

Alien Positions

I look at the moon.

What do I see?

Who looks back at me?

What do they see?

The moon looks like a face to me.

What do I look like from the moon's point of view?

This is what I wonder when I face an other and the seemingly indecipherable mystery that they offer me. I try to turn things around and imagine me from their point of view. What me does this other see?

Jean Laplanche, a psychoanalyst who trained with Jacques Lacan, has examined the points at which he argues Sigmund Freud went astray, a 'going-astray'. This includes most famously Freud's controversial abandonment of the seduction theory, and his turn to the child's fantasy to explain seduction, thus at some level avoiding thinking-through the complex interplay of inner and outer worlds between the child and what Laplanche calls 'the concrete other'.¹ Laplanche argues that this early scene of seduction is of key importance to psychoanalysis as it works to de-centre the position of the subject in its articulation of the formation and role of the unconscious. For Laplanche, it is the embedding of the alterity of the mother in the child, which places an 'other' in the subject. This 'other' is 'other' to the mother as it is also her unconscious. Thus the message imparted to the subject by the 'other' (for Laplanche the mother or concrete other) is an

¹ Cathy Caruth, 'An Interview with Jean Laplanche', © 2001 Cathy Caruth. See <http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.101/11.2caruth.txt> accessed 3 May 2006. Laplanche notes that Freud uses the terms *der Andere* and *das Andere* to distinguish the other person and the other thing. See 'The Kent Seminar, 1 May 1990', in John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (eds) *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation and the Drives*, (London: The Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992), pp. 21-40, p. 25.

enigma both to the receiver but also to the sender of the message: the 'messages are enigmatic because ... [they] are strange to themselves'.²

This question: how does one make a relationship with an 'other'? is at the heart of psychoanalytic theory and practice. As Jessica Benjamin has written:

An intersubjective theory of the self is one that poses the question of how and whether the self can actually achieve a relationship to an outside other without, through identification, assimilating or being assimilated by it. This – how is it possible to recognize an other?³

Benjamin suggests that once we start to think in terms of relationships between subjects, or subjectivity, we have no choice but to consider intrapsychic mechanisms of relation, most importantly identifications: 'Once subjectivity is embraced', she says, 'we have entered into a realm of knowledge based on identifications, hence knowing that is intrapsychically filtered.'⁴ Feminist theorist Diane Fuss states that identification is 'a question of *relation*, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside';⁵ it is 'the psychical mechanism that produces self-recognition'.⁶ While Fuss outlines how identification involves the interrelationship of two processes each working in different directions: introjection, the internalization of certain aspects of the other through self-representation, and projection, the externalization of unwanted parts of the self onto the other, visual theorist Kaja Silverman has explored identification in terms of cannibalistic or idiopathic identification where one attempts to absorb and interiorize the

² Cathy Caruth, 'An Interview with Jean Laplanche', © 2001 Cathy Caruth. See <http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.101/11.2caruth.txt> accessed 3 May 2006.

³ Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1998) p. 80.

⁴ Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, p. 25.

⁵ Diane Fuss, *Identification Papers* (London, Routledge, 1995) p. 3.

⁶ Fuss, *Identification Papers*, p. 2.

other as the self, and heteropathic identification where 'the subject identifies at a distance' and in the process of identification goes outside his/herself.⁷

The issue of how is it possible to recognize an other has also been taken up as a pressing enquiry in feminist philosophy. Judith Butler, through discussions of both Hegel's account of the master-slave dialectic and Levinas' exploration of the face of the other, has drawn attention to the ethical aspects of relationships with the other. She suggests that certain accounts of Hegel argue that the subject 'assimilates' the other, reminding us of Silverman's account of cannibalistic identification, and explores instead, following Hannah Arendt and Levinas, the possibilities of a subjectivity created by its exposure and vulnerability to the other:⁸

For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you' by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that we which we have yet to know.⁹

Laplanche, however, does not confine his discussion of the enigmatic message to psychoanalysis, he suggests that transference occurs not first in the psychoanalytic setting to be applied in culture, but the other way around; he suggests that 'maybe transference is already, 'in itself', outside the clinic.'¹⁰ Yet it is in terms of his psychoanalytic concept, the enigma, that

⁷ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1996) pp. 23-4.

⁸ Judith Butler, 'Giving an Account of Oneself', *Diacritics* (Winter 2001), v. 31, n. 4, pp. 22-40.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2004) p. 49.

¹⁰ Jean Laplanche, 'Transference: its Provocation by the Analyst', translated by Luke Thurston, *Essays on Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 2-14-33, p. 222. See also Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, translated by David Macey (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989) pp. 152-4.

Laplanche talks of the cultural message:

If one accepts that fundamental dimension of transference is the relation to the enigma of the other, perhaps the principle site of transference, 'ordinary' transference, before, beyond or after analysis, would be the multiple relation to the cultural, to creation or, more precisely to the cultural message. A relation which is multiple, and should be conceived with discrimination, but always starting from the relation to the enigma. There are at least three types of such a relation to be described: from the position of the producer, from that of the recipient, and from that of the recipient-analyst.¹¹

For Laplanche then, the critic or recipient-analyst is involved in a two-way dynamic with the enigmatic message: s/he is, 'caught between two stools: the enigma which is addressed to him, but also the enigma of the one he addresses, his public'.¹²

In a remarkable essay Laplanche draws connections between astronomy and psychoanalysis, discussing the de-stabilizing affects of reversing the structures of relationships we take for granted socially, culturally and personally, from the macro-scale of the cosmos to the micro-scale of the psyche. Laplanche argues that the revolutionary move made by Copernicus in 1543, which demonstrated that the earth revolved around the sun, rather than the reverse, can be paralleled to Freud's discovery of an unconscious whose existence de-stabilized the central position of the ego in the formation of the subject. In Laplanche's view Freud did not pay proper heed to the possibilities inherent in his discovery, and went astray: 'the wrong path was taken each time there was a return to a theory of self-centering'.¹³ This

¹¹ Laplanche, 'Transference: its Provocation by the Analyst', p. 222.

¹² Laplanche, 'Transference: its Provocation by the Analyst', p. 224.

¹³ Jean Laplanche, 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution', translated by Luke Thurston, *Essays on Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 52-83, p. 60.

notion of going astray, Laplanche relates to astrology, describing how the word for planet derives from the verb 'planao', 'to lead astray, to seduce':

One cannot ignore the fact that the wandering stars, [planetes asteres], derive their name from the verb [planao], which means to lead astray, to seduce', and which is notably used in this sense in the Bible, to describe 'seduction' by God or by Christ (John VII, 47).¹⁴

Laplanche writes of how the unconscious implanted in the subject by the enigmatic address of the other can be thought of as an internal foreign body: 'the unconscious as an alien inside me, and even one put inside me by an alien'.¹⁵

Alien Position One

Go to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam on 7 October 2006.

Find the fragment of the moon on exhibition in the gallery.

Walk over to it.

Stand in front of it.

Think about where it comes from.

Contemplate its strangeness.

Consider it alien.

Ask yourself this: 'is this alien really outside me?'

Alien Position Two

Ask the gallery attendant for a copy of Jean Laplanche Essays on Otherness.

Take the book and find a location where you can see the face of the moon.

Turn to page 52 and start reading.

¹⁴ Jean Laplanche, 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution', p. 54, footnote 6.

¹⁵ Jean Laplanche, 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution', p. 65.

Read until you have completed 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution'.

Alien Position Three

Remain in Position Two.

Stay there until the full moon has risen at 03.13.

Turn to the centre-fold of this book.¹⁶

You are looking at an image of earth taken from the moon.

Lift the book to the night sky with the image facing you.

Position the image so that you can see the moon at the same time.

Hold them together and wait.

¹⁶ This is an image of the earth taken on 7 December 1972 as the Apollo 17 was travelling toward the moon. Reproduced from the NASA website: <http://veimages.gsfc.nasa.gov/1597/AS17-148-22727.jpg>