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LACAN'S IMAGINARY

A practical guide

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Imaginary, Symbolic, Real

To understand the Imaginary in the theory of Jacques Lacan, we must begin with his unique view of the ego. Lacan's conception differs greatly from that of ego psychology, which like him claims a basis in Freud. For ego psychology, the ego is a positive force, a bulwark against the unconscious drives that threaten the personality's integrity: our id must be controlled by our ego, and later by our super-ego, to make us fit for society. Freud's ego was not so simple, however. Indeed, he says our ego may well consider itself an independent whole, but this is to deny its actual dependence on others: 'In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent [...]' (Freud SE 18: 69). The integral, self-contained ego is a delusion: individual psychology is always already, Freud says, social psychology – although he makes an exception of narcissism (ibid.).

Lacan took up Freud's position on the illusions of the ego but extended his conception: for Lacan 'the narcissistic moment' is precisely when the ego is born. And it is born not as *single*, but as *double*, as both itself and another. According to Lacan, the initial formation of the ego comes from the infant's encounter with its own image in the mirror. In his early 'The Mirror Stage' (1949) and 'The Aggressivity of the Ego' (1948) Lacan details the process by which the infant's ego is alienated in and from its own mirror image. What appears in the mirror materializes before the infant's eyes, a being that seems infinitely superior to what the child knows itself to be: an inchoate jumble or a 'body in pieces'. Its mirror image is a clearer, more fully formed self than what the infant experiences as its own.

The *Imaginary* is thus the very basis of the ego for Lacan. The infant's mirror image shapes its self-image, and in no simple way. For out of this uneven pairing of the ego and its mirror-image (*imaginary*) other grows a quasi-Hegelian rivalry. The ego

opposes itself to this other who seems to be an *ideal ego*. As Lacan explains, the mirrored other appears to possess a special 'it' that grants it superiority, a singular object that Lacan subsequently names object *a*: an object the ego feels it must have lost, and whose loss it attributes to thievery by its rival.¹

The destructive hostility that ensues from this imaginary tug of war between ego and other is and must be tempered, according to Lacan, by an invisible third party that comes *between* the imaginary rivals. This third party is *symbolic* in character and it announces itself as an enigmatic *signifier* (the root form of language) that calls the infant to speech and thus to society. Entering the *Symbolic* alters the ego, the two-dimensional, imaginary body it inhabits. At the same time, the rival *other* is transformed from an ideal ego *who has what the ego lacks* into an other *who is equally wanting*. In other words, 'control' of one's aggressive drives is not exercised by a 'healthy ego' à la ego psychology, but rather by the subjection of the ego to the *symbolic order*. How does that happen?

Lacan says 'structure carves a body' out of animal substance (Lacan 1990: 6). It splits the ego into two parts, conscious and unconscious, forming a *speaking subject* (*parlêtre*). The conscious part, under the dictates of language and society places its original passions and aggressions under the rule of a primal law: Oedipus, or the 'no' of the Father. This law is installed as an *ego-ideal* (usually modelled on the Father) in the newly formed subject's *unconscious*.

The subject's *body* is also modified by language. It is no longer shaped exclusively by its two-dimensional mirror image. Instead it is 'carved' or shaped by a language that cuts away animal and imaginary pleasures (MacCannell 2013). Language alters the body, originally centred on satisfying organic needs and appetites, by ordering it according to a linguistic logic: the human body becomes the infamous '*body without organs*' (Deleuze and Guattari 1977). Indeed, Lacan characterizes the dominion of the *symbol* as endowed with the power to insert *productive voids* (MacCannell 2013) into the *real* of one's anatomical body – voids that shape the speaking subject, channel its sexuality, and make its social order into an arena of creative outlets for the *drives*.

What are the *drives*? Privation of organic satisfactions can never, of course, be total. Indeed, the very fact of the original loss leaves an unconscious residue: satisfactions denied haunt the body in unconscious *fantasy* form, 'repetitive' *jouissance* returns to the body, investing it in the 'erogenous' zones. (Erotism sometimes escapes these localized zones, as when body parts other than the genitals become fetishized.)

The *body without organs* represents a *loss* of simple satisfactions for us, but a *gain* for culture, civilization, and the *Symbolic*: the removal of simple, animal satisfaction drives us, Freud said, to strive to fill in for this lack: to *sublimate* it and find ways of enjoying, despite the ban against it (Freud SE 7: 168). *Desire* is thus born: Oedipal desire; *symbolic desire* or *jouissance* deferred. Like language, which always promises a 'meaning' it can never finally deliver, desire promises a satisfaction that it is itself instrumental in deferring.

So it is that right from the start of his clinical research and teaching Lacan formally opposed the *Imaginary* (which grows from and defines the ego as originally

aggressive) to the *Symbolic* (wherein *subject* and *other* are born into a non-rivalrous relation). He opposed both *Symbolic* and *Imaginary* to the *Real*, which is the absence of these elementary human forms. The *Real* is that which is not subject to the laws of speech or the constraints of Oedipus: it is the realm of *jouissance* or absolute fulfilment, ultimate satisfaction, and finally death. The true virtue of the *Symbolic* is not only that it supplants the *Imaginary* but it also makes a 'hole' in the *Real*. That is, the *Symbolic* remodels our natural impulses potentially destructive to human life, and thus protects us from the devastating force of the *Real*.²

Lacan's very clarity about the role of the *Imaginary* has lured many into believing his conception of it is largely limited to the mirror stage (Lacan 2006: 75–81). They see his *Imaginary* as a flat, two-dimensional world of rivalry between the *ego* and *ideal ego* that sets up an anti-social hostility detrimental to Oedipal norms. If this were all there is to Lacan's analysis of the *Imaginary*, it would make him just one more moralist critiquing its illusions in the vein say, of Adorno. It would mean that Lacan believed Oedipus was indeed the ideal solution for the subject, the only desirable norm.

Such a view is simply incorrect. (Lacan is reported to have pronounced *normal* as *norme male* meaning 'evil norm', or 'male norm', the French pronunciation of either would be indistinguishable.) Lacan is well aware that while entrance into the *Symbolic* moderates the ferocity of the *ego*'s hostility to the other, it does not fully eradicate it. The original hostility to the other remains, albeit driven into the unconscious: the primal scene of rivalry with the ideal *ego* becomes unconsciously elaborated as a fantasy scenario in which the ideal other, who has deprived you of the coveted object *a*, is finally bested, leaving you free to enjoy the object. This fantasy *underlies* Oedipus just as it *undermines* it. It drives our actions, and is the ultimate support for our desire.

Lacan is thus well aware that the *Symbolic-Oedipal* solution to the problem of hostility to others has never been resolved, the aggressivity toward the other originating in the *Imaginary*. His cue was in Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, where Freud says that every human is hostile to the 'civilization' it depends on to make it human (the animal brought under the sway of language and society). We know that we must depend on and join with others in constructing this civilization and enjoying its fruits, but we resent it in our deepest psyche. Lacan's striking refinement on Freud was to reduce the kernel of this conflict to a formal, identifiable moment (the mirror stage) in the unfolding of the subject, its subversion, and the dialectic of its desire.

Early readers of Lacan and Freud believed that both men thought the subject's Oedipal trajectory and the installation of its complex made us submit to the regime of social discourse. They often failed to note that the power of Oedipus inevitably wanes; the child rebels against parental prohibitions on enjoyment; its inner voice encourages the child to go ahead and just 'Enjoy!' (Lacan 1992: 6–7; 1998: 3).³ A commandment to pleasure presents the child with a double bind. If it obeys, it faces castigation for indulgences that are socially punished. More often its transgressions simply embarrass it and leave it guilty. While analysts like Anna Freud thought the

superego was thoroughly benign, a 'voice of moral conscience', her rival Lacan saw it as a manifestation of the pernicious presence of a hostile other in the unconscious: an 'extimate' other within. It becomes a voice issuing simulated Oedipal imperatives that command us *to* and also prohibit us *from* at the same time, inducing thus new forms of repressive guilt.

Lacan's emphasis in Seminar VII on the ethics of (dis)obeying superego imperatives led the early Slavoj Žižek to depict our political era as that of the *obscene* or *sadistic superego*, in which an 'anything goes' mentality combines with intensifying self-imposed regulations against (guilty) pleasures (e.g. the various fads for 'giving up' eating sugar, fat, or meat). The limitation of Žižek's approach is that it remains insightful at the level of *individual psychology* without addressing corresponding alterations in the constitution of *society* itself – material changes in what Lacan called *discourse* or varying *forms of the social link*.⁴ The fact that Oedipus, desire, and our social links no longer seem to compel us subjectively indicates less the reign of the superego than the rise of the *Imaginary* which now has the power to determine what only the *Symbolic* once determined: the shape of *society itself*.

The long slow decline of symbolic authority over the social order and the growing sway of the *Imaginary* over group psychology have to be considered for their broadest social and political, not just individual implications. We can no longer assess society and its politics, and their inherent conflicts, by relying exclusively on symbolic terms. As Deleuze and Guattari long ago divined in their *Anti-Oedipus* (1977: n. 27), Lacan was the first to clear a path for understanding ours as a truly *post-Oedipal condition*, whose imaginary basis is recalcitrant to analysis and remains largely unchallenged in any convincing theoretical way. (Despite assiduous efforts by the Frankfurt School's Adorno, the Neo-Frankfurt School's Marcuse, and impassioned critics like Antonio Negri and Guy Debord.)⁵ Žižek has come close with his focus on the sadistic superego but the results are not entirely satisfactory.

Lacan knew that desire, lack, unfulfilled longing – all these still rest on the primordial passions originally installed (and 'satisfied' fantasmatically) in the unconscious. Making the case for how psychoanalysis uses the signifier to free the subject from bondage to its phantasms, Lacan said that fantasies couldn't survive being spoken (Lacan 1992: 80). Yet, we must wonder if such articulation is even possible any longer in a social order now dominated more by the *Imaginary* than by symbolic speech.

In his later seminars Lacan began paying specific and sustained attention to the role of the *Imaginary* as it shapes *society* as it once shaped the *ego*. Psychoanalysis and social analysts alike have underutilized Lacan's insights here. In Seminar XV he hewed closely to Freud's *Group Psychology* tracing the outlines of its *Imaginary* social order. He created algorithms for the social discourses and tracked the 'revolution' from the discourse of mastery (*Symbolic-Oedipal*) to the discourse of the university, a discourse that places accumulated knowledge in the dominant position (and which Lacan links to that of capitalism, whose dominant is accumulation of wealth). In Seminar XXIII he will add something else: an unheralded revolution in discourse, working its way through the *Imaginary*, to new forms of the social link (MacCannell 2006; 2014).

of the Imaginary

ary social order

Thinking about society today – certainly the popular account of it – assumes a set of *autonomous individuals* bound to their fellows by means of *visible images* and by *abstract symbols* (e.g. law, morality, ethics). It also assumes that image-ego link bind *discrete egos* together into a *unified whole* through *mutually self-images*. Finally, it is thought that those who are party to this mirroring are and must be *like one another*.

A society defined as a *commerce of images* appears to have a major advantage: societies formed through *symbolic exchange*: because it develops as a singular whole composed of individual egos acting as visual mirrors for each other. It can call upon the resources of *self-love* to ensure the attachment of each ego to every other in the society. Inter-ego conflict is muted by the deepest desire of what Freud (SE 18, 1922: 93ff.) called ‘the artificial group’ (bound together by mirroring self-images): *the command to conformity and uniformity*: ‘Everyone must have the same and be the same’ (ibid. 120–21).⁶ Society pretends to be a whole and the need for interpersonal conflict.

Cohesion is, of course, a two-edged sword. Take the contemporary society of like egos in ‘identity politics’. *Identity politics* were originally the political arm of minorities in a larger society for pleading their sub-group’s legal needs for greater rights and recognition. Yet no matter how specifically historical, cultural, and legal their demands, an identity that had earlier been defined by our actual ethnic or religious affiliations, ended by being defined culturally – mainly through *imagery*. Visible characteristics like skin colour or attire, the hallmark of identity politics. However, anyone antipathetic to such identity could also mobilize images to demonstrate that ‘those’ people simply do not deviate too far from a nation’s ideal ego, its *imago*.

In the Sarkozy government in France singled out the Roma for deportation, the media outlets began publishing pictures of the gypsies’ shabby lifestyle, their dark skin, their suspicious dexterity as making manifest that they were not really part of the French nation. The implication? That the ‘whole’ French nation would be more homogeneous, more harmonious – without *those* people.⁷ For a multicultural society to pretend to a singular self-image that excludes all unlike others is perhaps the most troubling political outcome of an image-dominated society.

ary economy

An economic corollary to a society of the Imaginary is (the claim of) the inherent exclusivity of Western *capitalism*: capitalism is said to be unique in its power to create the wealth of nations and individuals, and thus everyone under its regime has an even chance of obtaining said wealth. All are free to enjoy. Yet

accumulating wealth is hardly a feature of most people’s experience under capitalism. So capitalism must force masses of people to adopt and ardently espouse an economic ideology that does not necessarily benefit them.

It deploys well-crafted images of a vast *wealth-available-to-all* that links us libidinally to the one-sided world of capitalism, designed as much to inhibit the free exercise of our imagination to oppose it as to incite our devotion to it. The populist appeal of late capitalism seems to spring most from a media saturation of images of immense wealth – a wealth that vast numbers of people are unable, in reality to access, let alone accumulate. These include dramatized portrayals of wealthy families (e.g. *Dallas*), advertisements for luxury goods (where ordinary items like purses, watches, or shoes magically turn into exorbitantly expensive, unattainable fetishes), and the inordinate attention television and the Internet pay to the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

If money was once deemed an ‘external’ or objective measure of one’s social worth, it was because money itself was *symbolic* in character, tied to a specific social contract to represent a certain *value*. The Symbolic dimension to money has however yielded to the Imaginary: one enriches oneself now with virtual money, Bitcoins, accumulated without any societies authenticating their worth.

Glaring illustrations of wealth and luxury can stifle our freedom to dream of alternative futures, to contemplate different social arrangements, or to devise other economies than those defined exclusively by wealth accumulation, the cardinal feature of capitalism. The image of superabundant wealth (recall Scrooge McDuck swimming in his gold) is the powerful binding ideological force in the economy of the Imaginary; the more such images contradict the reality of people’s economic condition, the more they become attached to it. Lacan thus asked, ‘What is wealth?’ and the answer was a tautology: ‘Wealth is an attribute of the wealthy.’ He then asked why those without wealth support the wealthy: the answer is *identification* (Lacan 2007: 94–95). Despite actual disparities of wealth, each person must be convinced that the wealthy are really *just like you and me*. Mesmerizing images of the wealth-touting capitalism erase the poor or demonize them for insufficiently identifying with the affluence of the whole.⁸

Identification: the link that binds

Identification powers the solidarity of the whole: no differences may appear; no gaps in the social totality may be recognized.

Consider how today’s cultural and political leaders project images that show them being just like us – not remote authorities invested with mysterious symbolic power. Reviewing Tony Blair’s memoirs, Peter Stothard asks this question:

Are politicians different from the rest of us? Do they live by the same rules? Should they live by the same rules? When we are told about their personal lives and habits [...] are we being persuaded that they are more like us than they really are? Is that useful for either side? Blair is drily candid on the

pretences required for modern politics, the need to appear like a normal person during election campaigns, buying items in front of the TV cameras from security-vetted salesmen in security-cleared shops and learning the prices of grocery items he would never buy lest he be accused of not knowing the cost of corn flakes.

(Stothard 2010: 10)

In the Imaginary social order, configured around a unified ego as site of mastery and control, the unconscious paternal *ego-ideal* of Oedipus is replaced by a visible *object* with which all egos are equally linked together libidinally and through which all egos identify 'themselves with one another in their ego', as Freud remarks (SE 18: 116).

The image-object fuses everyone's *ideal ego* with that of others through identification with the Leader. Instead of a three-dimensional relation to a Symbolic Other, there is a flat mirroring of all by all. The symbol, neither a *having* nor a *being*, meets its dialectical antithesis in this image-object, which asserts we can both *have* (the object) and *be* (the object) – and can do so not despite, but because of our social obligations. Analytic protocols that assume the Oedipal-symbolic premise of a successful installation of the *ego-ideal* in each member of a society yield little insight.

Only an undivided, unified individual ego can be the basic unit of a social order formed by identification. There is undeniably a deep appeal in the idea of joyously reunifying the split ego and joining that whole ego to an equally unified social group with no need for sacrificing satisfactions to the collective. Equally alluring is its promise of equality: 'Every one must be the same and have the same' (Freud SE 18: 120–21). Such a social order is no longer formed by efforts to bridge the gaps between us opened by the symbol. No gaps are tolerated in the whole: if the other is you, the very same as you, with the same value, the same being, no language or metaphor need bridge any distance nor grant symbolic passage from subject to the other.

The paradox of a society based on the self-image of a unified ego, not a divided subject is that this requires the ego to be an isolatable unit, discrete and countable, while this 'undivided' ego only exists as a unit by virtue of its inclusion in the whole, the bounded totality of a social order whose oneness and singularity mirrors

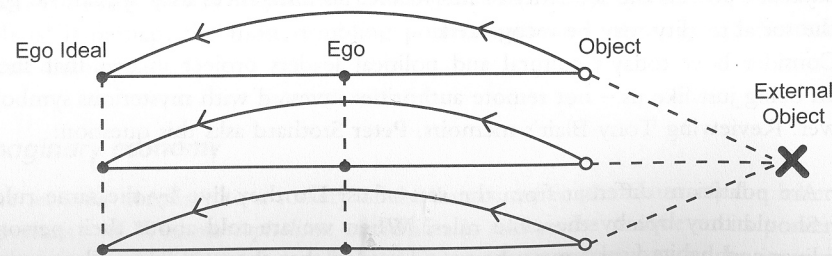


FIGURE 5.1 Identification

and sustains it. In an Imaginary order only the One can support a multitude of ones. *Identification with the whole society* is both required and assured by the fact that the society itself is strictly modelled on the individual as a unified ego, the whole and at one with the whole. Reconciling ultimate individual differences by submerging them in the empire of the images, has, of course, its dark side. Freud's picture of the exploited plebeian in Ancient Rome: 'No doubt the wretched plebeian, harassed by debts and military service; but to make one is a Roman citizen, one has one's share in the task of ruling other nations, dictating their laws' (Freud SE 18: 13).

Banishing reality in favour of fantasy and abandoning the basic idea of the symbolic social contract puts the Imaginary in the driver's seat. If it curtails freedom of the imagination and impoverishes human discourse, reducing the richness of life to being measured by a single dominant (wealth), one might still ask, 'What is the regime of the Imaginary?' True, at the dawn of Imaginary society, we experienced a terrible politics of race and religion that deployed visual imagery to stir up war, persecutions, and genocides (like the infamous intercutting of people with 'Jewish' faces in Nazi propaganda films). Such abuses were curtailed after World War II. Still, post-war thinkers and planners firmly believed that creating small homogeneous *societies of likes* (called 'garden cities' or 'new towns') would generate greater cohesion than traditional societies ever had⁹ (Abrams 1938). The widely held belief that the individual (Negri: the 'singularity', the 'autonomous', 'private' individual) is the building block of society and that the proposed solution to social antagonism is highly questionable. Can inter-ego conflict be set off by the dominance of the *Imaginary* in the single psyche, be it controlled in a universal society of the *Imaginary*? Freud thought not.

Sublimation, Symbolic and Imaginary

For Lacan, as for Freud, the original basis of human life in common (collective society) was an inescapable *lack*. *Everything held in common is nothing* – except for each subject yielded claim to for itself. The entirety of one's relation to the other is structured by the *recognition of mutual lack* – the other's lack is equal to one's own. (Recall that in the pre-social mirror stage you assume the other *has* the 'it' you lack.) From religion as sacrifice to love, what counts in the Symbolic social order is that each offers the other precisely *what they do not have*: their nothing, their desire, their lack.

The constitutive lack at the heart of the Symbolic grants it a crucial openness to change, to creating meaning, to becoming rather than being, or winding down into entropy or death that ensues when full satisfaction (the lowering of tension to zero) is achieved. For Lacan all drives are partial but all relate to what he says is the substance in psychoanalysis: *jouissance*, satisfaction literally unfulfillable for the subject in its human experience. *Sublimation* is its answer to the allure of the 'principle' where the absence of tension is deadly. Oedipal society, with its 'no', bans certain enjoyments. Since no subject can give up all pleasure, *sublimation* simulates fulfilment of forbidden wishes in art and drama.

proscriptions on drive satisfaction are provisionally lifted – we stage murder, incest, and other illicit passions. There is a knot tying *abstract symbols of mutual lack/desire to unconscious fantasy enjoyment*. The *sine qua non* social life requires, is an art that makes it tolerable.

In the long run, all societies promise individuals a measure of satisfaction for forbidden wishes – otherwise that portion of us which is ‘enemy’ to civilization would have long since prevailed. Where drive satisfaction is not strongly proscribed, Symbolic sublimation is ineffective. In the post-Oedipal what was once consigned to the unconscious rises to the surface. Drives appear on the verge of satisfaction: recall the 1960s slogan, ‘Just do it!’ What then protects the Imaginary order from entropy?

Imaginary society can no more dispense with sublimation than the Symbolic one: no society can exist without limits on the enjoyment of all by all. Lacan discovered where sublimated satisfaction exists in the post-Oedipal: in *fantasy objects* as spurious as symbolic substitutes for the mother under Oedipus (2007: 95ff.). The difference is not of kind, but degree. In post-Oedipal society there are what Lacan calls *jouissances en toc*, counterfeit enjoyments, mock fulfilments (Lacan 2007: 95; MacCannell, 2006). Whereas simulating drive satisfaction was once the province of great writers, talented dramatists, and outstanding artists, today we automate the production of image-objects promising full enjoyment (blockbuster action movies, video games) that easily displace the sublime pity and fear of Aristotle’s stage. The fake or simulated enjoyment, *jouissance en toc*, appears in all those gadgets swirling all around us (Lacan 2007: 188). Well before the advent of the i-objects that now surround us (iPod, iPhone, etc.) Lacan predicted that our new social reality, which is a realm of images or appearances (*aléthosphère*), would soon be overfilled with gadgets (*lathouses*) busy ‘fulfilling’ us – in a fake manner (again *jouissance en toc*).

Lacan suspected that the true function of *jouissance en toc* was to reassure us, by dint of an overwhelming accumulation of these gadgets, that our drives are fully satisfied and under control – and that the ego is secure in its wholeness, unity, and mastery.

Psychoanalysis of the Imaginary?

A revolution – in discourse, from Oedipal to post-Oedipal – has set the *positive image of fulfilment* above the *negative symbol* founded on lack. This means that the image must be engaged on its own terms. We can no longer take for granted the effectiveness of the symbol for safeguarding the creative openness necessary to defend against the drives and the ultimate entropy giving in to them entails. Let us therefore turn directly to the image, to the symbol’s opposite, for analytic breakthrough. The challenge is to trace a path to an open and creative social contract by *going through the Imaginary*, rather than setting ourselves against it, vainly trying to turn back to an Oedipal-symbolic.

Can Imaginary society provide the necessary openings to prevent sclerosis and stasis or entropy, given its unity, solidarity, and virtual seamlessness? Or is the tendency to one-sidedness and closure in the image-based social order rather a fundamental weak spot psychoanalytic criticism can exploit as new grounds for critique?

How can we open up the Imaginary’s self-enclosed, rigidifying, and increasing entropic existence and make a *breach* in it wide enough for *something else* to appear in it, *something new* to emerge from it, and for *something other* to touch it and move it from without?¹⁰

Symptom to sinthome: from symbolic speech to signifying image

In the theory offered by Saussure the linguistic sign is an *image plus a concept* – the *signifier* and its *signified*. But is the picture of the tree Saussure provides the *image* or is the written word ‘tree’ the image? Which is the *concept*: the *image* or the *sound* of the image of the word ‘tree’? Either part of the sign can be deemed the signifier – or the signified. And that is precisely the point. The signifier mobilizes images and concepts to structure meaning in a way that eludes most theorists’ grasp of the work of the image (e.g. Adorno).

The signifier is ultimately the *only* operative concept in language – a language that is and remains the model for the Symbolic. The reason: the unfathomable *division between signifier and signified* is of far less importance to its *meaning* than is the sign’s *difference from other signs*. Even though one might want to believe that once established language is finished, a closed lexicon, the differentiating process from signifier to signifier is an unending process of promising but not delivering *final* meaning. The supposed *whole* of a language is never really whole.

Language is by definition, incomplete; we must keep renewing it with more signifiers, producing more possible meanings. As Lacan puts it in one of his later seminars:

In the long run, this language, we create it. This is not reserved to the stages or phases where language is created: at each and every instant we give it sense, we give it a little push, without which language would not be living. It is not living except that at each instant one creates it. It is in this that there is no collective unconscious. There are only particular unconsciousnesses insofar as each one, at each instant, gives a little push to the language he or she speaks. (Lacan 2005: 10)

Language is thus the *Symbolic* par excellence: an open, self-generative system of meaning creation based on adding yet one more signifier to another with productive difference between them. It is a body ever in need of new appendages, new limbs, new signifiers. It is to be what it is. But as with the Oedipal-symbolic there is another side to language.

We imagine we enjoy an immense body of words and meanings, much as Hamlet’s imagined ‘total-knowledge’ would be enjoyed at the end of history. While in reality each signifier requires a *next* – an *other* signifier to grant it provisional meaning, we fantasize that somewhere every signifier is just part of a vast treasure available to us:

This other signifier is not alone. The stomach of the Other, the big Other, is full of them. This stomach is like some monstrous Trojan horse that provides

the foundations for the fantasy of a knowledge-totality. It is, however, clear that its function requires something coming and striking it from the outside, otherwise nothing will ever emerge from it. And Troy will never be taken.

(Lacan 2007: 33)

The promise of a full meaning and a place in the lexicon of established socio-symbolic meanings for the subject can never be fulfilled, and this promise ends unhappily with the poor subject lodged in 'the stomach of the big Other', unmoved, and unmoving. The signifier's failure to finalize meaning is a blessing in disguise: it protects us from death drive; it keeps us moving onwards instead of backwards or staying stuck. This 'belly' is like Imaginary society, the illusion of a container, not round but flat, centred on an ego that has expelled from its purview whatever does not fit its ideal. It lacks dimensionality; its logic is that of 'the sack and the cord' (Lacan 2005: 146), the dead end of social discourse.

Lacan's four discourses, the various forms of the social link, are the following: *master*, *university*, *hysteric*, and *analyst*. Each exhausts the universe of possible human links within them, but with some impediment, some obstacular knot that cannot be articulated or linked into the discourse. Each algorithm symbolizes this blockage in the lower left quadrant of the discourse.

Where does the impediment arise? The gaps between signifiers generate ever-changing meanings. But in speech there is also a permanent gap where one particular signifier has been 'dropped' from the productive chain. Its *meaning stays fixed* (as fantasized enjoyment/pain), and while it plays no part in conscious social discourse it is an impediment to that discourse. It is *the thing that cannot be said*. This dead signifier is the *symptom*, a subjective obstruction.¹¹ For all the Imaginary's dream of undoing the primacy of the signifier, the central problem of the symptom/obstacle remains or increases daily: consider how taboos on speech have multiplied to the point now where casually tactless words are deemed racist 'micro-aggressions'.

The image-object blocks us as vexatiously as the symbolic symptom. After Lacan in *Seminar XVII* sought alternatives to the current form of our social link (*identification with image-objects*) he decided to engage the Imaginary directly. What he found, beyond the opposition of symbolic-symptomatic/identification with *image-objects* or *ersatz* ego-ideals, was less a new model for identification than a way to *undo* identification altogether. Lacan had not considered that the Imaginary could ever in itself provide any way of escape from that closed 'identity' sack it puts us in – until the concept of the *sinthome*, in which he finds a new freedom for the subject in the effectiveness of a link that suddenly comes *undone*.

A different model for the post-Oedipal: late Lacan and the discovery of a dialectic in the Imaginary

Lacan begins a *two-dimensional* flattening operation that reveals to him that the Symbolic, which we have long assumed to be the sole locus of the 'hole' or the opening that allows for change, creativity, etc., is *no longer the 'true hole'* (2005: 134). That

opening is now there where the *Imaginary* (and not just the *Symbolic*) breaches the *Real*. To make an opening in the ostensible seamlessness of totality by *Imaginary* rather than *Symbolic* means is something new in Lacan. To believe it is linked to his understanding of how much Freud's *Groß* with a particular ego at the centre of it has come to define our social

By locating a structural void *even in* the Imaginary, Lacan's thesis of openness, a potential fracturing of the image's received totalitarian meaning. If apparent meaning must have, we might say, a bit of *non-meaning* in its perfection. The 'true hole' marks where the *Imaginary* meets up with the *Real*, *makes a hole in it*, just like the Symbolic – a hole, which enables other in interacting with the image present before the eyes, a hole that voids the image of the image to be all and to end all.

Recall that an internal *symbolic* limit opened the *ego* to the world and the quotient of hostility to others – the gap between *I and you* and that internal person, the *Symbolic Other*. The Imaginary order rejected symbolic identification with the others *lack* and substituted for it the overt *identification* with the others: an ideal *image-object*. No gaps, no change, and thus insufficient to the death drive. But to discover a 'true hole' in the Imaginary is to open the discursive possibility, an alternative social link that deploys *both identification and lack*. The knot must come undone.

Lacan articulated his vision in his early 'Rome Discourse' (1953) where he invoked 'the subjectivity of his time':

Let whoever cannot meet at its horizon the subjectivity of his time, let him then. For how could he who knows nothing of the dialectic that is at work in a symbolic movement with so many lives possibly make his best of those lives? Let him be well acquainted with the whirl into which he is drawn, let him draw him in the ongoing enterprise of Babel, and let him be content to function as an interpreter in the strife of languages.

(Lacan 1953: 10)

Rather than assume Lacan is merely caught up in the then current linguistic phenomenology and the 'intersubjective relation', it is wiser to see his interest in identifying with one's fellow subjects as a transindividual in the light of the Symbolic's ascendance to discursive dominance. Lacan speaks of 'the ongoing enterprise of Babel', not of the formal structure of a single language, but of the ongoing interlocation *among* languages. Babel is no traditional linguistic order, the Symbolic one, it can disrupt false plenitudes and the dream of a complete set of meanings. 'An ongoing enterprise' means movement, not entropy.

A static Imaginary frames the horizon as a *boundary*, an enclosure; Lacan sees it as an *ever-receding line*. Lacan's *transindividual* unties us from the Imaginary social order than it ties it to any specific society; and it unties the subject from its socially fixed articulation within a *pseudo-horizon*. Thus it offers us another social link to others, based on experience. To reach for that ever-receding horizon

has first to be situated within the closed one, inside that box, a consumer of the very images that bind us too tightly together. Lacanians often short-circuit the laboriousness of this task with pop culture references (movies, the media, and politics). But discussion of *the method* such analysis requires and the *systematic* analysis of discourse and its alienation of the subject have lagged. The real task of the analyst is to grasp precisely how discourse situates and alienates *all* of its subjects, including oneself.

Lacan says the domain of psychoanalysis 'is that of concrete discourse qua field of the subject's transindividual reality; and its operations are those of history, insofar as history constitutes the emergence of truth in reality' (Lacan 2006: 214), and that this means we must recognize that 'it is not at the subject's disposal in reestablishing the continuity of his conscious discourse' (ibid.). The fiction of our order as a self-enclosed whole has to be deconstructed (MacCannell 2014).

Urging images (even or especially self-images) into 'the ongoing enterprise of Babel' breaks apart the seamless 'perfection' of Imaginary society and its egos. The Imaginary can and must shatter its own unity and open up a space for encountering (and countering) the Real. Only in that space will we find ways of escape. A parallel opening of the ego itself is also necessary (Lacan 2005: 152; MacCannell 2014).

The opposition *subjective symbolic lack* (once thought to be confined only to the Oedipal order) to *egocentric identification with imaginary plenitude* (so clearly delineated by Freud in his *Group Psychology*) has been to some degree rendered moot by the triumph of the Imaginary ego. Only if that ego might finally see itself as something other than a closed circle can the jerry-built structure of group psychology be brought down, and the social link be re-conceived. One must, as in Baudelaire's beautiful phrasing, know how to 'take a bath of multitude' – to be in the crowd, but not at one with it. Only when the ego is open to others, open to desire, passion, and creativity can we figure a serious alternative to Oedipal repression as our means of living together and co-creating our world.

Notes

- 1 Unchecked, the 'primitive rivalry' over the 'it', excited in the ego by its encounter with the imaginary other, develops as *psychosis*: the rival other becomes a fixture in one's own mind, an internally hostile and eternally terrifying object within (Lacan 1993: 39–40).
- 2 In the formation of the human subject, all three realms are linked together, although not always in the same way. The 'link' is Lacan's *Borromean knot*, in which Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real are linked together with voids or 'holes' between them, openings without which there is no knot.
- 3 Noting how complex the generation of the superego is in Freud, Lacan writes: 'Will it [the ego] or will it not submit itself to the duty that it feels within like a stranger, beyond, at another level? Should it or should it not submit itself to the half-unconscious, paradoxical, and morbid command of the superego [...] If I may put it thus, isn't its true duty to oppose that command?' (Lacan 1992: 7).
- 4 The theory of social link is developed systematically in Lacan's Seminar XVII (2007 [1969–70]) and in subsequent seminars. Seminar XX presents its final form.
- 5 Guy Debord's 1967 *Society of the Spectacle* also opened this topic, but he attributes it to commodity fetishism and narcotization. Lacan and Freud show the mechanics of imaginary identification.

- 6 Freud notes that even gender distinctions are not desirable in the artificial group. Later Lacan would note that capitalism begins by 'getting rid of sex'.
- 7 At the time, President Nicolas Sarkozy launched a campaign to get his compatriots to define 'Frenchness' by making checklists of what they considered 'real' French attributes.
- 8 Right-wing conservative candidates freely and viciously attack the poor, comparing them to calves sucking at the state's teats and to monkeys.
- 9 Nineteenth International Conference for Housing and Town Planning, held in 1948, Zurich, Switzerland, and attended by delegates of 30 countries (Abrams 1949: 38).
- 10 In Seminar XXIII, Lacan showed the way in his concept of the *sinthome*, a word-image that permits the subject's *jouissance* to flow through it, rather than being repressed by verbal expression. Recall that speech excises *jouissance*. The *sinthome* is something else, and in my view, quite the opposite of 'psychotic', but is rather the essence of the experience of art (MacCannell 2014).
- 11 'The symptom [...] inscribes the symbol in letters of suffering in the subject's flesh' (Lacan 2006: 252).

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