destinations, producing territories. These territories are occupied by the child’s libidinal investment. The work with the unconscious must have the act of playing at the core of its free associations. In *Elephant*, teenagers play teenagers and improvise the interactions of a school day that, at the same time, will produce more trauma and expose the trauma of crashing against language as the cultural symbolic structure of the unconscious. Language writes down a phantasmatic destination one is educated to achieve in its transcendent chains.

Teenagers are in a place between childhood and adulthood, a conflicting and ambivalent factory floor that underscores the investments of the libido. As the body changes while growing up, where to invest the libido? To which futures? How to deal with the new strange forms of a changing adolescent body? How does a teenager reinvent narcissism? Which are the possible lines of flight young people can take? Is it possible for them to still work with the child’s machinic forces, become reel and string, operating a new aesthetic paradigm of the *Fort-Da*? How

can we preserve the child's play while growing up? Images are producers of multiple schizo intensities in bodies that explode with libido; adolescence is a threshold within bodies. Gus Van Sant poses these questions: What do teenagers desire? How do teenagers compose territories? He uses both cartography and fiction instead of screenplay and documentary to work with young aspiring actors, filming in the town he lives in – Portland, USA –, thinking with teenagers about teenage desire in a film that is not a metaphor or even a representation: *Elephant* is *clinic*.

Shooting the shooting, Gus Van Sant makes this essay possible by the industry of his cinema. "O-o-o-oh" is a blow, a hit, a shot that makes the physicality of our bodies receive psychic actions. The moments of microperception in *Elephant* are synesthetic answers to the original shots in Columbine. The sound of "O-o-o-oh" was suffocated, listened to only after gunshots. Gus Van Sant's film only exists after the gunshots. Students, actors, directors, and audiences may learn with the film the importance of listening to movements, to the emancipatory vibrations, contractions, and sensations of moving semiotic bodies in a territory, on Earth, under the weather. With *Elephant*, we psychoanalyze moments of crisis. The territory that the film counter-signifies is the high school, which encapsulates other teaching institutions such as family and State. Against the State, the highest mark of symbolic castration via overcoding, we must think and feel with Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's nomadic war machine and its weapons that aim at manifesting the forces of desire. The war machine also operates with overcoding, as *Elephant* displays with the fictional kiss. The film is a weapon of the war machine that may liberate life instead of plotting massacres because it maneuvered violence. In a clinical perspective, it deterritorialized representation by confusing fiction and reality to aesthetic elaborate on the characters' violent acts. The relations between semiotics, the clinic, and the war machine need precaution, though, because they run with both the vulnerability and the exposure of bodies in constant impact, composing a tense field of collisions.

Conclusion



The cover of *Seminar I*, Jacques Lacan.

As we reach the end of this essay, we must consider the moving images and sounds of Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* in comparison with the image Jacques-Alain Miller decided to use on the cover of the transcriptions of Jacques Lacan's *Seminar I: Freud's Papers on Technique*.²⁷ Miller chose an elephant to put on the cover of *Seminar I* because Lacan both mentioned the animal

several times that year during his presentations as well as gave each participant an image of an elephant at their last meeting. Jacques Lacan, in his propositions, talks *about* elephants that are talked *about* by humans. But elephants, for Lacan, never *play* their own *Fort-Da*: disturbing human language by creating new universes of reference. In one of the lectures of *Seminar I*, Lacan speaks about language deliberations in relation to elephants:

Think for a moment in the real. It is owing to the fact that the word elephant exists in their language, and hence that the elephant enters into their deliberations, that men have been capable of taking, in relation to elephants, even before touching them, decisions which are more far-reaching for these pachyderms than anything else that has happened to them throughout their history – the crossing of a river or the natural decimation of a forest. With nothing more than the word elephant and the way in which men use it, propitious or unpropitious things, auspicious or inauspicious things, in any event catastrophic things have happened to elephants long before anyone raised a bow or a gun to them.²⁸

The fact that Jacques Lacan does not ignore that deliberations are made because elephants are talked about by humans does not exclude language from deliberating about them. What this essay pointed out is the necessity of disorganizing language's power of deliberation – for which signifying chains are its most notorious arresting tools. Beyond the transgression of the nature-culture divide, we aimed to position schizoanalysis as a vital critique that triggers unexpected mutations in the concepts of psychoanalysis. Mutations which follow the intensities of bodies; bodies which graphically fold into creative circuits within libidinal territories. As the film *Elephant* teaches us through its use of the war machine, cinema can be a clinical composition that restores the ambiguity of one's fate. The superposition of a queer kiss before the killings investigates the impossibility of the symbolic because it empowers the ambiguities of two teenage men's bodies. Did they have the opportunity to practice their ambiguities? Or did they have their fates organized by a phallic order? *Elephant* dislocates their violence and opens a smooth

space for both unpredicted clinical elaborations and conceptual productions.

For Lacan, conversations concerning elephants are *about* them. It is precisely this impossible act of talking *about* something what we intended to underline in this essay that investigates the poetics of psychoanalysis in a new aesthetic paradigm of the *Fort-Da*. We listen to the movements of teenagers in Gus Van Santt's film. How do they move for *their own sake*? We want to make language strange by stressing the importance of the semiotic unconscious and its graphic expressions to the theory of the libido, working with the troublesome impossibility of symbolic understanding. We do not talk *about*: we talk *with*; and, as we learn with schizoanalysis, we talk *for* new possibilities of autonomous graphic expressions to exist, highlighting the relevance of microperceptions and events. Learning with the clinical *mise-en-scène* created by Gus Van Sant in *Elephant* via fictional overcoding, we need to assemble new possibilities of reading, writing, and living with the productions of Jacques Lacan. Lacan must fold and transform; his libidinal territory which conceptualized the unconscious in chains of signifiers must be traversed by death-images of deterritorialization and overcoding. Lacan, then, may *become* an elephant who faces his own new body and work – and from this impossible new perspective, with fiction, we may produce new philosophical discussions and clinical approaches.

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¹ DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1980, p. 168.

² DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1980, p. 434.

³ DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1972, p. 226.

⁴ DELEUZE, 1988, p. 20.

⁵ DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1980, p. 592.

⁶ FERENCZI, 2018.

⁷ GUATTARI, 2022.

⁸ LACAN, 1973, p. 220.

⁹ DELEUZE, 1986, p. 115.

¹⁰ DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1980, p. 284.

¹¹ GUATTARI, 2022, p. 180.

- ¹² DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1980, p. 140.
- ¹³ DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1972, p. 141.
- ¹⁴ DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1972, p. 184.
- ¹⁵ DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1980, p. 172.
- ¹⁶ FREUD, 2011.
- ¹⁷ DELEUZE, 1993, p. 15.
- ¹⁸ FERENCZI, 2018, p. 117.
- ¹⁹ GUATTARI, 2022, p. 160.
- ²⁰ FERRAÇO NASSIF, 2025, p. 13.
- ²¹ LACAN, 1970, p. 189.
- ²² LACAN, 1970, p. 188.
- ²³ LACAN, 1970, p. 189.
- ²⁴ FREUD, 2003, p. 53.
- ²⁵ DELEUZE, 1992, p. 81.
- ²⁶ LACAN, 1953.
- ²⁷ LACAN, 1953, p. 190
- ²⁸ DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1980, p. 434.