Towards an Economy of Desire

I wish to clarify the agency of desire in determining culture. To do so, I will specify desire in terms of, one, its origin, or more precisely, the condition of its reproduction (its *impulse*), and, two, its trajectory. To consider desire vis-à-vis structure and constraint, I will draw upon the two Jacques, Lacan and Derrida, vis-à-vis subversion and change, Homi Bhabha, and finally, by way of contrast, I will enlist (interpellate?) Althusser.

Structure & constraint

The mirror stage, according to Lacan, occurs the moment an infant beholds its image (*imago*) in the mirror. It sees itself as whole, an undifferentiated and bounded entity, and this image contrasts sharply with its feelings of bodily unease and uncoordinated-ness. This "primordial discord"—between self-consciousness and self-image, between an inner and outer world—founds the basis of the infant's relation with reality. Hereafter, insofar as the mirror image portrays an impossible identification, a sense of loss ("organic insufficiency") suffuses the infant's reality and informs the project of his desire; namely, to recover himself in all the fullness of that original perception. This is, of course, an impossible task—the apprehension of wholeness being entirely imaginary; the sense of loss being thoroughly irreducible—and so desire can only continually approach and never arrive.

Thus Lacan speaks of "the armor of an alienating identity", an impregnable *I* imagined in dreams as a fortress or stadium, towards which the individual goes questing. The figure of the quest is particularly felicitous, with its emphasis on seeking, the mythical quality of its destination, and the series of adventures—dalliances—which seem to delay the knight errant but end up composing the reality of his journey. Likewise, desire proceeds metonymically, that is, through a succession of attempts at self-completion which span, Lacan seems to suggest, the range of human industry.

> Thus this *Gestalt* [the mirage of cohesiveness]…is still pregnant with the correspondences that unite the *I* with the statue in which man projects himself, with the phantoms that dominate him, or with the automaton in which, in an ambiguous relation, the world of his own making tends to find completion. (3)

He draws a link between the desire animating the act of making (indeed, as well as the act of knowing) with the desire for presence, originally the apparent presence of the mirror-image. It is hard to see what this claim doesn't cover. Certainly it would seem to posit primordial desire—creative while compensatory in its impulse—as the fundamental dynamic elaborating human culture.

Derrida, too, narrates desire in terms of absence. Writing is predicated on the condition of absence and hence must be iterable ("structurally legible") in order to be understood. He departs from the classical notion of writing as "a progressive extenuation of presence" (313), with its absence merely the absence of its addressee, and claims, instead, that all writing involves a radical break with presence. That is, it accounts for or anticipates the

death of both its author and addressee, and, as such, exists "orphaned", bound neither to communicate consciousness nor transport meaning.

Writing, in other words, wrests presence (meaning/intention) from context ("the set of presences which organize the moment of its inscription" (317)); or more particularly, in terms of Sassure, signified from signifier. The fact that, by its iterability, writing can be cited attests to its unmoored, its *itinerant* quality; neither context nor code can definitively enclose it. Consequently, writing always risks failure (nonmeaning), but this iterable agony is precisely what makes writing possible and full of possibility. Just as it is what can make writing impossible.[1]

Absence constitutes writing as a signifying form but one that risks signifying nothing. Hence Derrida speaks of writing's "divided identity", an identity that is always underdetermined or—insufficient. By no accident does Derrida's account reflect Lacan's. "Contextual nonsaturation" can easily be read as an instance of "organic insufficiency" in the linguistic realm, and as such, as predisposing a condition of desire.

Desire operates in this instance as the will to understand, as "epistemic intention" (320). Desire determines the context—if only (but always) provisionally—in which writing is to be interpreted and articulates, therefore, a metonymy of meaning. We might describe the

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[1] Therefore Derrida takes pains to separate the concepts of polysemia and dissemination. Polysemia suggests an ever-present multiplicity of meanings, while dissemination, as it connotes circulation, implies both dissipation (of original meaning) and propagation (of new meanings—new inscriptions—from new readings).

arc of desire, then, as a quest for context. The figure of the quest, as a narration of impulse and trajectory, describes, in turn, a structure—an economy—of desire.

Subversion & change

With this architecture in mind, I now consider desire in motion; in particular, how desire is transformed as a consequence of difference among individuals (socially) and over time (temporally). Two points guide my thinking. One: Desire for the other, Lacan observed, inaugurates the individual into the social (the specular *I* becomes the social *I*). Two: Desire must continually negotiate the tension between its demand for stability in objectification—for a totalizing identification—and the instability of its metonymic nature; the tension, in other terms, between synchrony and diachrony, between identity and history.

Bhabha's account of mimicry is useful here. Colonial mimicry, he writes, "is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite*" (86). It is marked, in other words, by ambivalence. The colonizer wants the colonial subject to mirror him but not completely; enough to reflect his authority as a model but not enough to eclipse it by erasing the difference constituting it. Mimicry, therefore, aspires for a resemblance that is always somehow off-key.

It is a fine line, however, between mimicry and mockery. The colonizer's look of surveillance is appropriated by the colonial subject and refocuses as "the displacing gaze of the disciplined" (89), and, as such, articulates recalcitrance rather than reform. The

difference that is supposed to identify the colonial subject as incomplete becomes ambiguous—it comes unfixed—and thus returns to haunt the colonizer as an indictment of his own "partial presence".

Hence, the difference that mimicry (deliberately) fails to cover threatens as well as affirms the colonizer's conceit of identity. By subverting the norms of seeing, by "rearticulat[ing] presence in terms of its 'otherness'" (91), mimicry revalues the norms of knowing. The whole notion of identity, Bhabha writes, is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy, as the metonymy of presence, and the impossibility of the Other, of fixing the category of difference, becomes apparent.

Thus desire turns against itself; a strategy of discipline turns into a mode of subversion, of de-authorizing authority. We might read the volatility—the "turning"—of desire as a general property of its operation across social space and over time.

Integration & conclusion

I think we can read the accounts of Lacan, Derrida, and Bhabha integratively, as delineating an economy of desire, where the regulation of desire is the same process as the progressive constitution of the *I*. It is simply that they consider different aspects of the process; Lacan, the *I* from the primordial image; Derrida, the *I* from language; and Bhabha, the *I* from the dialectic of recognition (viz. from social intercourse).[2]

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[2] Our theorists no doubt built upon each other; Derrida upon Lacan et al. and Bhabha upon Lacan, Derrida et al.

Thus that there be a degree of isomorphism among their accounts is inevitable. The key concepts recur, and repeat, even within accounts, metonymically: absence (also insufficiency), metonymy, and instability (also indeterminateness). In characterizing an economy of desire, I have called them, respectively, impulse (the immediate "action" of absence), trajectory, and turning. They narrate, I have argued, both structure and subversion.

The accounts all involve mirroring and misrecognition, comparison and the misperception of presence as a self-negating standard: the infant and his mirror-image, the colonizer and his Other, *langue* and *parole*. The aims of desire, also, are one— fullness, understanding, and fixity; all suggest a union with presence—and draw an imaginary arc from absence to presence. Likewise the irreducibility of absence, and hence, the impossibility of this project: discord in Lacan is remainder in Derrida and difference in Bhabha.

So the pieces fit; does the puzzle hold? To cite a foil: There is one theorist missing from this coterie who could, conceivably, have been integrated within it. Althusser imagines ideology to be the mirror-image of the "real conditions of existence". It exists, like the *imago*, as illusion and allusion and is premised on misrecognition. Because of ideology's mirror-structure, the individuals whom it interpellates as subjects believe their subjection is freely given—they see themselves in ideology—when, in reality, their *I* requires it. Hence, ideology systematically regulates desire.

The degree of constraint this account implies is too much for my taste. Althusserian ideology makes desire too determinate—it would almost seem intentional—to concur with a notion of desire as ambiguous and volatile. The accounts I have integrated, in contrast, describe a minimum of dynamics which, all together, articulate a loose structure—what I have preferred to call an economy—of desire.

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Derrida, Jacques. "Signature, Event, Context". In *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 307-330. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I". In *Ecrits*, pp. 1-7. New York: Norton, 1977.