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Perspectives on 'Lacanian subjectivities'

Derek Hook and Calum Neill

Despite the fact that the quality of the literature published on Lacan in the English-speaking world has increased markedly in the last decade - a development towards which many of this issue's participants have made notable contributions (Chiesa, 2007; Glynos, 2000, 2001; Leader, 2002, 2008; Leader & Corfield, 2007; Neill, 2006; Parker, 2005, 2007; Salecl, 2003, 2004; Stavrakakis, 1999, 2007) – Lacanian notions of subjectivity remain, nonetheless, under-utilized within the social sciences, cultural studies and contemporary social theory alike. Much of this literature has refuted the stereotypes of anti-psychoanalytic critique – the idea that psychoanalysis inadequately understands the subject-to-society relation, that it remains antithetical to socio-historical critique, the contention that the notion of the unconscious commits one to an essentialist depth-psychology – successfully demonstrating the applicability of Lacanian thought to a variety of pressing societal, political and ideological dilemmas.

The fact that Lacanian theorizations of subjectivity are under-utilized and, indeed, so often misunderstood, or reduced to crude approximations, is not simply the fault of a uninterested readership. It is true that certain approaches to Lacanian psychoanalysis do result in something akin to a self-referential language game, where the concepts in question remain isolated from other realms of theorization or from non-clinical horizons of application. The aim of this special issue is to take up the challenge of demonstrating the practical application of Lacanian theory in relation to subjectivity and to do so not from a range of disciplinary perspectives (political studies, historiography, urban and spatial theory, critical psychology, performance studies, the concerns of pedagogy and art theory) but in a way that connects Lacanian and psychoanalytic thought to a variety of non-psychoanalytic theories and practices.

The subject of fantasy...and enjoyment

The paper that opens this special issue, Glynos and Stavrakakis's 'Lacan and political subjectivity', explores the potential for political theory of the Lacanian notion of fantasy and the associated idea of the 'subject of enjoyment'. The authors offer a number of helpful links as a means of introducing their topic. Through an initial consideration of critical psychology research on fantasy in the workplace, the authors explore a Lacanian understanding of fantasy and the related problematic of *jouissance*, using these notions to introduce a discussion of what we might term the 'affective turn' in contemporary social theory. Perhaps the most helpful aspects of this paper to non-initiates is the clear overview the authors provide of the Lacanian subject. Foremost here is the idea of the subject as constitutively split, as ex-centric (as 'outside' unto itself, as one might put it), or, more radically yet, as void, as not merely a *lacking subject*, but as *subjectivized lack*, as Chiesa (2007) helpfully puts it. Clearly, this is not a positive vision of the subject; lack here is a constant and inescapable condition.

This lack, however, must be understood as more than a morass of negativity, as it is sometimes, unhelpfully, presented in critical literature on Lacan. Against such a reductive caricature, the Lacanian understanding of the subject is as lacking in such a way that it leads to a sequence of ongoing identificatory acts which aim precisely to deliver a positive (symbolic-imaginary) identity to that which has no positively defined essence. Given this impetus - the subject's unceasing attempts to cover over its constitutive lack - we can appreciate not only the persistence of fantasy - which provides an imaginary means of attempting to attain such impossible ends - but also, the fact, as Glynos & Stavrakakis insist, of the socio-symbolic dependency of subjectivity. In short, the constitutive impossibility of a cohesive, positive, autonomous subjectivity is precisely the underlying condition of possibility for the myriad imaginary and symbolic identifications that characterize the complexity of subjectivity.

One of the many strengths of this paper is that it includes a valuable differentiation – often lacking in less textured Lacanian accounts – between the differing modes of *jouissance*. The interactions between *jouissance* and the dialectics of socio-political identification for Glynos & Stavrakakis include: 1) the imaginary promise of recapturing lost/impossible enjoyment; 2) limit experiences linked to a *jouissance* of the body; and 3) enjoyment as it connects to the motor of desire (*objet petit a*), the object of identification that relies on a fantasmatic narrative to explain a given lack of enjoyment. The last of these modalities of *jouissance* is an instrumental factor in the operation of fantasy. The logic peculiar to fantasy, as Glynos & Stavrakakis explain, involves the staging of a relation between the subject (as lack) and the object (which always evades symbolic capture) thereby “organizing the affective dimension of the subject, the way it desires and enjoys”. The advantage of this approach to fantasy is that it “links the ‘dry’ socio-symbolic field....to the ‘sticky’ affects of the subject”.

A further differentiation between modes of *jouissance* becomes important when the authors turn their attention to specifying different forms of subjectivity. The distinction between social and political subjectivity is made possible on the basis that the former is linked to practices conforming to current socio-political norms, whereas the latter contests and disputes them. The distinction between the ideological and ethical subject, on the other hand corresponds to the difference between phallic and non-phallic (or feminine) *jouissance*. We have in mind here the difference between a mode of enjoyment stemming from *an overinvestment in a socially-configured ideal or norm*, and a type of enjoyment linked to an awareness of *the contingency of social relations*, one that does not aim to totalize, to complete or to ‘make whole’.

The issue of fantasy is also of central importance in Hook's paper, which takes up the notion of unconscious transactions between the subject and the trans-subjective social order (the Lacanian ‘big Other’) as a means of understanding a series of paradoxes evident within apartheid ideology. A key concern here revolves around the difficulty of separating historical from subjective agency and, moreover, with the apparent impossibility of resolving the contradiction of apartheid ideology as simultaneously both a carefully crafted ideological doctrine and a parasitic idea-system possessing the minds of its

hosts. Hook argues that the two modes of theorizing the subject-Other relation in Lacan's Seminar XI - the processes of alienation and separation - provide a means of understanding how apartheid ideologues could both seemingly stand outside ideology (at least inasmuch as they were its authors) and yet remain nonetheless themselves subject to the spread of its ideas.

By linking fantasy to the posited desire of the Other, by viewing it as the return-effect of the incessant line of unconscious questioning addressed to the Other ('*Where do I belong?*', '*What is my role here?*', '*What is the nature of this society?*', '*What do you, the Other, want of me?*') we are able to view fantasy as both that which lies at the very core of subjectivity and yet also necessarily formulated within the parameters of the socio-symbolic order. Fantasy thus, according to Hook, is "both in a sense autonomous – it is the *invention of the subject*, their unconscious response to the enigma of the Other's desire – and yet it is nevertheless contingent on the Other inasmuch as it is a kind of working hypothesis - charged with certain modes and promises of *jouissance* - to the question of the Other's desire". This then is perhaps the most paradoxical aspect of fantasy, that it is both that which, more than anything else, constitutes *what is irreducible about us* despite that it cannot ever be fully separated from the field of the Other. What this means, then, is that while there certainly is an element of symbolic determination at play within the persistence of apartheid ideology – the big Other of white apartheid South Africa was indeed a racist Other - this ideology is ultimately held aloft, recreated, reanimated by the fantasies and enjoyments of its beneficiaries, for which, to emphasize, such subjects remain fully accountable.

Phobic topology and social contradiction

Chiesa's 'Topology of fear' takes as its starting point a series of intriguing but ultimately failed attempts at performing 'the psychoanalysis of space'. His objective lies with an exposition of Lacan's theory of phobia inasmuch as it proposes phobia as a particular form of symbolization, "a signifying logos that creates space for the phobic object". Thus, not only does Chiesa open up a perspective on a particular mode of spatial subjectivity, he also advances the usefulness of a Lacanian understanding of the phobic. We have opted to briefly retrace his argument here, in the hope that such an overview will prove beneficial to those coming to his paper with little or no prior knowledge of Lacan.

Chiesa begins his discussion of phobia with a consideration of the three crises of the Oedipus complex – frustration, privation and castration – with a particular emphasis being placed on the transition between the first and second of these crises when the child is confronted with the Desire-of-the-Mother. This is an exemplary instance of anxiety: the child's potentially engulfing realization of the facts both of the mother's lack and of her desire to which he or she is unable to adequately respond.

The figure of the father represents an escape route in this respect. Imaginary competition with the father - presumably along with the child's inevitable failure in attempting to best him - institutes an authority, a paternal anchoring-point and, subsequently, a means of ordering the symbolic realm. The

child is thus provided with a way of locating themselves, a means of taking on a position and of grasping the meaning of their social and symbolic co-ordinates. This of course becomes particularly pressing when the child is confronted with instances of 'the real', those irresolvable deadlocks of experience that cannot be mediated with any of the tools of language and understanding he has at his disposal; for example, in Freud's case of little Hans, the dawning realization of sexual difference and sexual desire. In the absence of such a figure of competition and rivalry – little Hans's father poses him no threat and his mother's desire seems all too accessible, too present – another mediator, another 'paternal operator' needs to be sought. This is one way of approaching the phobic object in the little Hans case: a crude signifier – for Hans, a horse – that enables a simultaneous re-ordering of the symbolic world and a protection from (or indeed a localization of) a troubling anxiety. This phobic object is to be understood along the lines of an empty signifier, which is to say that it has no single and fixed meaning, but is generatively applied in a variety of different relationships (in successive attempts on Hans's part, for example, to restructure his world and indeed his relationship to his mother, his father, his sister, etc.).

It is important, as Chiesa emphasizes, that Hans's 'location problems' have a spatial dimension. Hans's symbolic co-ordinates have been unmoored in an anxiety-provoking way which impinges on his spatial security, a fact which suggests the pertinence of this account for an understanding of phobic spaces more generally. The ingenuity of Lacan's interpretation of the little Hans case - and indeed of the applicability of this theorization to Mike Davis's account of the phobic spaces of Los Angeles - is to be found in a reference to the Levi-Straussian notion of the myth. According to the latter, a myth is a narrative that begins with an irresolvable situation, a 'real' impossibility, and that eventually yields a further contradiction at a higher level, thus both containing within itself and also reaching beyond the original deadlock. As Chiesa relates, Hans has two fantasies, one of leaving but always rejoining his mother, another of departing by train without his father but somehow nonetheless arriving with him. There is something functional about this succession of fantasies and a type of resolution is thus attained. A given deadlock (a return trip to the mother which never fails) is recapitulated at a higher level, in the form of a second fantasy which sublates the first (he finally succeeds in leaving with the father). What, then, is the relevance of this Levi Straussian logic to the myths and phobias to Davis's account of Los Angeles? For Davis, fear is an ideological construction that has been imposed on the urban population; a mediator, an operator, a means of dealing with the 'real' deadlock of radical racial and class inequalities which cannot be either wished away or adequately mediated by the existing socio-symbolic frame. Unlike in Hans's case, the production of phobic spaces here remains acute, pronounced. There is no resolution at hand. Los Angeles's more privileged communities remain stuck in fear, in a situation where phobia, as Chiesa notes, naturalizes social contradictions.

Intersubjectivity and the (im)possibility of connection

The contributions by Frosh, Neill and Baraitser and Bayly each seek to explore, in their own ways, questions of how it is we might, as subjects, come to, or fail to, relate. Frosh is concerned with the fact of language as medium necessarily functioning as mediator. That is, the very thing which supposedly connects us, in so doing, necessarily emphasizes the gap between us. Through a careful reading of the opening lines of Genesis, Frosh brings out the overlooked point that prior to *the word*, which is most usually seen as what is there *in the beginning*, there is not simply nothing or silence but, rather, *tehom*. Where *tehom* is usually understood as the deep, formless water or chaos which precedes creation, Frosh brings out a more nuanced translation, allowing us hear the *murmur* before the first word. This is then linked to a sense of what remains always with and yet always outside of language. Human speech is always accompanied, necessarily, with the unsaid; an unsaid which is not simply the nothing of silence but is rather a persistent *murmuring* of not yet meaning, the not yet understood. One way of conceptualising this *something* in the human subject which insists beyond language and understanding is through Lacan's concept of *das Ding*.

For Lacan, *das Ding* or *the Thing* refers to that which insists beyond any imaginary or symbolic capture or, as Lacan himself puts it, it is "the thing in its dumb reality" (1992). Drawing on Žižek's use of this concept, Frosh raises crucial questions for our understanding of ethics and being human. Against the popular trend in ethical theory, fueled by readings of Levinas and his notion of the irreducible otherness of the other, Frosh draws on Žižek to show that that which lies beyond comprehension, that in the other which is truly other, is not necessarily the human of Levinas but might be better understood as the inhuman. One point which emerges here is that where a Levinasian ethics might be understood to stop at the point of a shared elemental - the face of the other for Levinas is typically demanding of a response – Žižek's use of the concept of *the Thing* allows us to appreciate a more alien encounter, a more stringent alterity and this, in turn, raises crucial questions of how it is we might respond ethically to the other.

These questions are, in indirect ways, picked up in the two articles which follow. Like Frosh, Neill is concerned with questions of relation and, specifically, questions of how we conceptualize the boundary between the self and the social. Mainstream psychology has typically sidestepped this question by supposing itself to have already solved it. Through recourse to Descartes' *cogito*, arguably the prototype of modern conceptions of the self, and Husserl's revisiting of Descartes in *The Cartesian Meditations*, Neill poses the question of how we might come to conceptualise intersubjectivity in a manner which does not effectively reduce either the self to the other or the other to the self. Drawing on Lacan and the Lacanian influenced theorist and artist, Bracha Ettinger, Neill presents an understanding of intersubjectivity which contests the traditional psychoanalytic concept of mother-child unity in favour of what we might tentatively term an originary difference. Like Frosh, Neill utilizes Lacan's notion of *das Ding*, but this time seeking to distance it from its Žižekian overtones of horror and the inhuman and emphasize what might be understood to be one of Lacan's

central points; that that in the other which refuses comprehension cannot, logically, be distinguished from that in oneself which refuses comprehension. Through careful analysis of key texts from Freud, Lacan and Ettinger, Neill suggests that our constriction by the dominant concepts in modern philosophy and psychology has forced us into a position where it has become all but impossible to think the relation of self and other without being trapped by seemingly common-sense notions of individuality and the naturalization of separateness that this suggests. Lacan's thinking linked with Ettinger's armoury of border-concepts, Neill argues, furnishes us with a fresh vocabulary which then brings with it fresh ways of thinking the subject-other divide.

Anxious encounters

This theme of relation is picked up again in Lisa Baraitser and Simon Bayly's 'On waiting for something to happen' where they focus on two seemingly quite different contexts of encounter to question notions of the ethical or what, with Levinas, we might term, the response in responsibility. They do this by utilizing Jane Gallop's anecdotal theory approach wherein an anecdote is recounted and then worked through to draw out the theoretical insights it might offer. The first two anecdotes in the paper concern experiences of therapy sessions; one in which one of the authors, as therapist, begins to faint and slide from her chair and, the other, in which the other author, as analysand, reacted to a comment from their therapist with the sensation of having their 'spine plugged in'. The second group of anecdotes relate secondhand accounts of a performance by the Italian performance artist Franko B. whose performances typically involve an exposition of vulnerability through nakedness and, until recently, controlled bleeding. In the performance in question, 2002's *Aktion 398*, Frank B. staged intimate one-to-one encounters wherein each 'audience' member shared two minutes with him in a closed room. All the anecdotes, therefore, relate to the idea of relating in one-to-one situations, situations in which those present might be understood to be drawn to respond to the other and situations in which those present might be understood to be drawn to a sense of responsibility towards the other present there.

Drawing on a range of theorists, from Lacan to Levinas, from Badiou to Agamben, Baraitser and Bayly forge a meaning from their anecdotes which sees a conjunction between the analytic session and the theatrical performance, which foregrounds what they term the 'liveness' in each encounter. This notion of liveness, which has its roots Philip Auslander's thesis on the problematic distinction between live and mediatized performances, is developed here as an important new concept in thinking the ethics of encounter and helps us understand something central to analytic experience, the potential for reaching out and across to the other.

Encounter and perhaps even something like Baraitser and Bayly's liveness are key too in the experience of Antony Gormley's *Blind Light*, the exhibition held at the Hayward Gallery in the summer of 2007. Central to the exhibition was the piece *Blind Light* itself, a 8m by 10m glass box filled with a dense cloud-like vapour and lit with fluorescent light. Visitors to the Gallery were

allowed, twenty-five at a time, to enter the box and wander in its space, inevitably encountering each other as they did, but encountering each other in a manner quite different from usual. With the vapour, it was impossible to see your own hand nevermind your neighbour. This meant that collision was all but unavoidable. The effect was that, in this strange space, you moved precariously, bumping repeatedly into strangers who remained conventionally strangers while at the same time becoming intimate fellow travelers.

As well as being a renowned artist, Antony Gormley is also deeply interested in psychoanalytic ideas. We are very lucky to be able to include in this special edition a transcription of a discussion between Antony and three key figures in the world of psychoanalytic writing; Darian Leader, Renata Salecl and Susie Orbach. The discussion took place shortly after the *Blind Light* exhibition closed and, thus, takes as its starting point experiences of that and, what we might understand as its companion piece, *Event Horizon*, the collection of life sized figures which were stood on buildings and bridges around the Hayward Gallery. Not only does the discussion offer important insights into Antony Gormley's work, but also, focusing on ideas of anxiety and connection from a psychoanalytic, and primarily Lacanian, perspective, it echoes many of the ideas and themes discussed in more depth elsewhere in this issue.

Following Glynos and Stavrakakis's and Hook's discussions of fantasy and its relation to the social, in 'Public Space and the Body' Renata Salecl points us towards the precarity of fantasy, suggesting that the experience of *Blind Light* can function to disorientate not only our spatial awareness but that it can unsettle our very experience of reality, a reality which, as we have discovered, is always necessarily supported by fantasy. Salecl links this experience to anxiety and, in understanding her discussion here, the reader would be well served to return to Chiesa's paper where he clarifies the distinction between fear and anxiety, that "[anxiety] is the subject's confrontation with the lack [*absence*] of object, in which he is swallowed up" (Lacan, Seminar IV, 345-6). We can see here, perhaps, a direct evocation of *Blind Light* and it is in this anxious space that we might find echoes of the murmur to which Frosh points, the unspoken which accompanies our relating to others and, to link this with Neill's argument, the murmur we hear in ourselves. As Antony Gormley puts it, "We need art as a space in which we can familiarise ourselves the incommensurable, the unknowable, the unseeable both within ourselves and in space at large and escape from the dominance of visible symbolic orders."

Negativity against knowledge

The brief article that closes the issue, Parker's review of the recently translated Seminar XVII, 'The other side of psychoanalysis', lists a series of Lacan's warnings against a series of lures – those of mastery, individuality and truth - that stem from treating psychoanalysis as an idealized form of knowledge. What is intriguing about this seminar is the extent to which Lacan takes on and extends a series of critiques that psychoanalysis is often presumed to have ignored, including the dynamics of institutional-spatial power-relations, the blunt application of psychoanalytic models to history, and the universalizing

prescription of the Oedipus complex. More striking yet is the degree to which Lacan proves willing to use these critiques *psychoanalytically* – in line, that is, with the psychoanalytic imperative of destabilizing illusions of understanding, mastery and individual agency - against certain trends within psychoanalysis itself.

Parker concludes with a twofold cautioning, which perhaps makes for an appropriate ending to this issue as a whole. He is concerned not only with a routine problem underlying the attempt to turn subjectivity into viable forms of knowledge, that is, the transformation of critique into “something...marketable and useful”, but also with the possibility that we might neglect “the negativity of psychoanalysis” as precisely a means of challenging and over-turning such “idealized forms of knowledge”.

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