

Sex, Desire and Language

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The following is a portion of a larger project that proposes to interpret Lacan's Graph of Desire for purposes of demonstration. This model is particularly significant in that it explores the creation of the Split Subject in relation to the signifying chain, two of Lacan's most significant psychoanalytic and linguistic concepts. What is the fundamental connection between sex, desire and language? How can we best determine its function and form? And finally, the most significant question of this paper, does the study of such a relationship that will clearly be based on cognition rather empiricism have any quantitative socially redeeming value. Or is this merely academic research exercise at best?

The first concept we must grasp is the universality and transfigurative nature of that which we use to consider such questions: language, desire and sex. Each of the terms considered in the course of this investigation is now and always will be non-static, in a constant state of evolution. There is a particular universal truth revealed in form and meaning that remains paradox because it dwells within the temporal and spatial sphere that is itself constantly expanding and contracting. Thus, any concept of the relationship of the key terms discussed in this paper are also expanding and contracting and in this concept lies the truth revealed and concealed. Thus what we study is an interpretation of an interpretation.

We understand through traces of our history, of our history of language. To the question of sex and desire: there is no singular relationship between the two and there is little reason for us to suppose that these terms refer merely to the consummation of the sexual act itself. It is for this reason that Lacan's Graph of Desire is so useful. It encompasses the concepts of Freud's desire, the transitive nature of language, and the problematic of coming to terms with the notion of what the Greeks thought of Being and Becoming.

We are our language, we are our desire, and we are born in language, desire and sex and so confront all the pros and cons of such conditions. To use a more popular term the subjects we choose to discuss have a unique stealth system created and fueled by a modern culture that fears becoming its own ghost in its own creation: technology.

The following is a discussion of these considerations and assumptions. Specifically, it is an endeavor to persuade the reader to examine the theories of Lacan and Freud more carefully. In a more general fashion it has the added benefit in showing that Sex is one the most primal forces of our being and as such dislikes the orderly not because it is some sort of aberration but quite the opposite: disorder properly studied is a misconception, a presumption of order such as that found in Lacan's split subject and his concept of the mirror stage, where — for the purposes of this discussion — subversion of the subject by the signifier begins.

It is (to use Henry James's title) one possible form of "The Beast in the Jungle" that will not be tamed nor chained to any one particular interpretation and understanding. And that, in an ironic Darwinian sense, is precisely as it should be. For on this view, our greatest fear reveals to us our greater pleasure, and many find such a concept disconcerting.

The mirror stage marks the point where the child begins a journey on the path towards that portion of the self that is called human sexuality. Looking at the right hand portion of his model the path leads upward but what drives that psyche on this path?

On this view, desire is conceptualized as a "drive" that is constantly shifting forms, fueled by desire as it is understood in Lacan's Mirror Stage. On this conception, desire is that which can never be fully satisfied, since a realization of complete satisfaction would entirely negate the function of desire as a repetitive and shifting phenomenon. Desire is infinite because, by definition, it is that which cannot be satisfied. The proposed satisfaction

of desire means its own demise. As our desires seem to doggedly follow us and manifest themselves prompted by an not so subtle media that taps into our most repressed contemplations, it seems as if desire is something of an entity unto itself. Therefore, the notion of a death drive, as it relates to desire, is not that which is satiated but rather faced with the fear of the lack.. Thus, the movement towards ideality or state of complete satisfaction that marked us in our earliest stages is not only improbable but impossible.

The graph of desire is linked to basic Freudian theory, as is a majority of Lacan's work. In this respect, when I speak of Lacan I also speak of Freud (albeit through Lacan's unique interpretation and understandings). The psychoanalytic approaches taken by Freud and Lacan — while not a complete inventory of such theories — clearly motivate one possible mode of interpretation and understanding. Note that even our desire to "understand" the modifications and shifts in our interpretation and understanding defies any static definition. In this sense, one must look at the graph of desire not as a single or unique event but as representing a constant shift of temporal moments that invite and require a continual redefinition of sex and desire. A detailed examination of the concepts reflected in this graph would reveal just this. It is the hope of this writer that some brave souls may venture forth into just such an effort. Such a study will almost always reveal the research not only as an academic but a praxis, a cognitive theory with very practical applications even into the impractical world of sexual identity as marked by the term desire. This praxis is a synthesis of psychoanalytic theory and practice. (For a more detailed discussion of this subject, one might turn to Bruce Fink's interpretation of Lacan's four discourses, which offers an intriguing look at the interrelations of academic study and psychoanalytic practice). The question of an ineffectual academic formalism is rendered inert with such consideration and so reveals sex not as object of research but a process or self-realization and growth.

We also assume that this is a human science, subject to cognition that is influenced to some degree by natural science. We must also understand here that there has been an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of a human science rooted in the natural sciences that has yet and will not be resolved.

The graph of desire reveals a psyche that is constantly in a state of evolution because of an intrinsic resistance to its ambiguous nature. We want to believe that there is a solution, a single statement that can define our feelings about sex. However, we are limited by the very fact this signified concept is beyond thought and language. There is no way of accurately predicting how a specific individual is going to respond to an erotic text.

Finally any model or discussion of desire as sex will have to make some basic assumptions that may or may not be agreeable to all. This is irrelevant in the sense that any attempt to circumscribe a given state of affairs about the sexual drive, what is contained in it, its interpretation and its cause and effect on the individual relies partially on intuition, gut feels based on experience that cannot be given complete voice. And it is also based on the individual's ability to lend that discussion some kind of form, albeit an incomplete one—given that desire is never static.

Thus the erotic novel is an expression of an unconscious desire which must be expressed. The child in his infant mirror stages does not experience this eroticism so much as a desire for understanding the other. Eventually, this desire gone unmet forms the basis of our sexual desires, a way or mode of expressing our needs or, as Freud might say, realizing the pleasure principle. What we eventually desire in regard to the expression of our desire we also dread because it is rooted in the unknown or the uncanny. Desire as physical eroticism is a displacement or a projection of our own unconscious desires. Again we see that the Graph of Desire cannot reveal any singular constant except that of change.

He also suggests that literature as a mode of language — the proper term is 'orthographic' — functions as a way of expressing the desire. In a sense, the erotic novel mirrors the unconscious in that it expresses that repressed desire as best it can in a kind of language that is constantly historically reinterpreted. It relies on memory or trace of the past with the present situations and the unconscious desires of the individual performing the action of writing. Turning towards the graph of desire reveals a double negative in that what is first expressed through a signifier inadequately expresses that which is signified. Following the path of desire in terms of

this double negative one understands that the subject is ultimately subverted by his or her inability to express in the signifier that which is signified.

Lacan follows Freud's example along with the influence of modern critical thought — structuralism among others — that suggests language can never express the thoughts and emotion of the psyche in a complete manner, the form will always reveal and conceal and so is characterized by the lack. Freud acknowledges the significance of the "lack" in language and—as importantly—recognized the significance of the uncomfortable pauses in the execution of language. Again returning to the graph one might see these moments when the signifying chain and the path of desire articulated earlier are a pause or interruption that reveals the depth and complexity of desire in its very lack.

Lacan amplified and extrapolated on this concept of the "lack" in language. Thus, the mirror stage discussed earlier causes an interruption in the young child who is suddenly—or at least appearing to be suddenly—the same as the other. His desire to consume the other -- not merely to identify with (the imaginary stage) but to actually become the other (the symbolic stage) -- has failed. But because desire is constantly driven (cf. Freud's 'Death Drive' and Hegel's 'Master and Slave' dialectic), it causes a split in the subject which ultimately translates into the constant subversion of the subject to desire—a constancy marked by an infinite number of particular moments in a unified whole.

The individual is not free to express his or her desire in a completely unedited way because of an institution moral order that dictates what is acceptable language and behavior and what is not. Where voice finds expression in the graph of desire is temporary and repetitive. If we follow the path of the signifying chain we come full circle. However, this circularity is not to mean a pure representation of a repeating signifying chain. Rather, this circle reflects historical and hermeneutic meaning where no two traces of the signified as signifier can ever be exactly the same. Again, the sign fails to depict that which it senses and it relies on basic cognitive powers to see this also as a lack. Indeed, the very attempt to put in words what the graph of desire represents is constantly reinterpreted precisely because of the historicity of the hermeneutic. The same applies for

our most latent desires. They may rise and fall but at all times taking familiar yet different forms.

Lacan's mode "Graph of Desire" provides one significant method of understanding, how desire operates, its true origins, and how it operates and functions within the day-to-dayness of our lives. We all begin from the same place, as a child who is virtually no experience save that of the birth process itself. From the moment our eyes begin to see shapes and forms we are observing and imitating those shapes already in a mode of exploration. We have not yet retained desire because all that is needed is provided to us: nourishment, shelter and affection. For the purposes of this article, the discussion will be limited to the Mirror stage as a point of origin for later and more in-depth discussions of the Graph of Desire. (See Figure One)

We literally live in what appears to be a utopian moment where desires are easily fulfilled. According to Lacan, desire starts in the mirror stage. The child sees himself in the mirror and imagines a separate object. He attempts to imitate this new object and he notes that as he moves so does the object. He has not quite made the connection that his gaze is directed towards an image of himself. The child observes his parents shake a hand, give a hug and speak: he observes non-linguistic and linguistic gestures such as those studied in Meade. Soon he begins to imitate these things. He begins the process of acquiring speech because he wishes to communicate and to be like that other. More to the point he wants to be that other. He wants power over that other.

Eventually the child grows and suddenly desires are not as easily met. But the child still lives in the memory of that satisfaction and so desires to return to that place. But he cannot and so he is faced with the uncomfortable notion that not all his desires are the other's top priority. Soon the child seeks entrance into the adult world by taking on and imitating the behavior of the adult including sexual activity. This and the simple biological realities of the human condition again propels him into a need for acceptance.

He wants to be part of the others, to participate in their activities and so learns to follow the rules of those groups. He has given a portion of his own voice over in the mistaken belief that he will somehow again have all his desires met. This act has

a history all its own but it never completely escapes the lack of desire in that first stage and so propels himself through his life in infinite regress: searching for unlimited satisfaction.

The graph plots out the beginnings of desire that are twice interrupted by what he calls the Signifying Chain. This consists of the signifier, the signified and the bar of resistance. The graph plots a path reflecting how that which is signified in the unconscious eventually comes to manifestation in the written or spoken word; in other words, we see how our desires manifest themselves in language. Below is a compellation of the three separate portions of the graph of desire. I trust this brief discussion will peek the interest of my readers and perhaps help them find their own path through this graph and so come to a better understanding of their own sense of moral appropriateness within the moral ambiguity of our sexual landscape.

