

Figuring (out) Lacan

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Figuring Lacan: Criticism and the Cultural Unconscious

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Candidates of Jacques Lacan's *École* who considered themselves ready to terminate analysis and take on their own patients, would give two or three fellow candidates their reasons. One of these candidates would then appear before a selection committee on behalf of the first; no candidate ever stated his or her own case. An aspiring analyst's success or failure was determined on this basis (Schneiderman, 1983: 65–70; MacCannell, 1986: 24–25).

The "message" of such unfair circuitousness is evident: in Lacan's terms, no-one ever speaks for himself or herself, we always speak for another, an Other. So there seems to be an odd poetic justice in the proliferation of Lacan's explicators, for, in the Anglo-American world at least, Lacan himself remains unread, while around his impenetrable discourse commentary flourishes. We seem destined to know Lacan only by means of stand-ins, the latest of which is *Figuring Lacan: criticism and the cultural unconscious* by Juliet Flower MacCannell.

MacCannell states that "use of his key concepts has touched nearly all the leading areas of literary criticism" (2), but later she acknowledges that only a very small portion of Lacan's *Écrits* has been translated into English. Moreover, given what MacCannell concedes to be the "elliptical" (19), "circuitous" (49), and "strangely ambiguous, even paranoid" (xviii) character of his writing, how does one *represent* Lacan, let alone *figure* him?

To recapitulate some other representations of Lacan – we have had Lacan as potential ally for feminism (Jacqueline Rose, 1982), Lacan as "ladies' man" and "prick" (sic, Jane Gallop, 1982: 33 and 29), Lacan as hidden antagonist (Julia Kristeva, 1982), Lacan as phallogocentric "facteur de la vérité" ("purveyor of truth", Jacques Derrida, 1975). Yet another Lacan can be added to the list, because the figure Lacan cuts in MacCannell's "figuring" turns out to be unexpectedly like Michel Foucault: an archaeologist of the strategies of inclusion and exclusion involved in discourse as a form of power. For MacCannell, Lacan's writing identifies discourse as a "social tie", a phrase which echoes through her text (4, 7–8, 12, 14, 27, 33, 78, 91, 103). Such a "social tie" excludes as much as it includes, joins a social order even as it separates speakers, is both link and knot, bonding and bondage. MacCannell states this insight sweepingly: "Culture sustains human intercourse – by preventing it" (xv).

A brief outline of Lacan's premises may be necessary to grasp the niceties of MacCannell's reading. For Lacan, learning language seems to promise an entry into social communication which allows the speaking subject to become part of a whole community. But because the word, to exist, has to stand in for or replace the thing, the acquisition of language is necessarily a loss, so that the subject is maimed, castrated, or "wounded" in its very constitution. Communication in the order of language, the Symbolic Order, never takes place just between two, for dyadic relations belong to the Imaginary, or to the child's initial identification with the mother. Only when a third term, the Father, intervenes to triangulate and oedipalise the child's relation to the mother, can the Symbolic Order be entered. Discourse, for this reason, cannot offer a reciprocity of meaning; instead it encloses us in a circulation of signifiers from which we mutely appeal to the Other for a guarantee of our significance. The Other is nothing other than the empty place from which language first reached us. Not a very promising scenario for culture.

Yet "culture promises . . . 'combinatorics': 'love', 'procreation'" (79), as MacCannell asserts. To lure us into it, so that it can reproduce itself, the Symbolic Order has to cover up its absences and divisions with Imaginary notions of fullness and wholeness: the subject is not split, but integrated; we are not denied significance, but in command of meaning, not isolated but communicating; the Other is finally *there*. MacCannell asks with a degree of pathos: "Without these promises [of unity and satisfaction], would we devote our energies and defer our pleasures to civilisation?" (79).

Within this framework, Lacan's rôle as what MacCannell calls a "culture critic" seems obvious: to deny the Imaginary unity which the Symbolic claims for itself. As such, his work has often been read, especially by post-*Screen* British critics, such as Colin MacCabe, Catherine Belsey, or Antony Easthope. Otherwise, his writing has been re-worked, particularly by feminists, to give value to the pre-Symbolic – the Imaginary for Hélène Cixous, or the Semiotic, a liminal moment before symbolisation, yet always present as a trace within it, for Julia Kristeva. Whichever direction it follows, one assumption is shared by all those who draw on Lacan's work: somehow this work must be reread as a critique of the Symbolic as it operates in everyday life.

MacCannell's reading is no different. The Symbolic emerges in her interpretation as a culture that makes promises, like fulfilment, mutuality, love, it does not and cannot keep (45–56). Once MacCannell has identified metaphor as the figure for these broken promises –

Metaphor binds by blocking the connecting flow of [libidinal] energy. The surplus thus saved is then available for doing cultural work, and it is offered to civilisation as a sacrificial gift . . . Metaphor is, then, for Lacan, the mode in which culture makes its promises (99) –

her work of "Figuring Lacan" is cut out. She has to demonstrate how Lacan's writing figures out, unravels, or performs an archaeology of the tropes of culture, or of the Symbolic itself. (MacCannell seems to use "culture" and "Symbolic" interchangeably.) Hence her claim that "no analyst was ever

more complete in his examination of his patient, which is, in Lacan's case, culture itself" (19).

But if culture is a patient, culture is also a text, and MacCannell demands that the tropes of culture be submitted to re-reading, "for it is the commonplaces [of the cultural text] . . . that Lacan challenges us to read" (4), whether these commonplaces are those of institutions, authoritative texts, philosophy, science, or of everyday life. When we discover, moreover, that in MacCannell's version, literature is given ultimate priority *over* other forms of discourse, it seems that literary criticism (always insecure and eclectic) is finally about to come into its own: ". . . commonplaces can be re-evaluated, restructured, rewritten if not spoken. The classic locus for such revaluing is, of course, literature" (4); ". . . Lacan reverses the priorities, not reading literature in the light of Freud, but Freud as literature" (2); Lacan subjects the discourses of science, human or positive, to a "radical critique", and for MacCannell, as well as Lacan it seems, "the only logical alternative mode for discourse about this discourse is literary or rhetorical" (13).

Remarking on the irony of literary critics, like Kristeva, who have turned away from literature to psychoanalysis proper, MacCannell writes that "literature is the place in which form is itself 'put on the couch', analysed rather than simply followed" (41). With some conviction, MacCannell appropriates, but misspells Verlaine's dictum "*Tout le reste est littérature* (sic, 14,¹ and goes on to inform us that "Lacan says, in fact, that everything is literature" (14). The act of taking Lacan out of the "ghetto" (MacCannell 24, Lacan's word) of psychoanalytic enclosure into the realm of culture is paralleled by a counter-movement which places Lacan between the covers of a book: a literary text.

Her literary self-consciousness is reflected in a high degree of critical self-awareness. MacCannell takes a sophisticated familiarity with Lacan's work for granted. She avoids glossing key words in the Lacanian lexicon, such as "Imaginary", "desire", "Symbolic", and so on, and she assumes that her reader is *au fait* with the discourse surrounding Lacan: she dismisses the "usual practice" of presenting Lacan in terms of a "structuralist [version] of language" (14); she sees herself writing after some "first wave of Lacan criticism" (128); she devotes a chapter to readings of Lacan (18). Her refusal to just explicate or paraphrase Lacan is a pity, because a real need exists for something like *The layperson's guide to Lacan*, a *Lacan without tears*. MacCannell herself rejects other attempts to offer introductions to Lacan. She does not altogether approve of Anika Lemaire's *Jacques Lacan* even though it is used as "the technical manual for Lacan's followers" (95); we are told that Lemaire "doesn't [sic] understand metonymy" (97). MacCannell prefers Anthony Wilden, but finds him flawed (131–133), recommends Catharine [sic] Clément's *The Live and legends of Jacques Lacan* patronisingly (139), and actively dislikes Stuart Schneiderman (24–28). On the subject of Shoshana Felman she becomes contemptuous, dismissing Felman's "formalist enthusiasm" (30).

Such an approach belies the format of *Figuring Lacan*, which is one of a series mundanely called "Critics of the Twentieth Century". (For those who were wondering, other Critics of the Twentieth Century are Paul de Man,

A.J. Greimas, and Raymond Williams, with Roland Barthes, William Empson, Lionel Trilling and Northrop Frye to follow). When even would-be primers turn self-reflexive, criticism evidently reaches zero degree. The question to ask of *Figuring Lacan*, as of so much contemporary criticism is: what is the relation between “figuring” (literature, “creative writing”) and “figuring out” (explanation, exegesis, “criticism”)?

Christopher Norris provides one answer to this question in a remarkably bland Series Introduction to *Critics of the Twentieth Century*. Norris enthuses about the “remarkable number of gifted and innovative literary critics” (vii) the twentieth century has produced, an enthusiasm which leads him to challenge the hierarchy between “creative writing” as primary and “critical writing” as secondary. Yet everything in Norris’s language points to a valuation of the “creative” *over* the “critical”: it is only *because* critics have become more “creative” that they now deserve the attention of a series like *Critics of the Twentieth Century*. (Does one sense a tautology here: what is creatively critical is that which deserves criticism in its turn?) Moreover, Norris revives some of the weariest myths in the literary repertoire, such as the “fine mind” and the “gifted critic”. In the present century, we learn, “some of the finest literary minds have turned to criticism” as a vehicle for their “complex and speculative range of interests” (vii), an outlet for their stifled creativity. (Surely the critic as sensitive dilettante is a figure dating back to the eighteenth century at least?) Norris reprimands those of us who cannot recognise creativity when it stares us in the face: “It is scarcely appropriate to think of writers like Derrida or de Man as literary critics in any conventional sense of the term” (ix). When, near the end of her argument, MacCannell, too, is struck by the observation that “under pressure from Lacan’s concepts, literary criticism, the reading of literature, *becomes* culture criticism” (129), the territory of literary criticism seems to have widened beyond recognisable boundaries. Criticism, for both MacCannell and Norris, is a *summum bonum*. MacCannell sets her sights not just on literature, but on the whole of culture as Lacan’s (and her) province. The function of the critic is “to criticise human culture and its misadventures” (xiv), and “[to examine], and perhaps [to begin] to cure, certain of the unconscious ills of cultural life” (xx). Diagnosis rapidly becomes didacticism.

Yet, one cannot rid oneself of the belief that this valorisation of literature, and of the criticism that seems to be indistinguishable from literature, is not quite as radical as MacCannell and Norris like to believe it is. Perhaps it is only the stubborn dream of the insecure literary critic that, on the other side of the figures of literature, shimmers a “real” world, waiting to be deciphered. Even less fashionable *Critics of the Twentieth Century*, like F.R. Leavis, have seen literature as a reading of life, and so, for that matter, have *Critics of the Nineteenth Century*, like Matthew Arnold. Textuality becomes tame in MacCannell’s version, because she, like Leavis and Arnold, never lets go of the belief that there is a bedrock of solid reality, beyond figuration, to which one must ultimately appeal. Hence her scorn of a “formalist” critic like Shoshana Felman, who is at least what Norris would call “gifted and innovative”, whatever MacCannell may think of her.

Despite MacCannell's unspoken assumption that literature has value only in so far as it relates to a "criticism of culture", she still invokes literary prestige from time to time. So she alludes to a "tradition, which includes not only Hegel, but Rousseau, Stendhal and Pascal, as well as Joyce" (xix). The suggestion is that if Lacan's niche is among these literary luminaries, then he must be creative, and no mere critic. No other need exists for such namedropping, particularly since MacCannell's invocation of this Great Tradition remains largely at the level of allusion. Quite detailed readings of works by James, Flaubert and Kleist in the light of Lacan do not convince us that Lacan's own writing belongs to this canon, especially because MacCannell simplifies the problematic relation of literary text to critical theory by offering *Mme Bovary*, *Penthesilea* and *What Maisie Knew* as straightforward anticipations of Lacan's genius. ("James, like Lacan, lets us know . . ." 174). Only her analysis of Lacan's "*Kant avec Sade*" is at all illuminating (138–151); her discussions of other texts, *Penthesilea* in particular, are so numbingly dull that regulation witticisms (such as the barred subject symbolised by a dollar sign in *What Maisie Knew*, 176) strike one as *Reader's Digest* poststructuralism. The canon MacCannell has selected seems infuriatingly arbitrary, but she never indicates that Lacan could as easily be slotted into another, any other grouping of texts. What, for example, was Lacan's relation to Georges Bataille? Surely they had more than Sylvie Bataille in common, but MacCannell cannot see any other connection (34).

(Here one must remark on the gossipy character of a few of MacCannell's culture criticisms. She reveals that Lacan "[stole]" Bataille's wife, but adds that she – MacCannell – knows nothing of "the historical accuracy" of the information passed on by none other than Paul de Man: 34; she asks conspiratorially why Lacan's seminars were attended by the "most beautiful and intelligent women in Paris": 23; she speculates, unforgivably, that Kristeva may be trying, as "a very intelligent woman [,] to negate or exorcise her mind": 109.)

MacCannell's reading of culture through the figures of Lacan seems more entertaining, if not more substantial, than her literary analyses. Her material in this instance may be more rewarding – after all, as she points out, the pertinent question about Ronald Reagan is whether his "*face* or his *facts* have been 'made up' for a TV audience" (104). There is also an engagingly malicious decomposition of Helen Gardner's Charles Eliot Norton lectures (themselves an oblique attack on Frank Kermode and Stanley Fish): the atmosphere of academic infighting is quite heady (110–112). But this, as most academics will agree, is still not the "real thing", and when one is after culture criticism, nothing less will do.

What does MacCannell see when she reads the whole of culture through Lacan? Culture is based on a symbolic code of simple oppositions, which seem to have the impersonality of algebra. But this neutrality conceals a series of evaluations, the "realm of symbolic signification [is] that of the 'plus-moins' and the 'moins-plus' . . ." (31). At its simplest, the evaluation resembles a series of pluses and minuses attached to terms, signalling positive and negative values. Because it evaluates, the code "alienates ask much as it

familiarises" (54), and while, for MacCannell, its initial function was to make an interchange of meaning possible, the code ends by "[delaying] or [deferring] direct communication" (54). Desire, operating within this system is not articulated by the code, but alienated by it. Our narcissistic fixation on the code, which is personified as the ubiquitous Other (62 and 64), covers or supplements the impossibility of fulfilment. The Other appears whenever an appeal is made to some source of authority and significance: God, the Party, cultural "values".

Our sacrifice of satisfaction to culture becomes a love affair in its own right (59). When one discovers that this love affair is in fact a *ménage à trois* (one of Lacan's felicities recycled by MacCannell: 55), and that this *ménage*, two subjects and an Other, is, at heart, what Lacan calls *homosexuel* (53), the stage seems set for a fascinating French farce: the Symbolic Order as a *liaison dangereuse*. Lacan figuratively describes culture as *homosexuel* because it recognises only male sexuality (*homme – sexuel*), and privileges similarity over difference. Any love is merely narcissistic self-recognition within a masculine paradigm, something both MacCannell and Lacan term "brotherly love" as opposed to real, but unobtainable, "otherly love" (53). In addition, the code, because it is empty form, not only prevents love, but paradoxically makes meaning impossible, giving us significance in its stead. For MacCannell, "meaning" is an acknowledgement of mutual desire (82 and 93), while "significance" is the system of binary evaluations (82).

Considered carefully, the major points of MacCannell's reworking of Lacan seem either misreadings or conservative interpretations. She assumes that the code is initially neutral, but is later hijacked by evaluation:

It is possible to imagine a kind of "first moment" of language-in-speech. At this point it would function as a mediator, as a bridge between the arbitrary division, I/you, so that it becomes a kind of common ground, a commonplace, a way for the two differentiated persons to "meet" and agree on their common desire (65–66).

Even though MacCannell concedes that this "first moment" can only be a "fiction" (82, see also 157), it still appears suspect: a nostalgia for an untainted origin, precisely the kind of thing that Lacan sets out to challenge. When MacCannell presents the corruption of the code as a *historical* process, one becomes even more suspicious: "Inserting himself into the tradition of cultural criticism begun by Rousseau, and extended by Hegel and Marx, Lacan recognises this structure [of labour divisions], although he brings the question of the gender division of labour to the fore" (79). One's apprehensions are reinforced by a free-floating Marxist vocabulary – "division of labour" (79, 80, 81), "surplus value" (36, 68, 173), and "ideology" (more of this later) – which has no other function than to connote a would-be historicism.

MacCannell's treatment of desire is equally unsatisfactory. She writes of a need which is deflected, by a double alienation into desire (80–81). That alienated desire is a tautology is one of the most frequently reiterated points

of Lacanian theory. For Lacan, desire is alienated from the outset, there is never a time when desire is not (always-already) predicated on loss or alienation. Lacan's writing dispenses with the old talk of alienation, for it reconceives the latter not as an unfortunate and evitable condition, but as ubiquitous and ineluctable.

If a "true" desire exists, that can be "alienated", as the drift of MacCannell's argument implies, then the way is opened for conservative appropriations of Lacan in the service of some "normality". MacCannell gives a summary of the Oedipus complex:

the son gives up the mother for "the girl" from another family; the daughter gives up, first her mother in favour of her father, and then her father for the "boy" from another family (77).

MacCannell concludes by declaring that this is "only a *fable* of how Oedipus works (ideally, ought to work)" (77). What Lacan has tried to demonstrate repeatedly to the psychoanalytic profession is not the narrowness of the model, but rather its failure (77), at least according to MacCannell. A few sentences later, she describes, with no discernible irony, how Freud discovered that "children as the bearers of the code of civilisation are no longer being produced, they are blighted by perverse passions even in the cradle . . ." (77). Although she appeals to an orthodox feminism at the end of this particular section – she states that psychoanalysis has repressed the figure of the mother (78–79) – her conclusion is irrelevant. By assuming that heterosexuality would be more desirable than any other form of sexuality if only it could be achieved, or that signs of childhood sexuality are symptoms of "perversion", MacCannell unthinkingly endangers the entire feminist project of reclaiming desire from the tyranny of "necessary" objects and "natural" aims. (For a detailed record of how difficult it has been for psychoanalysis – and for feminism – to preserve the insight that there is *no* normal sexuality, see Mitchell's discussion of Freud and Rose's examination of Lacan, 1982: 1–26, and 27–57. Rose finds the most liberating aspect of Lacan's work in his recovery of Freud's realisation that passion is necessarily perverse, that desire has no fixed object.)

MacCannell's bias can be glimpsed in extracts like the following:

The couple masculine-feminine does not exist. What we have, structurally, is simply + masculine/ – masculine masquerading as heterosexuality. Lacan was not too polite to name that "couple" for what it is: *hommosexuel*. He said simply that sexual intercourse has never existed, because we do not have, at least not yet, heterosexuality (107).

"Homosexuality" or *hommosexualité* as Lacan has it, has become quite popular in recent feminist thought as a way of describing, figuratively, real phenomena such as male bonding or patriarchy. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, gives an elaborate distinction between figurative "homosociality" and real "homosexuality" (1985: 1–15). It is vitally important to retain a distinction between figurative and literal in this instance, otherwise *hommosexualité*

simply gets identified with real “homosexuality” in another appearance of the familiar opposition + heterosexuality/ – homosexuality. This danger always lurks behind the poststructuralist platitude that the Other is better than the Same, and that narcissism and homosexuality represent negative examples of a collapse of difference into similarity.

Yet on how *real* “homosexuality” fits into “culture criticism”, MacCannell is either silent or dismissive. The only reference to actual (male or female) homosexuality is a throwaway one: “there are sometimes hiccoughs in the way Oedipus works – homosexuality, perversions . . .” (77). Tellingly, “homosexuality” with a single *m* is not given an entry in MacCannell’s index, although *homosexualité* is: on a crucial point MacCannell will not or cannot tell the literal from the figurative.

Critics, particularly feminists, have treated *Dora* as a test case for any psychoanalytic consideration of sexuality and desire. Juliet Mitchell writes “It was his [Freud’s] failure to analyse one . . . patient – (‘Dora’ Freud, VII, 1905) – in terms of normative concepts of what a woman should be or want, that led him to recognise the fragmented and aberrant nature of sexuality itself” (1982: 28), while Rose points out that a double failure was involved in Freud’s treatment of *Dora*: “by insisting to *Dora* that she was in love with Herr K, Freud was not only defining her in terms of genital heterosexuality, he also failed to see his own place within the analytic relationship . . .” (1982: 35). Rose argues that in Lacan’s revision of *Dora*, Freud’s failures form the starting point of Lacan’s radicalisation of the discourse on feminine sexuality (35, also see Lacan, “Intervention on Transference”, 1982: 61–73). MacCannell’s discussion of *Dora* reveals all the more pointedly MacCannell’s “own place within the analytic relationship”. In her version, *Dora* is not about the suppression of (*Dora*’s) homosexual desire in favour of (Freud’s) unavowed heterosexism, but is about the projection of *homosexualité* (Freud’s onto *Dora*). “Freud ‘proves’ that *Dora* loves him as a man, including everything that stands for him as a man (the male organ) and that he, as a man, stands for (including ‘*homosexualité*’)” (169). For MacCannell, *Dora*, in the last analysis, is about the “failure of heterosexuality” (169). While other feminists, Héléne Cixous, for example (Cixous, 1983) have attempted to release *Dora* from Freud’s heterosexist misinterpretation, MacCannell ends up by repeating Freud’s mistake. She believes that *Dora* depends upon Freud’s unspoken declaration of love (170): the implication is that had Freud enunciated his love for *Dora*, everything would have turned out for the better. What MacCannell is rather too eager to give *Dora* as patient and as text is a happy ending. And in MacCannell’s system of values, this happy ending is synonymous with heterosexuality.

MacCannell’s text is full of talk about “ideology” (63, 71, 95, 97, 106, 109, 113, 122, 134, 138, 172). Michel Foucault has noted drily that as a concept ideology is “difficult to make use of”, because “like it or not, [ideology] always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count for truth” (1980: 118). One should not be astonished then, that *Figuring Lacan* ultimately relies on such elementary hierarchisations: heterosexuality over homosexuality, altruism over narcissism, origin over alienation, good

over bad. MacCannell admits that Lacan himself never “evaluated [his propositions] negatively or positively” (124); in her own terms, the code of the Symbolic loses its efficacy as a means of communication the moment it starts to evaluate terms (60, 81 and 82). Oddly, she ends up by doing exactly what she denounces in culture – she *evaluates*, reductively and sentimentally. The only cure for the discontents of culture MacCannell can offer is a poststructuralist commonplace: to reverse dominant readings, to “attack the literal with the figurative, the figurative with the literal” (113), something she has conspicuously failed to do.

Any attempt to apply sophisticated theoretical insights to something as poorly defined as “culture” runs the risk of lapsing into the middlebrow, and indeed, there are times when *Figuring Lacan* recalls Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism*. Instead of reversing the literal and the figurative, MacCannell has simply confused them. Jacqueline Rose notices a “constant tendency to literalise the terms of Lacan’s account and it is when this happens that the definitions most easily recognised as reactionary tend to appear” (45). To read Lacan literally, to give substance to his metaphors, is to misread him. One of the many ironies of *Figuring Lacan* is that a text with such a title should be marked by an unrelenting will to literalism.

Note

1. One of quite a few spelling/printing errors in the text. Others include *Unbehagen* for *Unbehagen*, “discontents” (138), and variations on the proper name Catherine Clément, which is sometimes Catherine (167) and sometimes Catharine (177).

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