Some Introductory Thoughts on Lacan and the Concept of Culture

I want to introduce our discussion of Lacan in the context of visual and cultural studies by looking briefly at the concept of "culture" ("one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language") vis-à-vis a rough sketch of Jacques Lacan's three orders of human experience: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real.

Lacan attempts to explain human subjectivity, development, and experience with respect to these three orders. In Lacanian theory, the imaginary is characterized, as the name suggests, by images and imagination—the "order of appearances". By means of the imagination, one can identify with other people and images (see oneself as the other, or the other as oneself) and incorporate these images—this "misrecognition"—into the constitution and reconstitution of the self or ego. Because this process of self-construction entails borrowing and appropriating images, Lacan characterizes the imaginary as the realm of misrepresentation. While Lacan diminishes the positive role of imagination in the acquisition of knowledge, others (such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray) attribute much greater value and significance to the (female) imaginary as that which resists certain constraints of the (patriarchal) symbolic order, to which we turn next.

The symbolic is principally the order of language, differentiation, communication, and the regulation of desire (Law). Lacan characterizes the symbolic order as completely autonomous, contingent, and independent of genetics and biological determination. "Once the symbolic order has arisen, it creates the sense that it has always been there..." In Freudian terms, it rechannels the aims of the pleasure principle according to the dictates of the reality principle. The symbolic order is "the realm of culture as opposed to the imaginary order of nature".

In contrast to the imaginary and the symbolic orders, the real is a "smooth, undifferentiated space" prior to language and the imposition of symbolic order and laws. It is "everything that has yet to be symbolized". "Reality" (not to be confused with "the real") is created in the symbolic order by "canceling out" the real, i.e. cutting it up and, thus, annihilating portions of it with names and propositions.

What cannot be said in...[a given] language is not part of its reality; it does not exist, strictly speaking. In Lacan's terminology, existence is a product of language; language brings things into existence (makes them part of human reality), things which had no existence prior to being ciphered, symbolized, or put into words....[Thus] the real is perhaps best understood as that which has not yet been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization; and it may perfectly well exist 'alongside' and in spite of a speaker's considerable linguistic capabilities.

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1 Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, 76.
3 Evans, 202. "Like Claude Levi-Strauss and other anthropologists, Lacan points to the prohibition of incest as the kernel of the legal structure which differentiates culture from nature: 'The primordial Law is therefore that which in regulating marriage superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature abandoned to the law of mating.' (120)
4 Bruce Fink, The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 24. The real is "prior to language" not simply or solely in a temporal sense but in a logical sense as well.
5 Fink, 26.
6 Fink, 25. This characterization of Lacan's is derived from Heidegger.
The central assumption of psychoanalysis, of course, is that the symbolic has the capacity to transform the real by bringing it into language and, to that extent, "erasing" it. For example, a blockage or fixation is an aspect of the real that has become a stumbling block for the subject, which is to say, the subject is unable to symbolize some problematic aspect of the real that lies outside signification. The result is a traumatic experience. "By getting an analysand to dream, daydream, and talk, however incoherently, about a traumatic "event," we make him or her connect it up with words, bring it into relation with ever more signifiers." The obstacle is removed; the stumbling block is "dialecticized".

**Culture and the Symbolic Order**

Now, given these rough distinctions, let's consider Lacan's claim that culture (in contrast to nature) can be identified with the symbolic order.

The contrast between culture and nature in the western tradition goes back at least to the ancient Greeks. The Greeks divided reality into

- *phusis* ("nature" or, as Aristotle would say, that which arises spontaneously and has its principle of movement and growth within it), and
- *nomos* (custom or control; that which is governed from the outside by rules and laws).

So, for example, Aristotle used this notion of spontaneous growth or movement to distinguish the natural from the artificial components of a wooden bed by means of the following thought experiment. If the bed were buried in the ground and something were to grow from it, it would be a tree and not another bed. His point is that we would not expect a new bed to grow from the existing bed because the form that makes the bed a bed rather than a table, a chair, a bench, etc. is imposed on the matter (wood) from outside, i.e. by human artifice, not by nature. Thus, we might say that the practice of making beds as well as all the arts belong to culture, i.e. a realm in which things are governed by rules imposed from the outside (relative to a practice or custom) rather than from within.

But what would it mean to say that culture as "external law" is the symbolic order? And what is the "nature" (matter) on which it is imposed? Is it the real?

Rather than ruminating on possible answers to these questions, it may be more productive to introduce some additional concepts.

**Discourse and Knowledge**

Consider the following argument: Forms, material objects, movements, marks on a page or a wall, sounds, etc. have no meaning or value in themselves. These things acquire whatever meanings they have only through interpretation within a discourse. If this is true, then nothing has meaning or value "in itself" outside of a discourse. Thus, to have knowledge of a thing is to recognize the role it plays within the set of relations that constitute a discourse. It's always within a discourse that knowledge is produced.

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7 Fink, 26.
8 "Every craft [art; techne] is concerned with coming to be; and the exercise of the craft is the study of how something that admits of being and not being comes to be, something whose origin is in the producer and not in the product. For a craft is not concerned with things that are or come to be by necessity; or with things that are by nature, since these have their origin in themselves." [1140a11-15] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Terence Irwin (trans.), Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985, 153.
If this argument holds, then it is crucial to understand what constitutes a "discourse". What's the nature of this concept of a discourse? What is its object? What does it bring into focus? What we need are some concrete examples and, in this case, we'll borrow them from Michel Foucault.

Many concepts found in recent social and cultural analyses—madness, sexuality, justice, to name just a few—have meaning only in the discourses to which they belong. The same is true for knowledge about these things. Foucault claims that a discourse is determined by four components:

- **statements**, for example about sexuality ("We're addicted to sex today." "Sex sells." "The French don't think the sex life of a President is related to his or her capacity to govern effectively." "Sexual identity is culturally constructed.")

- **rules** prescribing certain ways of framing one's thinking about sexuality and "family relations"—a framework which makes possible some thoughts while excluding others. So, for example, in the context of and discussion about family life, the concept *family* is often understood solely in terms of the nuclear model. According to this way of thinking, i.e. these "rules" governing the discourse on family relations in western societies, there has traditionally been no place for two women or two men in the proper role of "parents". The rules or conventions "prohibit", in a largely subliminal way, our including any possible combination of two (or more) people as parents. The tendency is to imagine the traditional construct of a man and a woman.

- **subjects** who are implicated (constituted) in the discourse (These "subject positions" or "identities" vary widely. Consider, for example, the following: lipstick lesbian, macho male, pervert, sensitive and thoughtful lover, abusive husband, faithful wife, etc. These are types that one finds represented in conversation, advertising, film, TV, etc.)

- **practices** (e.g. punishment, confession, marriage) within institutions (i.e. prisons, asylums, churches) established for regulating the subjects created by the discourse.

Given these variables, it follows that any particular discourse or assemblage of discourses ("discursive formation") is **historical** and **contingent**—the rules, practices, subjects and statements will very likely change over time and vary from place to place.

For example, it has been claimed (by Foucault and others) that homosexuality and the primary subject of the discourse—"the homosexual"—did not exist prior to the late-nineteenth century.

While this may seem to be an extravagant and preposterous claim, it becomes more plausible if we distinguish

- objective acts (same-sex relations)
- concepts (the *homosexual*)
- connotations associated with the objective acts and the parties involved.

With these factors in mind, it becomes more plausible to claim that while certain physical acts have always occurred among humans (and other primates) of the same sex, it was not until the last century in Europe that a particular way of life (a "cultural identity") emerged, brought into focus and made salient by the concept of the *homosexual*.

Finally, since discourse and knowledge play an instrumental role in the regulation, discipline, and control of various social practices within which some individuals exercise control over others, they are intimately linked to power relations, assume authority, and have real (material) effects. For example, it may or may not be true that single parenting leads to higher rates of juvenile delinquency and crime. But if the dominant culture believes that it does, perpetuates such a view through media images and narratives, and imposes painful sanctions on single parents, there are real consequences for both the parents and their children.
Back to Lacan

Now perhaps we can see a little better what Lacan's claim might mean. Human beings are *self-defining* and *self-generating* organisms. We constitute and re-constitute ourselves as subjects through discourse. As human beings distinct from other animals, we "come-into-being" as human in language and the symbolic order. This is where we create a world or reality to inhabit; where we "cultivate" what it means to be human. In that sense, the symbolic order—the realm in which concepts and thoughts are formed—is culture.

There are many implications that follow from this conclusion and we'll explore many of them throughout the semester. But we must also keep in mind and question the very claim itself. What does it mean to be self-defining? Is there anything "outside discourse" that plays a role in human experience and behavior? Is the imaginary limited to pre-linguistic experience? Is it possible to draw on the imaginary in ways that enable one to circumvent or escape the symbolic order? How has the gendering of the imaginary as feminine and symbolic as masculine shaped or distorted the representations of men and women, as well as the rules, practices, and subjects of our everyday lives?

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