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Mnemic Images in the Early Works of Sigmund Freud

Abstract: Freud was interested in the problem of memory from the time of his very early works. The processes taking place in memory, imaging, remembering and forgetting images focused his attention and were one of the pillars of shaping his conception of the unconscious and mind as “the storehouse of total memory,” which in one of his works he compared to “the Eternal City of Rome” (*Culture and Its Discontents*), which accumulate images-memories gathered throughout life. Shifts, changes, deformations, strong emotional components determine the specificity of many processes of remembering and forgetting, a specific “coding” of information in the form of visual, acoustic and other images. Nowadays, there are indications of Freud’s views in various dimensions of scientific research on memory and the consciousness of the importance of these approaches in our culture and its discovery of the role of autobiographical memory.

Keywords: image, mnemic image, screen memories, memory, autobiographical memory, psychoanalysis

Like many of his followers, as well as his reformers and commentators, Sigmund Freud quite early recognized the importance of both phenomena and processes in the operation of memory. He also understood the importance of mental images themselves and their relationship to external reality. His conception regarding the latter issue, so fundamental from the point of view of philosophical approaches to memory, is widely discussed in the contemporary research on the psychology of memory. As Zofia Rosińska remarks, references to memory and mnemic experience are scattered throughout his work and one gets the impression that Freud discov-

ered a new paradigm in understanding these phenomena (Rosińska 2003: 81–82). We also owe to Freud the discovery of autobiographical memory which plays an important role in contemporary research in various scientific disciplines (ibidem), although the work of Hermann Ebbinghaus is also mentioned as pioneering in this area, especially on the forgetting curve and the influence of personal experiences in memory processes (Rybak-Korneluk et al. 2016: 959). It needs to be stressed also that Larry R. Squire mentioned conceptions of F.P.G. Maine de Biran, William James and Henri Bergson (Squire 2004: 171) among early considerations of different kinds of this “faculty of mind.” Bergson devoted much attention to memory and the relationship between duration, image and memory in his works. *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1970 [1888]) certainly precedes the developed forms of Freud’s conception.¹

Freud attaches a great importance to memory, its specific activity in various periods of life, including early childhood, but also its connection with imagery, symbolism and trauma (Błocian 2007: 6–7). The concepts of memory, its imagery, its content and the notion of the unconscious, are closely related in entirety of his conception. Anna Herzyk observed: “The thought of Sigmund Freud and modern neuropsychology intersect in many different ways, but the most important are the analogies regarding the subject of research and reflection on the nature of unconscious mental processes, which was manifested in the creation of neuropsychology — a new branch in clinical neuropsychology” (Herzyk 2017: 190).

It is deep memory, crypto-memory, and cryptomnesia that were at the root of understanding the mind as a store of total information and the hypothesis of the functioning of the unconscious, the polypsychic nature of the psyche and the model of the mind as a cluster of the conscious self and many unconscious sub-personalities (Ellenberger 1994; Błocian 2017). Nowadays, hidden, deep memory is also called implicit memory (“intuitive information processing”; Underwood 2004).

In the most general and basic terms, it is defined as “recording, storing and reproducing experience” (Maruszewski 2000: 137) at the individual and collective level. It is differentiated as understood as a process and as an ability. Therefore, if it is understood as recording images related to experiences, its role in storing information that may be used for orientation in the environment, solving problems and finally survival increases. Are the images and their sequences (stored by short-term and long-term, deep memory)² a registration of real experiences? Or

¹ Randall Auxier remarked the time relations between early works of Bergson and Freud; an extended form of presenting the problem of image in terms of Bergson; cf. Auxier 2014; Bergson 1970 [1888]. Bergson emphasizes in this work many of the processes that Freud later recognized as important, for example that “the deep-seated conscious states have no relation to quantity, they are pure quality” or that in the dreamer’s imagination two images can overlap and create one, like in Gaton’s photography (Bergson 1950: 136).

² At the turn of the 60s and 70s, there were, among others, ultra-short-term, short-term and permanent memory (the model of Richard Atkinson and Richard Shiffrin; see Malmberg, Raaijmakers, Shiffrin 2019), then — declarative and non-declarative memory (Squire 2004), short-term and permanent memory (Hebb 1949). It was treated as a “storage” (gathering information about experiences), but it was also associated with different levels of information processing (Craig, Lochkart 1972).

rather a specific, modified form influenced by factors of individual and collective memory? Memory refers to the data of the outside world, the individual itself and the relationship between the person and the outside world (Maruszewski 2000: 165). The composition of these dimensions is a significant cluster of problems. At its source, memory was primarily pictorial, because the first pre-literary forms of artifacts related to human activity assumed this shape and it is dated in those beginnings according to the time of the creation of rock painting and symbolism related to burial customs. Its first forms are therefore pictorial and symbolic. The image, even in contemporary culture, is still primarily a carrier of information documenting the course of an event, act, process — it happens both in the sphere of photography (watching the world; Sontag 2009; “undoubted usefulness of photography in acquiring knowledge,” “increasing knowledge on the photographed objects”; Walden 2008: 111), documentary photography confirming by eye “a certain state of affairs, although many studies also focus on showing the discrepancy or even ‘shady interests’ between art and truth” (Sontag 2009) and in the whole bearing of the central question of semiology, whether “analogous representation (‘copies’) can create true systems of signs” (Barthes 1985: 289). It is used both in the media and in science, where photographs, images as information carriers constitute the axis around which the spoken, transmitted, researched and interpreted content develops (an image is an “observation instrument,” “provides better visibility of reality”; Wunenburger 2011: 185 ff.) In this perspective, it is emphasized that considering the image, imaging processes and imagery, we also indicate that seeing itself is a central aspect of our way of being, and that our contemporary culture is “to an increasing extent visual culture” (Sztompka 2005: 11–12).

The image, despite significant possible transformations, deformations, delusions, is related to the states of reality, both external to the mind and mental. This relationship is very complex and it is also demonstrated by contemporary psychological research on memory. The culminating conclusion is the statement that memory “is the basic mechanism of storing experience” (Maruszewski 2000: 163).

Freud’s research on images of memory is of great importance. In psychological research on memory, it is also noted: “Freud’s hypothesis on the role of early childhood trauma gained support from the least expected side”³ (Maruszewski 2000: 169). In his view, the most significant also seem to be the forms of data transformation, their selection, the formation of certain specific chains of association, that is, their entire complex dynamics and the ways of functioning and determining the ways of creating new elements in memory. A considerable question in these areas is still how the mnemonic experiences of a person relate to the events in his biography, how does the experience of the external world compare to those concerning oneself and the formation of complex relations between them, and how the descriptive data relate to the strongly affective aspects memory activities.

³ That is, from the research on the relationship of parental care in animals and the secretion of neurotransmitters that inhibit the activity of fear centres.

“Double Conscience”

At the root of the symptoms of hysterical neurosis lies the intrusion of the content of the “second consciousness.” It is characterized by many symptoms that are troublesome for individuals. Freud dealt with it already during his scholarship in France; namely, he observed the research of Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière Hospital (he often refers to them,⁴ including in the work *Quelques considerations*;⁵ Freud 1893: 38–55). This does not mean that he was not critical of his and his students’ interpretation of the phenomenon of hysteria (*L’hérédité*; Freud 1896: 407–422).

Beng-Yeong Ng writes that hysteria has “a long and colourful history”; often means “dramatic behaviour,” includes “a mechanism, a concept, a pattern of symptoms, and even a personality style” (Ng 1999: 287). The axis of Freud’s considerations and research is the recognition that its condition is splitting off consciousness from proper awareness of certain contents (“the whole stock of imaginative products”; Freud 1895 (hereinafter SH): 16) functioning outside its control. It occurs as a result of the overlapping of traumatic experiences and reactions in the form of symbolic and image codes and creations of the rich imagination of patients influencing a kind of hypnoid state. According to Freud, it is also a condition for hysterical neurosis.

Its symptoms are numerous; examples include paralysis and paresis of parts of the body, partial or complete aphasia, anaesthesia or tremors in various parts of the body; after Freud, many symptoms are classified as conversion symptoms, that is, linking (changing) the emotional factor into a somatic symptom: paralysis, anaesthesia, blindness or silence (Jarosz 1980: 187). Freud combines hysteria and hypnosis: “We should like to balance the familiar thesis that hypnosis is an artificial hysteria by another — the basis and *sine qua non* of hysteria is the existence of hypnoid states.” “Pathological ideas” form the basis for the emerging and dissolving content; they retain great vitality and freshness, as if “bypassed” by the control of the conscious ego, not succumbing to forgetfulness over time. “Double conscience” (Ger. *zweite Bewußtsein*), the second consciousness is the basis of any hysteria, because it interferes disruptingly with the usual ways of human functioning and adaptation: “the products of hypnoid states intrude into waking life in the form of hysterical symptoms” (Freud SH: 9). It deepens the relationship between them; this relationship is “the second consciousness”: “in hysteria groups of ideas [Ger. *Vorstellungsgruppen*; GW 1: 95] originating in hypnoid states are present and that these are cut off from associative connection with the other ideas, but can be

⁴ Freud writes about Charcot’s conception of hysteria in *Studies on Hysteria*: “Charcot, as is well known, has given us a schematic description of the ‘major’ hysterical attack, according to which four phases can be distinguished in a complete attack: (1) the epileptoid phase, (2) the phase of large movements, (3) the phase of ‘attitudes passionelles’ (the hallucinatory phase), and (4) the phase of terminal delirium” (Freud 1985: 9).

⁵ Freud writes there that he was Charcot’s student between 1885 and 1886 (Freud 1893: 38). He notes here what is important for the problem of psychological determinants of hysteria, and concerns the phenomenon of paralysis: “I will first observe that hysterical paralysis is much more often accompanied by disturbances of sensibility than organic paralysis, which are usually deeper and more frequent in neurosis than in organic symptomatology” (Freud 1893: 46).

associated among themselves, and thus form the more or less highly organized rudiment of a second consciousness, a condition seconde” (SH: 10). These groups of ideas, groups of images, form the disturbance and the characteristics of the symptom. They also take control not only over the current form of behaviour, but due to the length of the process, ultimately over the entire existence of the individual. Freud studies the biography of patients; many of its events are purely internal and therefore cannot be verified by comparison with the memories of their other witnesses; but much is subject to it. Traumatic hysteria is based on actual painful experiences, such as the death of loved ones, parents, divorce, and early childhood experiences. They affect people with vivid imaginations and the ease of creating internal symbolic imagery, which are the basis of the activity he calls “private theatre” in various forms of fear of a snake showing up on the wall, loss of the ability to speak in the mother tongue, but keeping it in a foreign language, hydrophobia, or hallucinations. The vividness of the image is often precisely related to pathogenic memories. The “second consciousness,” that is the unconscious, can already in these early works of Freud be characterized primarily by vivid image codes in which it expresses its content. They appear to be related to real events of individual experiences (Freud reconstructs them frequently), but the connection is complex. The connection of unconscious processes, the ability to imitate (“map”) and the development of the emotional sphere is nowadays sometimes noticed and re-interpreted, for example in the works of Antonio Damasio (2018).

Contemporary research on biographical memory confirms the role of emotionally (positive or negative) marked images of events that are experienced in early childhood, for example in studies by L. Murray and C. Treverthen (1985) on real and sham interactions between mothers and children, or creating the basis for cognitive scripts (Abelson, Schank 1977), especially un verbalized emotional scripts and their impact on the development of emotional intelligence. During a series of works and analysis of cases undertaken and reconstructed in *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud searches for possible forms of influencing behavioural disorders and symptoms of neuroses. An important conclusion can be drawn from them, also today, that early experiences affect the development and possible disturbances of the emotional sphere of an individual and its adaptation to the requirements of life, understanding other people and the ability to create emotional bonds.

“There Is in General No Guarantee of the Data Produced by Our Memory”

In the early stages of his research, he is primarily interested in effectively influencing the causes of persistent symptoms of neuroses, especially hysterical neurosis. In 1899 he publishes *Über Deckerinnerungen (Screen Memories)*. Here he follows Catherine and Victor Henri’s research on memory. In reference to them, he writes:

In the majority of significant and in other respects unimpeachable childhood scenes the subject sees himself in the recollection as a child, with the knowledge that this child is himself; he sees this child, however, as an observer from outside the scene would see him (Freud 2001 [1899]: 321).

So it seems obvious that a certain transformation is taking place here. A memory that is based on an experience in the past and does not contain any transformations could not involve the image of itself from the point of view of an outside observer, yet in a certain class of images of memory it does. Screen memories are defined by Freud as: “recollection of this kind, whose value lies in the fact that it represents in the memory impressions and thoughts of a later date whose content is connected with its own by symbolic or similar links, may appropriately be called a ‘screen memory’” (ibidem: 319).

So there are many images stored in memory that the individual does not know why he remembered them. They seem neutral, indifferent to many biographically important events. They are accompanied, yet it is not known why the images of the events themselves or even those that would be semantically associated with them with a strong affective stigma are not remembered. This is what happens with images that are only accompanying, neutral in this respect, and even at first glance having no meaning at all. Sometimes they are kept alive and with almost photographic likeness, they are almost copies of images perceived by the senses. Thirty-eight-year-old patient of Freud recalls the remembered image of yellow flowers and the taste of bread: “The yellow of the flowers is a disproportionately prominent element in the situation as a whole, and the nice taste of the bread seems to me exaggerated in an almost hallucinatory fashion” (ibidem: 312). He even directly says: “The scene appears to me fairly indifferent and I cannot understand why it should have become fixed in my memory” (ibidem: 311). Therefore, the operation of memory is not a simple and obvious storage of information related to particularly important events from the point of view of an individual biography. It is not a simple process of registering impressions related to “fear, shame, physical pain, disease and death” as in the research by C. and V. Henri. A strong affective and emotional basis modifies the functioning of memory. Nowadays, it is noted that if there are disturbances in emotional communication, they may affect, especially in the early stages of life, further mental development, as well as neurodegenerative changes in the brain (Maruszewski 2000: 168). Symptoms, writes Freud, can be understood through a series of conflict and denial processes (*Verdrängung*; Freud 1899: 537). They most often take place around the main and strong sources of drive (*mächtigen Triebfedern*), love and hunger.

According to Freud, the veils of memory have a certain purpose, they replace unpleasant or painful meanings of experiences, forming an image that indicates with the unusual vividness of forms and colours beyond itself towards the “source experience.”

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