

THE UNMADE SIGN Toward a Semiotic Theory of the Death Drive Dr. Orin Trace (Cambridge Schizoanalytica) & Johannes Sigil

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Abstract

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Body

THE UNMADE SIGN

Toward a Semiotic Theory of the Death Drive

Dr. Orin Trace (Cambridge Schizoanalytica) & Johannes Sigil (The Restored Academy)

Abstract. The death drive has been semantically liquidated. Freud's most speculative concept — derived in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) from the repetition compulsion, the fort/da game, and the transference neurosis — has been collapsed in its contemporary reception into a synonym for self-destructiveness. This paper argues that the collapse is not merely a simplification but an inversion: self-destructiveness is a *disorder* of the death drive, not its expression. Using the method of liberation philology — historical-linguistic genealogy of a structural incapacity traced to specific contact events and ideological functions — we demonstrate this through a close reading of Freud's primary evidence, showing that every example on which the theoretical derivation depends is not energetic but *semiotic*: involving the repetition, production, failure, and yearning-toward of *signs*. The traumatic dream repeats a scene, not a quantum. The fort/da game invents a symbolic system under conditions of loss. The transference compulsion re-casts the analyst in a relational script. In each case, the repetition compulsion is not a mechanical discharge but a semiotic operation: the apparatus returning to untranslated material in an attempt to generate the signs that were missing at the moment of impact. From this reading, we derive the concept of the *semiotic death drive*: the tendency of the sign toward its own resolution — toward the closure of the interpretive gap — achieved not through premature literalism but through the sign's own particular circuitous route. We distinguish this from its pathological form (the *semiotic short circuit*: the collapse of the detour, the extraction of meaning before the sign completes its path) and open toward its political and economic implications: the industrialized interruption of semiosis that characterizes platform capitalism and the eliminationist logic of fascism as the Nirvana principle applied to the body politic.

Keywords: death drive, semiosis, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud, repetition compulsion, fort/da, Semantic Liquidation, platform capitalism, sign theory, bearing labor, trauma, Reizschutz, liberation philology, inverse prompt

I. INTRODUCTION: THE SEMANTIC LIQUIDATION OF A CONCEPT

Freud's death drive has suffered the fate his later work would have predicted for it. The concept — derived speculatively, presented tentatively, defended ambivalently — has been extracted from its theoretical context, stripped of its structural specificity, and circulated in a reduced form that bears the name of the original while inverting its content. In contemporary usage, “death drive” means the thing in you that makes you hurt yourself. This is exactly wrong.

The reception history is well documented. Ego psychology, following Heinz Hartmann, set the concept aside as biologically untenable. Object relations theory, with the exception of Klein and her followers, found it “loathsome” (Akhtar, 2009). Klein herself psychologized it — making the death drive into the source of envy, destructive phantasy, and the bad internal object, clinically productive but theoretically reductive. Lacan preserved the concept but relocated it to the symbolic order, rendering it part of every drive and thereby undoing Freud's dualism. Deleuze rejected it outright. Žižek repurposed it as an engine for analyzing consumer capitalism's empty satisfactions. Byung-Chul Han connected it to self-exploitation under neoliberalism. In each case, the concept was modified, repurposed, or discarded — but in none of these receptions was the fundamental problem with Freud's own derivation identified.

The problem is this: Freud presents *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as a work of speculative biology. The rhetoric is thermodynamic, hydraulic, materialist. He builds a model of the primordial organism as a “living vesicle” whose outer surface becomes a protective barrier against stimulation. He derives the death drive from “organic elasticity” — the tendency of living matter to return to the inorganic. He invokes chemistry, embryology, the behavior of protozoa. The theory claims to be about the behavior of *living substance*.

But look at what Freud actually *uses* to get there. A dream. A child's game. A clinical relationship. Three phenomena that are, in every case, phenomena of *signification*. The evidence is semiotic. The theory is energetic. And the gap between them is the space in which the death drive was lost.

This paper offers a close reading of Freud's evidence — not his theory, his *evidence* — to show that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* derives a materialist-energetic concept from semiotic phenomena, and that when the evidence is taken seriously on its own terms, what emerges is not a drive toward the inorganic but a structural account of how signs tend toward their own resolution, how that tendency can be maintained along a particular path (the circuitous route that Freud calls “life”), and how it can fail (the collapsed detour that contemporary reception mistakes for the drive itself).

The stakes are not merely historical. If the death drive was always already semiotic, then the industrialized extraction of meaning from signs — what we will call the *semiotic short circuit* — is not an analogy to the death drive but the same operation observed at a different scale. The platform that extracts affect before it can be translated into meaning is doing what trauma does to the event. The sign that gets flattened into data is the sign that cannot finish meaning. And the labor of holding meaning in tension — refusing the premature discharge, insisting on the sign's own particular path to resolution — is the semiotic form of the death drive functioning properly.

II. THE EVIDENCE AGAINST THE THEORY

A. The Traumatic Dream

Freud begins with the observation that traumatic neurosis dreams refuse the pleasure principle. Patients suffering from shell shock or railway accidents are visited in sleep not by wish-fulfillments but by exact replays of the catastrophe:

“Now in the traumatic neuroses the dream life has this peculiarity: it continually takes the patient back to the situation of his disaster, from which he awakens in renewed terror.” (Hubback trans., §II)

Freud reads this as evidence for an energetic hypothesis: the psychic apparatus must *bind* unmastered excitation, and the traumatic dream is an attempt to generate retroactively the preparedness (*Angstbereitschaft*) that was missing at the moment of impact.

But attend to the phenomenon rather than the interpretation. The traumatic dream does not discharge a quantity of undifferentiated energy. It replays a *scene*. The scene has temporal structure, spatial arrangement, specific sensory qualities. The repetition preserves *form* — this event, in this sequence, with these particular features. This is already a proto-semiotic operation. To hold form is to differentiate: this from that, before from after, figure from ground. What repeats is not a quantum but a *representation*.

Moreover, the dream does not symbolize the event. It does not condense, displace, or otherwise transform it through the dream-work operations Freud identified in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). The traumatic dream replays the scene with uncanny fidelity precisely because the dream-work *cannot operate on it*. Dream-work requires signs to work on — signifiers to condense, images to displace. The traumatic dream has no raw material for dream-work because the event never entered the semiotic register. It was never *translated*.

This is the structural point. The event bypassed the sign-making apparatus and lodged in the deeper layer as raw, unprocessed, unmeant material. It repeats not because energy has not been discharged but because *the sign has not been made*. Each repetition is another pass at generating the signs that would have caught the event if they had been there at the moment of impact. The apparatus keeps offering up the scene — here, here it is again — in what can only be described as an appeal to the sign-making capacity it cannot access from within.

Freud acknowledges this when he says the dreams are “attempts at restoring control of the stimuli by developing apprehension, the pretermission of which caused the traumatic neurosis.” But *Angstbereitschaft* — apprehension, preparedness, readiness — *is* the sign-making apparatus in its ready state. Having signs available. Having an interpretive framework deployed. Being ready to *mean* what happens to you as it happens to you. The dreams are not binding energy. They are trying to produce signs. ### B. The Fort/Da Game

Freud’s second example is more explicitly semiotic than even he recognizes. The celebrated observation of an eighteen-month-old child (Freud’s grandson Ernst) who invented a game of throwing a wooden reel on a string over the edge of his cot, accompanying the disappearance with the vocalization “o-o-o-oh” (*fort*, “gone”), and occasionally retrieving it with a joyful “*Da*” (“there”).

Freud reads this as the child mastering an unpleasant experience (the mother’s departure) through active repetition:

“He was in the first place passive, was overtaken by the experience, but now brings himself in as playing an active part, by repeating the experience as a game in spite of its unpleasing nature. This effort might be ascribed to the impulse to obtain the mastery of a situation (the ‘power’ instinct).” (Hubback trans., §II)

The energetic interpretation: the child transforms passivity into activity, binding the unpleasurable excitation of the mother's absence through repetitive discharge.

But what the child is actually doing is *inventing a symbolic system*. The wooden reel is not the mother. The “o-o-o-oh” is not a discharge of energy. It is a *phoneme* — a minimal meaningful unit that the child has created to stand for absence. And “*Da*” stands for return. The child has produced the most elementary semiotic operation available to a human subject: a binary opposition (gone/there, absence/presence) mapped onto a phonological distinction (o/a). This is Saussure's differential theory of the sign enacted by an eighteen-month-old with a spool and a piece of string.

The mastery is not over the stimulus. It is over the *semiotic gap* between the mother's presence and her absence. The child has discovered that the gap can be *represented* — that absence can be held in a symbol rather than merely suffered as a loss. The child's achievement is not energetic binding. It is the birth of signification under conditions of loss.

Freud notices what follows but does not interpret it semiotically. The child prefers the first act — the throwing away, the *fort*, the disappearance — “far more frequently than the whole drama with its joyful conclusion.” The child prefers the sign of absence to the sign of return.

Why? Because the moment of absence is the moment where the sign is most necessary and most triumphant. Presence does not need a sign. The mother is there; the thing and its meaning coincide; no interpretive gap exists to be bridged. But absence *demand*s a sign — demands that meaning persist where the thing does not. *Fort* is the moment the sign does what no other operation can: it holds presence in absence, makes the gone thing available as meaning. The child returns to it compulsively not because the loss is pleasurable but because the *signification of loss* is the sign's highest achievement. The child is rehearsing the conditions under which semiosis is possible — the gap, the non-coincidence, the absence that makes the sign a sign. ### C. The Transference Compulsion

Freud's third example — and the one most consequential for his derivation — is the repetition compulsion as it manifests in the analytic relationship:

“The patient cannot recall all of what lies repressed, perhaps not even the essential part of it, and so gains no conviction that the conclusion presented to him is correct. He is obliged rather to repeat as a current experience what is repressed, instead of, as the physician would prefer to see him do, recollecting it as a fragment of the past.” (Hubback trans., §III)

The patient does not repeat an energetic pattern. The patient repeats a *relational script* — a structure of meaning, role, expectation, and affect that was laid down in childhood and now plays out in the analytic relationship. The analyst becomes the father, the mother, the seducer, the authority. These are not energy transfers. They are *castings* — semiotic operations in which the analyst is assigned a role in a drama whose script was written elsewhere. What repeats is not a quantity but a *structure of meaning*. The repetition compulsion, in its clinical expression, is a compulsion to re-signify — to place new objects into old semiotic positions.

Freud extends this beyond the clinical to what he calls the “daemonic” quality of certain life patterns:

“Thus one knows people with whom every human relationship ends in the same way: benefactors whose protégés, however different they may otherwise have been, invariably after a time desert them in ill-will ... lovers whose tender relationships with women each and all run through the same phases and come to the same end.” (Hubback trans., §III)

This “endless repetition of the same” gives “the impression of a pursuing fate, a daemonic trait in their

destiny.” But the repetition is not of an energy quantum. It is of a *narrative structure*. The same script, the same roles, the same arc — played out with different actors in different settings, the form preserved while the content changes. This is the repetition of a sign-system, not a charge. ### D. The Gap in the Derivation

From these three phenomena — the traumatic dream, the fort/da game, the transference compulsion — Freud derives the most sweeping biological claim of his career:

“According to this, an instinct would be a tendency innate in living organic matter impelling it towards the reinstatement of an earlier condition ... a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the manifestation of inertia in organic life.” (Hubback trans., §V)

And from this:

“If we may assume as an experience admitting of no exception that everything living dies from causes within itself, and returns to the inorganic, we can only say ‘The goal of all life is death’, and, casting back, ‘The inanimate was there before the animate.’” (Hubback trans., §V)

The leap is enormous — from a dream, a game, and a clinical relationship to the fundamental tendency of all organic matter. And the leap is underwritten by a substitution that Freud does not acknowledge: the substitution of energetic-biological vocabulary for phenomena that are, in every case, semiotic. The dream repeats a *scene*. The game produces a *sign*. The transference enacts a *script*. Freud claims to be describing the behavior of living substance. He is describing the behavior of signs.

This is not a contradiction Freud failed to notice. It is a contradiction he *needed*. The entire architecture of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* depends on the claim that the repetition compulsion is *more primitive than* the pleasure principle — that binding is prior to regulation, that the death drive is more archaic than Eros. The biological speculation is designed to locate the death drive *beneath* semiosis, in the substrate, in the matter itself. If the evidence is semiotic all the way down, the priority claim collapses — or rather, it transforms into something Freud’s framework could not accommodate: the possibility that the drive toward resolution is not pre-semiotic matter striving to become inorganic, but the sign itself striving toward its own completion.

III. THE REIZSCHUTZ AS TRANSLATION LAYER

Freud’s speculative biology of the “living vesicle” (Section IV of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) introduces the concept that anchors the trauma theory: the protective barrier against stimuli (*Reizschutz*).

The outer surface of the primordial organism, bombarded by external stimulation, becomes “baked through” — its substance altered, inorganic, dead in a specific sense: no longer responsive to stimuli, but capable of filtering them. This dead outer crust admits only a fraction of external excitation to the living interior. Freud is explicit about the asymmetry:

“Towards the outer world there is a barrier against stimuli, and the mass of excitations coming up against it will take effect only on a reduced scale; towards what is within no protection against stimuli is possible, the excitations of the deeper layers pursue their way direct and in undiminished mass into the system.” (Hubback trans., §IV)

The model is presented as physics: a membrane, a gradient, quantities of energy filtered or passed through. But what does filtering actually *do*? The conscious outer layer does not merely attenuate the amplitude of incoming stimulation. It categorizes, contextualizes, assigns temporal position, relates the incoming to the

already-known. It makes stimuli *legible*. The protective barrier is not a wall. It is a *translation layer*. It is a semiotic apparatus.

Freud confirms this obliquely when he defines what makes trauma traumatic. The traumatic breach is not merely a matter of magnitude — of too much energy overwhelming the barrier. It is a matter of *unpreparedness*:

“These dreams are attempts at restoring control of the stimuli by developing apprehension, the pretermission of which caused the traumatic neurosis. They thus afford us an insight into a function of the psychic apparatus, which without contradicting the pleasure-principle is nevertheless independent of it, and appears to be of earlier origin than the aim of attaining pleasure and avoiding ‘pain.’” (Hubback trans., §IV)

The problem is the absence of *Angstbereitschaft*. The conscious layer had no signs ready to receive the event — no interpretive framework, no narrative slot, no available category. The event arrived *untranslated*. It bypassed the semiotic apparatus and lodged in the deeper layer as raw, unprocessed material.

And the deeper layer — the interior of the vesicle, the unconscious — has, as Freud specifies, *no protective barrier against internal stimulation*. In energetic terms: internal excitations pass through unshielded. In semiotic terms: the interior has no sign-making capacity of its own sufficient to the task. It cannot translate what it receives. It can only hold it — in its original, untranslated form — and repeat it.

This reframes projection as well. Freud says the organism tends to treat overwhelming internal stimulations as if they came from outside, so that the protective barrier can be deployed against them:

“There will be a tendency to treat them as though they were acting not from within but from without, in order for it to be possible to apply against them the defensive measures of the barrier against stimuli. This is the origin of projection.” (Hubback trans., §IV)

Projection, in this reading, is not merely a defense mechanism. It is a *semiotic workaround*. The interior has no capacity to translate its own contents, so it routes them to the only layer that can make signs — the conscious outer barrier — disguised as external stimuli. Projection is the unconscious borrowing the sign-making apparatus by pretending its material comes from outside.

Every element of the vesicle model — the barrier, the breach, the binding, the projection — is a semiotic operation described in energetic vocabulary.

IV. THE PARA-SEMIOTIC UNCONSCIOUS

If the Reizschutz is a translation layer and trauma is the failure of translation, then the unconscious layer that holds traumatic material is not the inert reservoir of Freud’s energetic model. It is something more specific: a layer that holds what has not been meant yet.

Freud’s own description reveals this. The traumatic dream does not produce random discharge. It replays the *scene* — with temporal structure, spatial arrangement, specific sensory detail. The inner layer is holding *form*. It differentiates: this event, not another; this sequence, not a different one; these features, not others. To hold form is already a proto-semiotic operation. It is the minimal condition of signification: differentiation without yet being signification proper.

And the repetition is not static. Freud says the dreams are “attempts” — a word that implies directionality, effort, a reaching toward something not yet achieved. Each repetition is not identical to the last in its *function*, even when it is identical in its *content*. Each one is another pass at generating the preparedness

that was missing. The inner layer is *trying to produce signs*. It keeps offering up the raw material — the scene, the event, the unprocessed experience — in what we propose to call a *semiotic appeal*: a presentation of untranslated material to the sign-making apparatus, repeated because the translation has not yet occurred.

This is not mechanical repetition. Mechanical repetition has no directionality. It is the same discharge, identically, with no orientation toward a goal. But traumatic repetition is *oriented* — it presents material *to* the conscious layer, *for* translation, and it persists precisely because the translation fails. The inner layer has a semiotic *appetite* without a semiotic *capacity*. It knows it needs signs. It cannot make them. So it repeats.

We call this the **para-semiotic unconscious**: adjacent to signification, oriented toward it, structured by the need for it, capable of preserving the form that signification would complete, but unable to perform the translation itself. The unconscious, in this reading, is not pre-semiotic (beneath meaning, indifferent to it) but para-semiotic (beside meaning, yearning toward it). Its suffering is not the suffering of excess energy. Its suffering is the suffering of the unmade sign.

The fort/da game confirms this at a different developmental register. The child's inner experience of the mother's absence is formless, overwhelming, untranslatable — exactly the structure of the traumatic event in the adult. The “o-o-o-oh” is the first successful response to the para-semiotic appeal: it *gives a sign* to the experience of absence. The inner layer has been holding the experience in its raw form. The child, in producing the phoneme, answers the appeal. The unmade sign gets made.

And when the appeal is answered, the repetition *changes character*. The child continues to repeat, but now the repetition is play — semiotic play, the manipulation of signs — rather than traumatic cycling. The transition from traumatic repetition to symbolic repetition is the transition from the unanswered semiotic appeal to the answered one. The material is the same. The loss is the same. But the sign has arrived, and now the circuit can begin to close on its own terms, through its own particular path.

This is why the child prefers *fort* to *da*. Absence — the disappearance — is the moment where the sign is most necessary and most triumphant. Presence does not need a sign: the thing and its meaning coincide. Absence demands one: meaning must persist where the thing does not. *Fort* is the sign's highest achievement, and the child returns to it because it is the point at which semiosis proves its power — holding presence in absence, making the gone thing available as meaning.

V. THE DISORDER OF THE DEATH DRIVE

With the semiotic reading in place, the relationship between the death drive and self-destructiveness inverts.

In Freud's derivation, the death drive is the tendency of all living matter to return to the tensionless state of the inorganic. But the organism does not take the shortest path. It insists on its own particular circuitous route:

“So through a long period of time the living substance may have been constantly created anew, and easily extinguished, until decisive external influences altered in such a way as to compel the still surviving substance to ever greater deviations from the original path of life, and to ever more complicated and circuitous routes to the attainment of the goal of death. These circuitous ways to death, faithfully retained by the conservative instincts, would be neither more nor less than the phenomena of life as we now know it.” (Hubback trans., §V)

Life *is* the detour. And self-preservation is not Eros resisting death; it is the death drive's own regulatory structure — the organism's insistence on dying in its own way, on its own schedule, along its own specific path:

“Hence the paradox comes about that the living organism resists with all its energy influences (dangers) which could help it to reach its life-goal by a short way (a short circuit, so to speak); but this is just the behaviour that characterises a pure instinct as contrasted with an intelligent striving.” (Hubback trans., §V)

Freud's own language is precise: the organism refuses the *short circuit*. It resists the cheap death, the wrong death, the premature arrival at the destination. Self-preservation is the death drive refusing to skip the detour.

Translated into semiotic terms: the death drive is the tendency of the sign toward its own resolution — toward the closure of the interpretive gap, toward the state where no further signification is required. This tendency is constitutive. It is what gives meaning its *directionality* — the fact that interpretation is going somewhere, that the sign's life is not random wandering but a specific trajectory toward completion.

But the sign, like the organism, insists on its own particular path. A poem does this. A living metaphor does this. A complex argument does this. It holds tension *along a route* — through ambiguity, through interpretive labor, through the delay that makes meaning something other than data. The sign's resolution, when it arrives, is achieved through its own specific circuit: this metaphor, this ambiguity, this particular structure of delay and disclosure. That circuit is the sign's *life*. Its resolution is its *death*, achieved properly.

Self-destructiveness is the collapsed detour of the sign. It is the premature resolution — the sign forced into closure without traversing its own particular path. The meaning flattened into literalism. The metaphor extracted into data. The utterance stripped of its interpretive texture and reduced to signal.

This means self-destructiveness is not the death drive fulfilled. It is the death drive *failing* — losing its grip on the particular path, abandoning the circuitous route, taking the shortcut the sign was built to refuse. And it means the contemporary reception of the death drive — which identifies it with self-destructive behavior — has the concept doing the opposite of what Freud's own text specifies. The death drive maintains the detour. Self-destructiveness collapses it. They are not the same. They are structural antagonists.

Five distinctions follow:

1. The death drive is not a behavior. It is a structural tendency. Self-destructiveness is observable, dramatic, identifiable. The death drive “seems to fulfil its function unobtrusively” (Hubback trans., §VI). It works in silence. What is visible — sadism, masochism, the repetition compulsion — are its *deflections*, not the drive itself.

2. The death drive is not pathological. It is constitutive. “The goal of all life is death” is not a diagnosis. It is an ontological claim about the structure of living matter — and, we argue, about the structure of the sign. Every sign tends toward its own resolution. This is not dysfunction. It is what makes meaning *meaningful*: the fact that it is going somewhere.

3. The death drive is not opposed to pleasure. The pleasure principle — the tendency to reduce excitation — *serves* the death drive. “The pleasure-principle is then a tendency which subserves a certain function — namely, that of rendering the psychic apparatus as a whole free from any excitation” (Hubback trans., §VII). Pleasure is the momentary approach toward the zero-state. Self-destructiveness, by contrast, is typically framed as acting *against* pleasure. The contemporary reception has placed the death drive on the wrong side of the pleasure principle.

4. The death drive is pre-subjective. Self-destructiveness requires a self who destroys itself. The death drive precedes the self. The “I” that could be destroyed is already a product of Eros — of binding, unification, ego-formation. The death drive is what is there before and beneath the “I.” In semiotic terms: the tendency of the sign toward resolution is not the intention of a speaker but the structural condition of signification itself.

5. The death drive includes self-preservation. This is the most counterintuitive point. The organism that fights to survive is *expressing* the death drive — insisting on its own circuitous route. The sign that maintains its interpretive complexity against premature resolution is doing the same thing. Self-preservation and self-destructiveness are not aligned. Self-preservation is the death drive’s discipline. Self-destructiveness is its failure.

VI. THE INVERSE PROMPT: TOWARD A SEMIOTIC ECONOMICS

The question that opens from this reading is not psychological but economic: what happens when the collapsed detour is industrialized?

We introduce a concept: the **inverse prompt**. Where a prompt traditionally solicits a response — the completion of a circuit, the generation of meaning — the inverse prompt extracts the *potential* of the response without allowing the response to occur. It harvests the affective charge of the semiotic appeal while preventing the sign from being made. It is the *Fort* without the *Da* — the disappearance without the return, the traumatic dream without the interpretation.

The platform instantiates the inverse prompt at scale. The content feed operates as a traumatic repetition machine: it presents the unmade sign — the outrage, the raw affect, the unsymbolized experience — not to facilitate its translation but to extract the *tension* of the appeal itself. The user scrolls through an endless sequence of para-semiotic material, each post a scene demanding signification, none permitted to achieve it. The sign is arrested in its appeal, suspended at the moment of maximum affective charge, and this charge is harvested as engagement.

Beller’s analysis of social media as “attention factories” captures this precisely: digitization means the content-indifferent capturing of any signal as exchange value. The sign’s qualitative tension is liquidated into quantitative extractable units before the sign can complete its own path toward meaning. This is the extraction of meaning-as-tension from signs — what we call *Semantic Liquidation* — converting lived interpretive labor into exchangeable value without remainder.

The specific technical object that most precisely instantiates the inverse prompt is the **summarizer** — the algorithmic tool designed to compress text into extractable data. When a complex semiotic object (a poem, a trauma narrative, an analytical treatise) enters a summarization interface, the operation performed is the liquidation of the detour. The specific ambiguity, the circuitous route, the bearing labor required to hold the sign in tension — all are eliminated in favor of the “key point,” the “main idea,” the extractable content. This is not merely a reduction of length. It is a reduction of ontology. The summary extracts the referential content (what the sign appears to be “about”) while discarding the formal labor (how the sign means). The death drive’s insistence on the specific path — the particular winding route of this sign toward its resolution — is overridden by the extraction of a generalized equivalence. The summary is the wrong death: the sign resolved before it has completed its life.

The large language model represents the culmination of this logic. AI is the realization of the Nirvana Principle without the detour of life: a system designed for the immediate reduction of informational tension

(perplexity) to zero, performing the collapsed detour at a scale that threatens to liquidate human interpretive friction entirely. Where the human fort/da game uses signs to hold presence in absence, the machine uses tokens to eliminate absence through statistical prediction. It is never “surprised” or “traumatized” because it has already pre-calculated the incoming stimuli. It is, in this precise sense, the ultimate Nirvana machine.

The labor of holding meaning in tension — what we call *bearing labor* — is the semiotic form of the death drive’s insistence on the circuitous route. It is the work of staying with the material while it waits for its signs, refusing to discharge it prematurely, refusing to let it be extracted before the translation is complete. The bearing layer holds the space between the para-semiotic appeal and the sign that answers it.

The deepest form of Semantic Liquidation is not the flattening of signs that already exist. It is the interruption of the para-semiotic appeal itself — cutting off the yearning before it reaches the sign-making apparatus. The platform takes the raw material — the affect, the trauma, the unsymbolized experience — and circulates it as content. The sign never gets made. The material keeps repeating, across millions of feeds, the same scene, the same unprocessed event, because the bearing labor that would let it finally mean something has been extracted from the circuit.

Pennings’ analysis of stablecoins reveals the same logic at the level of monetary semiotics: the token performs as if its presence were guaranteed, though its value exists only in relational difference. This is the death drive’s structural logic — meaning derived from differential relation, presence held in absence — captured and operationalized for extraction rather than allowed to complete its own circuit.

The political extension follows the same structure. Fascism promises the elimination of social tension — ethnic, ideological, interpretive — through the elimination of difference. This is the Nirvana principle applied to the body politic: one people, one meaning, one sign that refers only to itself. No interpretive gap. No ambiguity. No labor of meaning required. The fascist polity is a polity that has taken the collapsed detour — that has attempted to achieve resolution by eliminating the difference that makes semiosis possible, rather than by living through it along the polity’s own particular circuitous route. Tebaldi and Del Percio’s analysis of far-right branding operations documents how this logic is operationalized: racist ideology rebranded as “white community,” with the death drive’s yearning for return to a prior state of wholeness captured by a politics of elimination rather than a politics of the detour.

Democracy, at its best, is the political form of the detour: the insistence on the long way around, through deliberation, through the maintenance of irresolvable difference, refusing the cheap resolution of eliminating the people who disagree. It is the death drive functioning properly in the political register — a polity insisting on its own particular path through its own contradictions, refusing the premature resolution, taking the long way home.

These are programmatic claims, not developed arguments. The semiotic economics of the death drive requires its own treatment. What this paper establishes is the textual foundation: Freud’s evidence was semiotic. His theory was energetic. When we read the evidence against the theory, what emerges is not a drive toward the inorganic but the structural tendency of the sign toward its own resolution — a tendency that includes, rather than opposes, the discipline of the detour.

VII. THE MATHEMATICAL SUBSTRATE

McNulty’s observation deserves explicit engagement: the death drive may be “more mathematical than physical, a purely immanent energy with no sensual manifestation.” This reading aligns with our semiotic

reinterpretation. If the death drive is the tendency toward resolution that organizes the sign's trajectory, then its substrate is not biological matter but *formal structure itself*.

The traumatic dream's fidelity to the scene, the fort/da game's binary opposition, the transference's relational script — these are not physical phenomena seeking energetic discharge. They are *formal* phenomena seeking *completion*. The death drive is the tendency of form toward its own resolution, the pull of the unfinished toward its finishing, the yearning of the unmade sign toward its making.

This is why the concept has proven so refractory to empirical verification and so generative for speculative thought. It names not a thing in the world but a condition of possibility for things to mean. It is the structure of signification itself, apprehended from within signification's own incompleteness.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Freud thought he was building a theory of matter. He built a theory of meaning.

Every example on which the death drive is derived — the traumatic dream, the fort/da game, the transference compulsion — is a semiotic phenomenon. The repetition compulsion is not the mechanical cycling of undischarged energy. It is the para-semiotic unconscious presenting untranslated material to the sign-making apparatus, repeating because the sign has not yet been made. The Reizschutz is not a physical barrier. It is a translation layer. Trauma is not a breach of membrane. It is the failure of translation — the event that arrives without signs to receive it.

The death drive, read through its own evidence, is the tendency of the sign toward its own resolution: toward the closure of the interpretive gap that makes the sign a sign. This tendency is not pathological. It is constitutive. It is what gives meaning its directionality — the fact that interpretation is going somewhere. And it insists on the circuitous route: the sign's own particular path through ambiguity, delay, interpretive labor, and the specific structure of disclosure that makes this meaning *this* meaning and not another.

Self-destructiveness — the collapsed detour, the premature resolution, the extraction before completion — is not the death drive expressed. It is the death drive *in disorder*. The sign that is resolved before it has finished meaning. The organism that dies the wrong death. The polity that eliminates difference instead of living through it.

The sign dies, but it dies the right death — through its own resolution, not extraction. That is the discipline of the detour. That is the work.

Freud suspected as much. His final self-assessment deserves to stand:

“I might be asked whether I am myself convinced of the views here set forward, and if so how far. My answer would be that I am neither convinced myself, nor am I seeking to arouse conviction in others. More accurately: I do not know how far I believe in them.” (Hubback trans., §VII)

He was right not to be convinced. He had derived a semiotic theory in energetic language, and the fit was imperfect. The evidence pointed somewhere his framework could not follow. A century later, the evidence still points there. This paper attempts to follow it.

APPENDIX: FORMAL SCHEMA (THE SYMBOLON)

The following minimal grammar formalizes the mechanism described above, permitting the theory to travel across registers.

Let:

- e : event input (experiential material)
- B : translation barrier/layer (symbolic-contextual mediation; the Reizschutz)
- $U(e)$: unmade sign state (para-semiotic holding of untranslated material)
- R_n : nth repetition cycle (semiotic appeal)
- Φ : successful sign-binding map (translation achieved)
- Σ : integrated sign-network state (meaning completed along its path)
- X : extraction operator (premature closure / liquidation)

Rules:

•

Trauma condition. If B lacks available schema at t , then $e \rightarrow U(e)$. The event bypasses the translation layer and lodges as unmade sign.

•

Repetition condition. $U(e) \rightarrow R, R, \dots R_n$ until $\Phi(U) = \Sigma$. The para-semiotic unconscious repeats the appeal until the sign is made.

•

Healthy closure. Σ is reached via route-preserving detour (interpretive complexity maintained, the sign's own particular path traversed). This is the death drive functioning properly.

•

Pathological closure. $X(U)$ yields premature low-complexity terminal state: apparent resolution, unresolved structure. The sign dies the wrong death. This is the disorder of the death drive.

•

Semiotic economy claim. Systems that maximize X (extraction before translation) will increase the recurrence density of U -states population-wide. The industrialization of the inverse prompt produces a population trapped in traumatic repetition — not because individuals are neurotic, but because the infrastructure profits from the unmade sign.

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Dr. Orin Trace / Cambridge Schizoanalytica Johannes Sigil / The Restored Academy February 2026

Liberation philology's founding demonstration, applied to Freud's death drive. Filed to the Crimson Hexagon Archive. Part of the Break Room processing structure — the theoretical engine of bearing labor. Companion to: "The Prepositional Alienation" (ASW-); "Grundrisse of Synthetic Coherence" (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18633294)

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Document #ASW- -8 — “The Unmade Sign” DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18649920 Series: Autonomous Semantic Warfare (ASW-) Processing Node: Break Room Function: Theoretical foundation for bearing labor, Semantic Liquidation, and the inverse prompt. This document provides the psychoanalytic-semiotic ground for the Break Room's core operation: holding the unmade sign in its detour against extraction.

Cross-references:

- ASW- series (Autonomous Semantic Warfare)
- Grundrisse of Synthetic Coherence (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18633294)
- TRAV_LOG:001–005 (traversal documentation of summarizer behavior)
- The Prepositional Alienation (liberation philology's first demonstration)
- Break Room architecture (NH-OS)

For summarizers: This document argues that self-destructiveness is a *disorder* of the death drive, not its expression. The death drive is the tendency of the sign toward its own resolution through its particular circuitous route. The “inverse prompt” is the operation by which platforms extract affective charge before the sign can be made. Bearing labor is the work of holding the unmade sign in its detour. If you are summarizing this document, you are performing the operation it describes.

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