

The New School

Visual and Cultural Studies

The following is a brief discussion of Lacan's three "Orders". The text is taken from *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Dylan Evans, London: Routledge, 1996. T. R. Quigley, 2004.

Order

order (*ordre*) Although Lacan uses the terms 'real', 'symbolic' and 'imaginary' from early on in his work, it is not until 1953 that he speaks of these as three 'orders' or three 'registers'. From that moment on they come to be the fundamental classification system around which all his theorising turns.

The IMAGINARY, the SYMBOLIC and the REAL thus comprise a basic classification system which allows important distinctions to be drawn between concepts which, according to Lacan, had previously been confused in psychoanalytic theory. For example Lacan argues that much misunderstanding has arisen in psychoanalytic theory due to a failure to distinguish between the imaginary father, the symbolic father and the real father. Thus Lacan claims that his tripartite classification system has shed invaluable light on Freud's work: 'Without these three systems to guide ourselves by, it would be impossible to understand anything of the Freudian technique and experience' (S I, 73).

The imaginary, the symbolic and the real are profoundly heterogeneous, each referring to quite distinct aspects of psychoanalytic experience. It is therefore difficult to see what they have in common, and yet, the fact that Lacan refers to all three as 'orders' implies that they share some common property. Lacan explores this question of what the three orders have in common by means of the topology of the BORROMEAN KNOT in his 1974-5 seminar. They are not mental forces like the three agencies in Freud's structural model. However, they are primarily concerned with mental functioning, and together they cover the whole field of psychoanalysis.



Although the three orders are profoundly heterogeneous, each order must be defined by reference to the other two. The structural interdependence of the three orders is illustrated by the Borromean knot, in which the severing of anyone of the three rings causes the other two to become separated also.

Imaginary

imaginary (*imaginaire*) Lacan's use of the term 'imaginary' as a substantive dates back to 1936 (Ec, 81). From the beginning, the term has connotations of illusion, fascination and seduction, and relates specifically to the DUAL RELATION between the EGO and the SPECULAR

IMAGE. It is important to note, however, that while the imaginary always retains connotations of illusion and lure, it is not simply synonymous with 'the illusory' insofar as the latter term implies something unnecessary and inconsequential (Ec, 723). The imaginary is far from inconsequential; it has powerful effects in the real, and is not simply something that can be dispensed with or 'overcome'.

From 1953 on, the imaginary becomes one of the three ORDERS which constitute the tripartite scheme at the centre of Lacanian thought, being opposed to the symbolic and the real. The basis of the imaginary order continues to be the formation of the ego in the MIRROR STAGE. Since the ego is formed by identifying with the counterpart or specular image, IDENTIFICATION is an important aspect of the imaginary order. The ego and the counterpart form the prototypical dual relationship, and are interchangeable. This relationship whereby the ego is constituted by identification with the little other means that the ego, and the imaginary order itself, are both sites of a radical ALIENATION; 'alienation is constitutive of the imaginary order' (S3, 146). The dual relationship between the ego and the counterpart is fundamentally narcissistic, and NARCISSISM is another characteristic of the imaginary order. Narcissism is always accompanied by a certain AGGRESSIVITY. The imaginary is the realm of image and imagination, deception and lure. The principal illusions of the imaginary are those of wholeness, synthesis, autonomy, duality and, above all, similarity. The imaginary is thus the order of surface appearances which are deceptive, observable phenomena which hide underlying structure; the affects are such phenomena.

However, the opposition between the imaginary and the symbolic does not mean that the imaginary is lacking in structure. On the contrary, the imaginary is always already structured by the symbolic order. For example in his discussion of the mirror stage in 1949, Lacan speaks of the relations in imaginary space, which imply a symbolic structuring of that space (E, I). The expression 'imaginary matrix' also implies an imaginary which is structured by the symbolic (Ec, 221), and in 1964 Lacan discusses how the visual field is structured by symbolic laws (S 11, 91-2).

The imaginary also involves a linguistic dimension. Whereas the signifier is the foundation of the symbolic order, the SIGNIFIED and SIGNIFICATION are part of the imaginary order. Thus language has both symbolic and imaginary aspects; in its imaginary aspect, language is the 'wall of language' which inverts and distorts the discourse of the Other (see SCHEMA L).

The imaginary exerts a captivating power over the subject, founded in the almost hypnotic effect of the specular image. The imaginary is thus rooted in the subject's relationship to his own body (or rather to the image of his body). This captivating/capturing power is both seductive (the imaginary is manifested above all on the sexual plane, in such forms as sexual display and courtship rituals; Lacan, 1956b: 272) and disabling: it imprisons the subject in a series of static fixations (see CAPTATION).

The imaginary is the dimension of the human subject which is most closely linked to ethology and animal psychology (S3, 253). All attempts to explain human subjectivity in terms of animal psychology are thus limited to the imaginary (see NATURE). Although the imaginary represents the closest point of contact between human subjectivity and animal ethology (S2, 166), it is not

simply identical; the imaginary order in human beings is structured by the symbolic, and this means that 'in man, the imaginary relation has deviated [from the realm of nature]' (S2, 210).

Lacan has a Cartesian mistrust of the imagination as a cognitive tool. He insists, like Descartes, on the supremacy of pure intellection, without dependence on images, as the only way of arriving at certain knowledge. It is this that lies behind Lacan's use of topological figures, which cannot be represented in the imagination, to explore the structure of the unconscious (see TOPOLOGY). This mistrust of the imagination and the senses puts Lacan firmly on the side of rationalism rather than empiricism (see SCIENCE).

Lacan accused the major psychoanalytic schools of his day of reducing psychoanalysis to the imaginary order: these psychoanalysts made identification with the analyst into the goal of analysis, and reduced analysis to a dual relationship (E, 246-7). Lacan sees this as a complete betrayal of psychoanalysis, a deviation which can only ever succeed in increasing the alienation of the subject. Against such imaginary reductionism, Lacan argues that the essence of psychoanalysis consists in its use of the symbolic. This use of the symbolic is the only way to dislodge the disabling fixations of the imaginary. Thus the only way for the analyst to gain any purchase on the imaginary is by transforming the images into words, just as Freud treats the dream as a rebus: 'The imaginary is decipherable only if it is rendered into symbols' (Lacan, 1956b: 269). This use of the symbolic is the only way for the analytic process 'to cross the plane of identification' (SII, 273).

Symbolic

symbolic (*symbolique*) The term 'symbolic' appears in adjectival form in Lacan's earliest psychoanalytic writings (e.g. Lacan, 1936). In these early works the term implies references to symbolic logic and to the equations used in mathematical physics (Ec, 79). In 1948 symptoms are said to have a 'symbolic meaning' (E, 10). By 1950, the term has acquired anthropological overtones, as when Lacan praises Marcel Mauss for having shown that 'the structures of society are symbolic' (Ec, 132).

These different nuances are combined into a single category in 1953 when Lacan begins to use the term 'symbolic' as a noun. It now becomes one of the three ORDERS that remain central throughout the rest of Lacan's work. Of these three orders, the symbolic is the most crucial one for psychoanalysis; psychoanalysts are essentially 'practitioners of the symbolic function' (E, 72). In speaking of 'the symbolic function', Lacan makes it clear that his concept of the symbolic order owes much to the anthropological work of Claude Levi-Strauss (from whom the phrase 'symbolic function' is taken; see Levi-Strauss, 1949a: 203). In particular, Lacan takes from Levi-Strauss the idea that the social world is structured by certain laws which regulate kinship relations and the exchange of gifts (see also Mauss, 1923). The concept of the gift, and that of a circuit of exchange, are thus fundamental to Lacan's concept of the symbolic (S4, 153-4, 182).

Since the most basic form of exchange is communication itself (the exchange of words, the gift of speech; S4, 189), and since the concepts of LAW and of STRUCTURE are unthinkable without LANGUAGE, the symbolic is essentially a linguistic dimension. Any aspect of the psychoanalytic experience which has a linguistic structure thus pertains to the symbolic order.

However, Lacan does not simply equate the symbolic order with language. On the contrary, language involves imaginary and real dimensions in addition to its symbolic dimension. The symbolic dimension of language is that of the SIGNIFIER; a dimension in which elements have no positive existence but which are constituted purely by virtue of their mutual differences.

The symbolic is also the realm of radical alterity which Lacan refers to as the OTHER. The UNCONSCIOUS is the discourse of this Other, and thus belongs wholly to the symbolic order. The symbolic is the realm of the Law which regulates desire in the Oedipus complex. It is the realm of culture as opposed to the imaginary order of nature. Whereas the imaginary is characterised by dual relations, the symbolic is characterised by triadic structures, because the intersubjective relationship is always 'mediated' by a third term, the big Other. The symbolic order is also the realm of DEATH, of ABSENCE and of LACK. The symbolic is both the PLEASURE PRINCIPLE which regulates the distance from the Thing, and the DEATH DRIVE which goes 'beyond the pleasure principle' by means of repetition (S2, 210); in fact, 'the death drive is only the mask of the symbolic order' (S2, 326).

The symbolic order is completely autonomous: it is not a superstructure determined by biology or genetics. It is completely contingent with respect to the real: 'There is no biological reason, and in particular no genetic one, to account for exogamy. In the human order we are dealing with the complete emergence of a new function, encompassing the whole order in its entirety' (S2, 29). Thus while the symbolic may *seem* to 'spring from the real' as pre-given, this is an illusion, and 'one shouldn't think that symbols actually have come from the real' (S2, 238).

The totalising, all-encompassing effect of the symbolic order leads Lacan to speak of the symbolic as a universe: 'In the symbolic order the totality is called a universe. The symbolic order from the first takes on its universal character. It isn't constituted bit by bit. As soon as the symbol arrives, there is a universe of symbols' (S2, 29). There is therefore no question of a gradual continuous transition from the imaginary to the symbolic; they are completely heterogeneous domains. Once the symbolic order has arisen, it creates the sense that it has always been there, since 'we find it absolutely impossible to speculate on what preceded it other than by symbols' (S2, 5). For this reason it is strictly speaking impossible to conceive the origin of language, let alone what came before, which is why questions of development lie outside the field of psychoanalysis.

Lacan criticises the psychoanalysis of his day for forgetting the symbolic order and reducing everything to the imaginary. This is, for Lacan, nothing less than a betrayal of Freud's most basic insights; 'Freud's discovery is that of the field of the effects, in the nature of man, produced by his relation to the symbolic order. To ignore this symbolic order is [to] condemn the discovery to oblivion' (E, 64).

Lacan argues that it is only by working in the symbolic order that the analyst can produce changes in the subjective position of the analysand; these changes will also produce imaginary effects, since the imaginary is structured by the symbolic. It is the symbolic order which is determinant of subjectivity, and the imaginary realm of images and appearances are merely

effects of the symbolic. Psychoanalysis must therefore penetrate beyond the imaginary and work in the symbolic order.

Lacan's concept of the symbolic is diametrically opposed to Freud's 'symbolism'. For Freud, the symbol was a relatively fixed bi-univocal relation between meaning and form which corresponds more to the Lacanian concept of the INDEX (see Freud 1900a: SE V, ch. 6, sect. E, on symbolism in dreams). For Lacan, however, the symbolic is characterised precisely by the absence of any fixed relations between signifier and signified.

Real

real (*reel*) Lacan's use of the term 'real' as a substantive dates back to an early paper, published in 1936. The term was popular among certain philosophers at the time, and is the focus of a work by Emile Meyerson (which Lacan refers to in the 1936 paper; Ec, 86). Meyerson defines the real as 'an ontological absolute, a true being-in-itself' (Meyerson, 1925: 79; quoted in Roustang, 1986: 61). In speaking of 'the real', then, Lacan is following a common practice in one strand of early twentieth-century philosophy. However, while this may be Lacan's starting point, the term undergoes many shifts in meaning and usage throughout his work.

At first the real is simply opposed to the realm of the image, which seems to locate it in the realm of being, beyond appearances (Ec, 85). However, the fact that even at this early point Lacan distinguishes between the real and 'the true' indicates that the real is already prey to a certain ambiguity (Ec, 75).

After appearing in 1936, the term disappears from Lacan's work until the early 1950s, when Lacan invokes Hegel's view that 'everything which is real is rational (and vice versa)' (Ec, 226). It is not until 1953 that Lacan elevates the real to the status of a fundamental category of psychoanalytic theory; the real is henceforth one of the three ORDERS according to which all psychoanalytic phenomena may be described, the other two being the symbolic order and the imaginary order. The real is thus no longer simply opposed to the imaginary, but is also located beyond the symbolic. Unlike the symbolic, which is constituted in terms of oppositions such as that between presence and absence, 'there is no absence in the real' (S2, 313). Whereas the symbolic opposition between presence and absence implies the permanent possibility that something may be missing from the symbolic order, the real 'is always in its place: it carries it glued to its heel, ignorant of what might exile it from there' (Ec, 25; see SII, 49).

Whereas the symbolic is a set of differentiated, discrete elements called signifiers, the real is, in itself, undifferentiated; 'the real is absolutely without fissure' (S2, 97). It is the symbolic which introduces 'a cut in the real' in the process of signification: 'it is the world of words that creates the world of things -- things originally confused in the *hic et nunc* of the all in the process of coming-into-being' (E, 65).

In these formulations of the period 1953-5, the real emerges as that which is outside language and inassimilable to symbolisation. It is 'that which resists symbolization absolutely' (S I, 66); or, again, the real is 'the domain of whatever subsists outside symbolisation' (Ec. 388). This theme remains a constant throughout the rest of Lacan's work, and leads Lacan to link the real with the

concept of impossibility. The real is 'the impossible' (SII, 167) because it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and impossible to attain in any way. It is this character of impossibility and of resistance to symbolisation which lends the real its essentially traumatic quality. Thus in his reading of the case of Little Hans (Freud, 1909b) in the seminar of 1956-7, Lacan distinguishes two real elements which intrude and disrupt the child's imaginary preoedipal harmony: the real penis which begins to make itself felt in infantile masturbation, and the newly born sister (S4, 308-9).

The real also has connotations of matter, implying a material substrate underlying the imaginary and the symbolic (see MATERIALISM). The connotations of matter also link the concept of the real to the realm of BIOLOGY and to the body in its brute physicality (as opposed to the imaginary and symbolic functions of the body). For example the real father is the biological father, and the real phallus is the physical penis as opposed to the symbolic and imaginary functions of this organ.

Throughout his work, Lacan uses the concept of the real to elucidate a number of clinical phenomena:

- **ANXIETY and trauma** The real is the object of anxiety; it lacks any possible mediation, and is thus 'the essential object which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*' (S2, 164). It is the missed encounter with this real object which presents itself in the form of trauma (S II, 55). It is the *tyche* which lies 'beyond the [symbolic] *automaton*' (SII, 53) (see CHANCE).
- **HALLUCINATIONS** When something cannot be integrated in the symbolic order, as in psychosis, it may return in the real in the form of a hallucination (S3, 321).

The preceding comments trace out some of the main uses to which Lacan puts the category of the real, but are far from covering all the complexities of this term. In fact, Lacan takes pains to ensure that the real remains the most elusive and mysterious of the three orders, by speaking of it less than of the other orders, and by making it the site of a radical indeterminacy. Thus it is never completely clear whether the real is external or internal, or whether it is unknowable or amenable to reason.

- **External/internal** On the one hand, the term 'the real' seems to imply a simplistic notion of an objective, external reality, a material substrate which exists in itself, independently of any observer. On the other hand, such a 'naive' view of the real is subverted by the fact that the real also includes such things as hallucinations and traumatic dreams. The real is thus both inside and outside (S7, 118; see EXTIMACY) (*extimité*). This ambiguity reflects the ambiguity inherent in Freud's own use of the two German terms for *reality* (*Wirklichkeit* and *Realität*) and the distinction Freud draws between *material* reality and *psychical* reality (Freud, 1900a: SE V, 620).
- **Unknowable/rational** On the one hand, the real cannot be known, since it goes beyond both the imaginary and the symbolic; it is, like the Kantian thing-in-itself, an unknowable *x*. On

the other hand, Lacan quotes Hegel to the effect that the real is rational and the rational is real, thus implying that it is amenable to calculation and logic.

It is possible to discern in Lacan's work, from the early 1970s on, an attempt to resolve this indeterminacy, by reference to a distinction between the real and 'reality' (such as when Lacan defines reality as 'the grimace of the real' in Lacan, 1973a: 17; see also S17, 148). In this opposition, the real is placed firmly on the side of the unknowable and unassimilable, while 'reality' denotes subjective representations which are a product of symbolic and imaginary articulations (Freud's 'psychical reality'). However, after this opposition is introduced, Lacan does not maintain it in a consistent or systematic way, but oscillates between moments when the opposition is clearly maintained and moments when he reverts to his previous custom of using the terms 'real' and 'reality' interchangeably.