

CULTURE AND PSYCHOANALYSIS SEMINAR

Kahpenakwə

Presentation Notes

Proceed giving an introduction to the presentation, but after the fact. To set up the possibilities which surround this investigation of art and psychoanalysis. What common terrain do these discourses share, how are they structured differently and what might Robert's work contribute to this knowledge?

Examine the argument of Marie-Hélène Brousse in *Art, the Avant-garde and Psychoanalysis*, which proposes the "discourse of art" to afford us a methodology for placing side-by-side psychoanalysis and art making. This method is important to avoid the problems of "psychoanalytic criticism" in the field of art. What I want to establish is the ground we might stand on to look at Robert's work. Take the clues of Freud, Lacan and Brousse, that psychoanalysis does not interpret art, but art interprets psychoanalysis.

Make clear that we are not proceeding by analyzing the work of art as a symptom or fantasy of the artist. Instead artist precedes the psychoanalyst in understanding the unconscious (refine this later).

What is the distinction between the discourse of analyst and the discourse of art? Discourse of analyst (object (a) as agent that acts on a divided subject) aims to isolate this veiled relationship, of the divided subject and the object of Jouissance (the fantasy). In the discourse of art, unlike the analyst's discourse, the object of Jouissance is not directly related to a divided subject – at least from the perspective of the artist – it is directly related to knowledge.

What the discourses share is the knowledge that Jouissance is what organizes a discourse. This is what the Masters discourse veils: (the object a as cause). Discourse of art, like that of psychoanalysis, inverts the master's discourse. In the position of the agent, the Master signifier is replaced by the object a. Art interprets the Masters' discourse by exposing this veiled relation between unconscious knowledge and Jouissance. (Art interprets psychoanalysis as the unconscious is also the master discourse). This is the sense in which "art precedes psychoanalysis".

Not productive to interpret art as symptom, because in the discourse of art the division is not on the side of the artist but the Other. The artist "re-covers" the object – this produces a splitting or anxiety on the side of the Other (the viewer), e.g. Hitchcock – anxiety signals the presence of the object.

I will develop later with *Lituraterre* and Roberts work, how the discourse of art, in establishing a relation between Jouissance and Knowledge – traces a hole in the symbolic. Marie-Hélène Brousse points to the importance of the structure of waste as an object of satisfaction in contemporary art. This will take us to Lacan's Joyce and the metonymy of the letter – the litter.

With metonymy prevailing over the stability of metaphor – we proceed to art which operates by emptying or voiding signification, aiming at the meaninglessness of Jouissance by isolating the object from signifiers. We see this very clearly in Robert's works (e.g. stars: flag, areole, milky way.)

Outline a few key moments in a very dense, poetic text of Lacan's which comes from a chapter in Seminar XVIII "On a discourse that might not be of a semblance" – *Lituraterre*.

Begin with James Joyce's slide from "a letter" to "a litter". Lacan investigated the role of the waste product or the remainder in his discourse of psychoanalysis. Question of "what falls" in art is critical to Roberts work.

In the neologism "litraterre", Lacan will extract: the letter, the litter, the littoral (shoreline), litura (erasure). These are different inflections of what is at stake with a hole in knowledge. He isolates the function of "litraterre" as that which operates in both writing and psychoanalysis. I will provisionally say "art" as well.

He shifts the focus away from psychoanalysis as a lens of literary criticism, dismisses "psychobiography". Instead offers psychoanalysis as that which we can take to art to measure the function of the enigma.

Lacan writes: the letter outlines "the edge of a whole in knowledge" (not a failure of knowledge, but a knowledge in failure). Through his experience flying over the Siberian plain, Lacan comes to understand the letter distinct from the signifier. Letter in the real – signifier in the symbolic. Letter is an effect of language. In the rivers that flow through the Siberian plain, we see the effects of the letter carving the land. It is the mark of the unary trait and what effaces it.

This landscape effect embodies Lacan's subject too. The subject emerges only as its own effacement: being wiped out by the very mark, which constitutes it before it takes its first gasp. Alienation under language and the retroactive formation of the subject as barred becomes material in Lacan's visionary landscape.

In this inaugural moment that defines the littoral we see Lacan's meteorology, one involving the semblant (as a cloud), its rupture, and the letter which rains down to form this region where Jouissance laps up against knowledge.

We zero in on discourse as a break. Lacan looks to writing (avant-garde literature) and psychoanalysis as discourses founded on the rupture of a semblant. The Jouissance associated with this rupture is the letter that falls from the semblant that veiled it.

The letter carves a hole in knowledge – it tunnels or creates a furrow in meaning. The void that the letter leaves is “a vessel always ready to welcome Jouissance or at least invoke its artifice”. In a sense it is an element that touches the symbolic that is filled with the real. This void, open to be plugged with Jouissance turns the letter towards the object a (a hole of Jouissance in the Other as knowledge). We could consider the object a as another face of the letter. Or as that which comes to fill the void that the letter opens up in the symbolic. Here we return to what Marie-Hélène Brousse develops in focusing on the role of the object a in both the discourse of the analyst and the artist – discourses which might not be of a semblance.

I want to suggest that art, the work of Robert is an artifact, like writing, of this void (e.g. sepulcher). In other words, we can understand that what remains from the work of an artist as traces of a particular relation of Jouissance and Knowledge – traces of a ruptured semblant and the path of the letter.

I would like to take up these traces in Robert's work as they concern the presence of the object that captures the gaze and the voice. If I am to “read” these remainders in Robert's work, it is oriented towards their effects as objects of Jouissance – as resisting meaning and interpretation. In that they trap the gaze and the voice, they are unnerving and provoke a certain division in the viewer. This is where we can locate the hole in knowledge in Robert's work. Or a knowledge in a certain failing (of the semblant).

Do we really want to see what is beneath the veil of the semblant? Yet, we also can't look away – the horror and the trauma captivate. But what can be even more powerful is to reveal the semblant as pure semblant, to expose the function as veil – art can do this particularly well and it's difficult because the semblant veils its own function as such. In *Kahpenakwə*, it is the semblant of the West, which Robert unties and lets fall to the ground (e.g. Indian drawings, tomb, can, shotgun shells).

The desert as a landscape purifies the semblant – phenomena of nature, the meteor, the stars, and the sky appear in isolation – de-materialized and pure image. (It's no wonder that Lacan's epiphany about the semblant came from an experience of the Siberian desert.) Lacan compares the function of writing with “surveying land” in *Lituratere* as artifacts that inhabit only language. Robert makes use of a desert landscape to do his own work with the semblant and the material of language. Lacan turned to the clouds to locate what the signifier is all about – semblance par excellence. Robert captures the infinite, mirage-like lure of the desert sky throughout the exhibition.

At dusk in the desert the light seems to bounce from behind silhouetted mountains as if it is projected onto a scrim stretched around the horizon. The landscape, the earth and the sky – that which we know is the most constant, most material part of our existence suddenly looks as if it's a backdrop or a set. It's all fake – and when nature flashes us the semblant we freeze up for a moment. It's an experience like anxiety, but more tinged with a knowledge that the symbolic fabric we tread on is a construct.

In a conversation with Jacques Alain Miller, *Lacan with Joyce*, Lacan discusses Joyce's work as “waking literature”, the end of literature, “the traversal of the literary fantasy towards the real of writing”. What is the semblant in art (the Other?). Is the traversal of the fantasy of art the moment when a signifier for the lack in the Other emerges – real of art and non-sense – the not to be read? Art needs an Other, but the moment of traversal of the fantasy of art might lead us to that effect of effacement, which writing produces that Lacan develops in *Lituratere*.

Lacan says of Joyce that he “knocks the air out of the dream” (dream of literature). Writing of resonances. Semantic echo returns on the signifier (essaim to S1). Explodes it makes holes in it. Miller also emphasizes in poetry: an effect of meaning and a production of a hole at the same time. Gap/impassé opened up by inability to justify meaning (meaning – phallic function operates bases on a tautology – “that is just the way it is”). Poetry plugs this. To plug something with a hole – “exploits the metonymical reserve in language”. Along those lines I am interested to look at what operates in Robert's works.

I see two movements in Robert's work that touch the semblant: First, to suck the meaning out of the semblants which compose the sculptures to leave only the material or the signifier without sense and signification. In *Kahpenakwe*, the main technique in this operation to void meaning is metonymy: e.g. stars. The other movement (inverse) is to extract the material out of the semblant and to leave only pure image/symbolic. This creates the effect of purifying the semblant: or revealing it as semblant – like extracting gold from the dirt filled (e.g. mountain silhouette).

I mentioned the object voice as well – In *Lacan and the Voice*, Miller develops the invocatory drive by positioning the object *a* as not the timbre or the “grain” behind the words in the voice, but rather silence. In the way that the gaze is always blind, the voice is always silence. The object constitutes an absence or inhabits a void. This is the silent object, which looms behind Robert's work. I used to live on a cattle ranch in the high mountain desert of California. We would speak about the voice of the desert – it was almost always understood as a particular experience with silence – a profound sonic vacuum that happens in the desert.

This silence is not one's own meditative inner monologue, nor the absence of sound, but the voice of the Other – this is what creates such an impact: we are always waiting for the reply of the Other, which as the “voice” will only come back as that which cannot be said. (The exception being the psychotic – who has the object – reply of the Other with him.) I suppose it is the emptiness of silence that comes to plug the hole through which the Other might be siphoned away – the subject left in destitution. The voice, Miller remarks, is a product of the signifying chain, a remainder that implies not just speaking and hearing, but also reading and writing to return to what is at stake in *Lituraterre* and with Joyce: a remainder of a traumatic encounter with language.

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