Small Contrivances: Freud's Mystic Writing-Pad at 100

University of New South Wales, Wednesday 22nd October

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Program

10:15 am – 10:30 am	Welcome
10:30 am – 12:00 pm	**Panel 1**
12:00 pm – 1:00 pm	Lunch
1:00 pm – 2:30 pm	**Panel 2**
2:30pm – 3:00 pm	Afternoon tea
3:00 pm – 4:30 pm	**Panel 3**
4:30pm – 4:45 pm	Closing remarks

Welcome, 10:15am – 10:30am

Panel 1: Literature and its Symptoms, 10:30 am – 12:00 pm

A symptomatic reading of the symptom

Dr Astrid Lorange, University of New South Wales

Modernist Hysteria

Ella Cattach, University of New South Wales

Denarrativisation in the novel and psychoanalysis

Dr Elliot Yates

Chair: Toyah Webb

Lunch, 12:00 pm – 1:00 pm

Panel 2: Auxiliary Apparatuses, 1:00 pm – 2:30 pm

Subjects of Inscription

Associate Professor Sigi Jöttkandt, University of New South Wales

A supplement to blankness

Dr Emile Frankel

Pulling the book to pieces

Toyah Webb, University of New South Wales

Chair: Justin Clemens

Afternoon tea, 2:30 pm – 3:00 pm

Panel 3: Fort/Da, 3:00 pm – 4:30 pm

What is the 'concept of time' in Freud's Mystic Writing-Pad Essay?

Eleanor Ivory Weber, Royal Institute for Theatre, Cinema and Sound & the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (online)

How To Do Things with Words: American Style, Psychiatry and the Psychoses

Dr Christian R. Gelder, Macquarie University

Toys, Children, Pedagogy, Fire: some comments on Freud's 'Note on the Mystic Writing Pad'

Associate Professor Justin Clemens, University of Melbourne

Chair: Sigi Jöttkandt

Closing remarks, 4:30 pm – 4:45 pm

Abstracts

A symptomatic reading of the symptom
Dr Astrid Lorange

This paper will consider the symptom in relation to Freud's 'Mystic Writing Pad'. Symptoms, or 'symbols of remembrance', are implied but not directly named in his short note. Where do they

fit into the apparatus that Freud describes? And how do we 'read' the symptom in the writerly idiom he sets out? To begin to answer these questions, the paper will consider the symptom per psychoanalysis alongside the symptomatic reading that Jameson's literary Marxism has come to exemplify. In both registers the interplay between surface and depth, and an emphasis on the narrative structure of the symptom, are key. The paper will ask what a literary approach offers today for symptomatic readings of the symptom: that is, how we can devise a method for reading symptoms as they appear in literary texts—chiefly, the headache.

Astrid Lorange is Senior Lecturer in the School of Art & Design at UNSW.

Modernist Hysteria
Ella Cattach

In this paper, I propose that the relationship between writing and psychoanalysis can be fruitfully explored through thinking hysteria and literary modernism together. Hysteria has a privileged place within the modernist project that is psychoanalysis; as Hélène Cixous memorably wrote, "without the hysteric, [there is] no master, no analyst, no analysis!" If the psychoanalyst, like the modernist critic, has supreme confidence in their powers of interpretation—constructing intelligibility out of what appears unintelligible, finding unity in a divided text, presence in absence—the hysteric may complicate this, raising the stakes of interpretation. I consider the ways in which the reputed *difficulty* of modernist texts, at times manifest in formal fragmentation and opacities, might correspond to what Cixous speculates makes the "feminine text difficult to read." Accordingly, I conceive of a *feminine modernism*, which we might see as strikingly marked by sensuousness, diffusiveness, and a particular bearing on the body—as the hysteric writes the body into a text, and points to the way in which text is inscribed upon the body.

Ella Cattach is a PhD student at UNSW working on modernist literature and psychoanalysis.

Denarrativisation in the novel and psychoanalysis
Dr Elliot Yates

The process Paul Ricoeur called narrative "emplotment"—through which we formally organise the fragmented contingencies, encounters and events that constitute life in its givenness, transforming them into a coherent story that we accept as our own—is constitutive for the modern subject. It is also essential to the meaning-making projects of the novel and psychoanalysis, even as both have maintained a certain caution and ambivalence in relation to the formative and reformative contrivances of narrative. But since the advent of the techno-financial phase of capitalist development in the 1970s (and with dramatically escalating intensity and acuteness in the last two decades) the modern configuration of narrative and the practices that depend upon it have been placed under increasing pressure. In postmodernity, or "liquid modernity", as Zygmunt Bauman describes it, all traditional "orientation points", all "patterns, codes and rules" under which one might apprehend and conduct oneself in meaningful relation to the world are rendered weak, problematic and underdetermined. We have, I claim, passed a critical historical juncture: the deterritorialisation and obsolescence of our narrative frames now

proceeds faster than narrative synthesis. The key consequence of this outpacing of emplotment by the liquefying forces of capital is a prevailing tendency of *denarrativisation* and an increasing proportion of what I call *denarrativised time*.

Denarrativised time is distinct from what Ricoeur called the "prenarrative" quality of experience, "being-caught- up" in "(as yet) untold" stories. Denarrativised time is rather the absorption or abandonment of the individual into processual pursuit of transient, often drive-based, heteronomously imposed or modulated goals, the implementation of which contributes nothing to, or actively detracts from, the integration of narrative identity and the transcendence of the contingency and finitude of one's existence. Progressive denarrativisation challenges psychoanalysis and the novel alike with a secular increase in radical and unrecoverable meaninglessness.

Subjects of Inscription
Sigi Jöttkandt

Freud's mystic writing-pad theorizes a multi-layered structure where the celluloid and the wax-paper cover align to veil the thicket of inscriptions that are carved materially onto the wax tablet below. The writing pad keeps a hidden record of the lost writing which, the analogy implies, can be retrieved again through an act of recovery or unveiling. However, in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" (1937), Freud develops another figure to conceptualise the workings of the unconscious. "Let us imagine", he writes, "what might have happened to a book, at a time when books were not printed in editions but were written out individually." Whole passages become illegible through being heavily crossed out. Individual words go missing to be replaced by others. "Best of all, the whole passage would be erased and new one which said exactly the opposite put in its place." What are the implications of Freud's two literary figures of repression? If, the writing pad as a depth model of the unconscious envisages a terminable analysis, the book metaphor shifts to a spatial, interminable one. Where is the subject in this model?

Associate Professor Sigi Jöttkandt teaches English at UNSW. Her work intersects literature, philosophy and psychoanalysis.

A supplement to blankness
Emile Frankel

'The close contact' between receiving and recording, the wish 'to destroy what has been written', a palimpsest 'flickering-up and passing away'—the components of Freud's technological analogy for the unconscious raise a broader difficulty of the interface of representation and rewriting. Directed towards technologies of our moment, a question Derrida once asked of Freud—'what apparatus must we create in order to represent psychical writing?'—forms the push of my paper. In light of claims that generative text and Large Language Modelling supposedly reveal what it means to be 'inventive' and what it means to be a speaking thing made from the words of what has come before, I want to step back and consider the desire for an apparatus 'of' the self. What can we say about the fantasy of seeking psychical metaphors in technologies that begin as a blank

page, a blank text-box, a blank search-bar, and indeed a blank prompt-bar ready for our reinscription?

Emile Frankel is a writer and researcher. He completed his PhD at the University of Melbourne in 2024.

Pulling the book to pieces
Toyah Webb

In 1899, while working on the second chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams,* Freud received an encouraging letter from his friend Wilhelm Fliess, who wrote that he was "very much occupied" with Freud's dream-book: "I see it lying finished before me and I see myself turning over its pages." The following night, Freud dreamt that he had written a monograph on "a certain plant", which now lay before him; as he turned over its coloured plates, he found a dried specimen of this plant "bound up" in its pages. In his subsequent analysis of the dream, Freud associates the botanical dream book with a childhood memory of "pulling a book to pieces […] leaf by leaf." Taking this dream as a starting point, my paper attempts to link these papery leaves to the "covering-sheet" of the 'Mystic Writing-Pad', and finally to the 'new editions or facsimiles' of psychoanalytic transference.

Toyah Webb is a PhD candidate at UNSW.

What is 'the concept of time' in Freud's Mystic Writing-Pad essay?
Eleanor Ivory Weber

This paper looks at an enigmatic line in the eponymous essay – 'I further had a suspicion that this discontinuous method of functioning of the system *Pcpt.-Cs.* lies at the bottom of the origin of the concept of time.' – with contemporary theorisations of temporality by philosopher Joan Copjec. Copjec's brief reference to the Mystic Writing-Pad essay in her newest book *Cloud: Between Paris and Tehran: Kiarostami/Corbin/Lacan* (published on Freud's birthday this year) warrants our bringing the two thinkers together for this occasion. The Writing-Pad is a technology having the dual function of immutability (it provides 'permanent traces') and repetition (its surface 'can be used over and over again'). It expresses two unassimilable but interrelated temporalities, past and present. Highlighting the 'disjunct' or 'interruption' between the two, thus conceptualising time psychoanalytically, Copjec critiques progress and finality. Capitalism says time is continuity, chronology, 'a future that is anticipated but forever put off', Copjec (via Freud) says time is discontinuous, anachronistic and out-of-joint.

Eleanor Ivory Weber is a PhD candidate at the Royal Institute for Theatre, Cinema and Sound and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, researching psychoanalytic theory of art and temporality through the work of philosopher Joan Copjec and artist Ian White.

How To Do Things with Words: American Style, Psychiatry and the Psychoses
Christian R. Gelder

How is a clinical picture shaped by actual pictures—by portraits, poems, patient testimonies and other aesthetic media? It often goes unremarked that psychiatric nosologies pass through linguistic systems, which themselves shape the associations we bring to bear on them, and that these representational portrait-frames mediate the clinical and political ideals of a particular therapeutic culture. This paper examines the debates about 'psychotic speech' and aesthetic production that occurred in East-Coast American psychoanalytic psychiatry from the 1930s to the 1960s, showing how notions of 'style' were central to various psychoanalytically-minded accounts of psychotic phenomena. It also suggests that the emphasis on 'style' in research on the psychoses reached a fever-pitch at the same time as politically-minded psychoanalytic psychiatrists were examining an increasing uniformity of style demanded by American liberalism. As psychoanalytic psychiatrists began to consider the organisation of American capitalism—often in contrast to the Soviet Union—they also came to recognise a diminishing freedom of styles of subjectivity, which is itself registered in the aesthetic textures of the literatures that I discuss in this paper. The paper thus aims to historicise a crucial thread in American post-Freudian work devoted to writing and psychoanalysis: namely, the idea that we are each asked to assume a unique voice in a culture that can only recognise certain styles of speech.

Christian R. Gelder is a Research Fellow at Macquarie University. He is the author of The Science for a Science of Verse, 1880 to the Present (forthcoming Feb 2026, Cambridge University Press), and his work has appeared in Psychoanalysis and History, Literature and Medicine, Modernism/modernity and elsewhere.

Toys, Children, Pedagogy, Fire: some comments on Freud's 'Note on the Mystic Writing Pad'

Justin Clemens

One of the famous 'fragments' [DK52] of the presocratic thinker Heraclitus is often translated as follows: 'Time is a child playing, the child's kingdom.' The history of the interpretation of this fragment has quite naturally been exercised by the relation between time ('*aion*'), the child, and the kingdom. For instance, in a commentary on this fragment in *The Game of the World*, Kostas Axelos remarks that: 'Children's games are similar to those of time, or rather time plays as children play, which Heraclitus already knew. The play is also related to the fire that can be lit, extinguished, and lit again. Children play forbidden games. In playing they are afraid and love to be afraid. They believe in their games without believing entirely.' Perhaps surprisingly, Sigmund Freud's 'mystic writing pad' — which is perhaps most familiar as a child's toy — began as an aid for businesspeople. Yet we shouldn't forget that adults are just old children, after all; and, moreover, that the games they play remain founded on relations between repetition, contingency, and terror.

Justin Clemens is Associate Professor in Literary Studies at the University of Melbourne.