

Jacques-Alain Miller  
*Introductory Remarks*  
*before the Screening of Television*

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Great Hall, Cooper Union, New York, NY

As a matter of fact, I'm not sure *Television* needs an introduction.<sup>1</sup> There is just one man, an old man, with white hair, speaking behind a desk, in front of a wall, beside a lamp, under a painting, at home, sometimes standing and sometimes seated. The camera is motionless, and from time to time, the angle changes. You couldn't imagine a simpler setting, a more austere staging. Yet, it's a show, a one-man show. The audience can't even imagine for a single minute that it is permitted to share the intimacy of someone who gives himself up so completely. The modulated voice, the always expressive face, the sometimes convoluted gesture of the analyst, and, some people may say overacting, signal that the performer doesn't forget one second he is on the air. It is like a long theatrical tirade, a monologue, scarcely interrupted, or rather marked by, the questioning of an expressionless voice—which is mine. Generally speaking, the audience cannot understand what is being said, but may be moved, and sometimes struck by the bizarre truth, both opaque and self-evident. The performer, at times, seems to speak from a distant planet, and yet, sometimes he is inside of you.

How could you understand such speech? It goes too quickly, sprinkled with fleeting allusions to Aristotle and Freud, to Dante and Kant, to Newton and Attila. He's sometimes deadly serious, sometimes jocular, and sometimes both. Do not believe it is difficult just because it is in French and not in English [although this film has been subtitled in English]. It is as difficult for the French. Secondary school in France used to end, and still does more or less, with three or four courses where the pupils learn how to develop an idea. De-velop, De-velopment is a rhetorical device by which you learn how to present an idea, how to vary it, to vary it in notable ways, so as to exploit all the possi-

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bilities and, progressively affect the mind of the reader. Practising this method, de-velopment, enables you to write an essay, and perhaps even books, with one or two of your ideas. This kind of rhapsodic style is what we learn at the École Normale Supérieure where I was a pupil. And we see this kind of style used in different ways by our philosophers. It is used in one way by Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, or in another way by Foucault and Derrida. We have it in music, too. Just think of the Bolero of Ravel.

Lacan *never* develops! He surprises, and moves on like quicksilver, from surprise to surprise, shifting perspective at every sentence and sometimes even in the middle of one. You do not follow him, but the difficulty is more than that. The overacted expressivity itself troubles you. This man, indeed, looks like he understands himself. And, as you make sense of one sentence or another, from time to time, you may come to suspect that you could be right. The seemingly inconsistent and cryptic flashing of Lacan's horizons constitutes a systematic questioning of the basic assumptions of psychoanalysis. Beyond the elementary questions asked by the invisible interlocutor [Jacques-Alain Miller], Lacan is, in fact, answering highly systematized

conceptual problems, which you have to develop for yourself to understand what his speech is all about. Plain common sense can't get you very far in the dimension of the unconscious, which expresses itself in a very nonsensical way, and that is precisely what Lacan begins to do.

What is common sense? What is it? It's "what everyone understands? But this "what-everyone-understands," does it encompass that which is peculiar to each one in particular, as distinct from every other one? Is "common sense" able to formulate the very private fantasy which gives sense to reality for each one of us separately? No, your fantasy, even though you enjoy it, doesn't make sense to you, and surely doesn't make any "common sense." And, perhaps, what appears at first glance to be a very eccentric confirmation of Lacan's mind, could be nothing other than the intellectual asceticism required to open up access to the new rationality implied by Freudian analysis, which only looked frivolous before being connected to the analytical experience.

I must admit that I would have liked Lacan on this rare occasion, at this time of his speaking on television, to address himself, for once, to the common man. That was my idea and, on the first page of *Television* which you can read in *October* [40], he alludes to that idea, to the idea suggested by friendship. But, speak to the common man, he

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*couldn't* do it, and didn't want to. He spoke to the supposed cognoscenti. And so, what could be done, in one sense? The excessive theatrics of this one man behind his desk is, in another sense, the reverse of inauthenticity. Lacan is on the air, but he's not putting on a mask. He's speaking in the same way he always talked—take it or leave it. I wanted him to take up the part of the common man.

In my questions, which I gave him beforehand, he answered by writing. Each day for two weeks, every evening, he would give me his page of the day, or rather his page of the night, because he saw patients all day long. So, his *Television* is a reading that is published as a booklet in French, and now in October, of this original writing of Lacan. But, when he read it on television, he made some deviations. So the film is post-text. That is the precise situation of the relation of the text and screen. I guarantee it.

So this *Television* film is a reading such as writers used to do before the war, more often than they do now, and Lacan recalled that he had attended one such reading by James Joyce in the twenties. At the time of the filmings I believe I tried to play a kind of Sancho Panza to his Don Quixote. But, he didn't answer me as such. It's true that he answered me as Jacques-Alain Miller, who at that time, had just finished a book on Maoist militancy following May 1968, and who was teaching students of every leftist leaning at the University of Vincennes, and also on the verge of entering an analysis. So, he will establish [for me] an identity which I was, in some way, attempting to erase. And he made me see that those questions—which I believed to be the questions of everyone—in what sense they were still my own. And his highly personal answers—not everyone of them, but some—those highly personal answers are a way of saying that the common man is nothing but fictitious in the Freudian field.

Lacan, as a matter of fact, didn't need to give such an answer [to the common man], whom, perhaps, I was not very gifted to mimic in the first place. He didn't need me to play Boswell to his Dr. Johnson, a part for which I had no liking. He didn't need this kind of questioning as living testimony that he could be understood, as a proof that the set of those who read and understood him was not empty: "At least one," which he says is a vulgar translation of the

existential logical quantifier—x—of which he makes use in the second reel of *Television* that we'll see in half an hour.

*Television* was done to be filmed and seen, but also to be read. The booklet was published simultaneously with the broadcast at the begin-

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ning of 1974, just as the special issue of *October* 40 was issued simultaneously with the screening of tonight. So, the viewer of what is called on the screen "Psychoanalysis" may turn into a reader of *Television*. To read *Television* is much more arduous than to view "Psychoanalysis." Viewing the show, you may get, you will get, some entertainment from looking at this original and famous man. You may comment on him, or make fun of him. All that proves is that Lacan is obviously not like you. But reading *Television* with the aim of capturing its elusive meaning is not an hour long experience. You need hours and hours of rereading and pondering. And it is, in fact, a much longer work than you can believe by counting the pages. Is it worthwhile to spend all that time reading and rereading *Television*?

This question is phrased in a somewhat malevolent way in this week's *The Village Voice* by Mr. Guy Trebay.<sup>2</sup> His comment in "The Opinionated Survey of the Week's Events" asks, and I quote: "Is the master's take on psychoanalysis worth the trouble of deciphering his oracular jargon?" Malevolent as it is, it's nevertheless judicious, and I do not even discard his words, because you could as well ask this about the unconscious itself. Is it worth the trouble to decipher the oracular jargon of the unconscious? It could, perhaps, be of some use here to the would-be students of Lacan. Being "at least one" doesn't mean, God forbid, that I'm the only one. And sure, it's difficult to speak just before we listen to Jacques Lacan. It was already difficult to speak in front of him during his lifetime. You could always be severely criticized. But now, whereas he doesn't see me and us, his gaze is nevertheless on us, an object *a*, whose function may work better up there [on the screen].

Perhaps, it would be best now to put *Television* in its historical perspective. *Television*, as a text, comes twenty years after the seminal essay of Lacan in 1953, which according to his own estimation, opens way to his teaching. The name of this essay is "Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," which can be the simple function of speech in language. It may be said that *Television* taken from twenty years later in 1973, is a reappraisal of the fundamental thesis of this seminal essay ("*The Discourse of Rome*," 1953).<sup>3</sup>

Firstly, Lacan forcefully restates that the second topic, the Freudian topic—that is to say the distinction between ego, id, and superego—doesn't supersede Freud's first topic with its operative distinction between unconscious, conscious, and preconscious, but that the second topic is a new elaboration of the same intuition. So that the first works

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of Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* remain completely valid, and are not to be discarded like "some troublesome priests."<sup>4</sup> And so, he restates that the very discovery of the unconscious by Freud shows that it is through what is said, through a meticulous analysis of speech, that the unconscious may be pinpointed.

In this way he notes that the unconscious is not instinctual, that the unconscious is not equivalent to the blind knowledge of instinct which enables the animal to survive in his need. Instinct, they say, is an adaptative function. I would say, on the contrary, the Freudian unconscious is fundamentally disadaptative. That is to say, the unconscious response is *never* adequate. It runs contrary to an adequate response. And so the unconscious is testimony, not to instincts, but to *Trieb*, the Freudian word translated as "drive." That enabled him to invent such a paradoxical concept as the death drive. You know that this very concept of the death drive has never been accepted by the psychoanalytic community, by so-called authoritative psychoanalysis, or by the psychoanalytic village. I would say, because their orthodoxy is based precisely on the assumption that the taboos of the unconscious can be refused, and a normal response substituted for absurd, nefarious, pathological unconscious responses. Lacan agrees with Freud that this inner depth is irreducible, that it pertains to the very existential condition of man, as distinct from any humanity that man has in his love affair, if I may say, with language. Lacan says that in the very first minutes of *Television*, I quote the phrase: "There is no unconscious except for the speaking being, and it is in the field of language that Freud discovered the unconscious through linguistic theory." So, you may say of the unconscious that it speaks. Lacan will say that, and you will hear it once more in *Television*. "It" speaks, but, perhaps, you will notice progressively that Lacan's point of view on this is not exactly what he has contributed to this discovery. It speaks, but you don't know what it means, and as a result, it has to be interpreted. That is to say, that the very act of the unconscious, once you accept it, binds you, not only to distinguish the signifier from the signified, as did Saussure and the Stoics, but to admit the economy of the signifier in relation to the signified. And let us say, in a simple way, that a signifier is liable to produce different signified effects. That reminder may be sufficient to remove the idea that the simple use of language gives access to reality. On the contrary, the structural evocation of language *disturbs* the human relation to reality. And so, the unconscious is not a matter of

body, nor soul. It can be adequately located in the classical distinction between body and soul, which is grounded on the supposed adequation of the two. The unconscious comes in third, from the existence of language.

And, at the beginning of *Television*, Lacan speaks of the unconscious as thought, as a thought which is distinct from soul, which is observed as distinct from soul and body. The unconscious is in this sense "parasitic." It introduces disturbances and you will see that the Lacanian doctrine of affects is grounded on this very fact of the disturbance introduced through language into the supposedly meditative function of the body, disturbances introduced in the body by the unconscious. That is what happens to hysterics. The unconscious is introduced in the soul or the mind like short sessions. We may say the main disturbance introduced in human beings by language is unconscious desire, which you cannot reduce to any need. You may even decide that you have no need for desire, or that it is a principle of all kinds of wisdoms, which are always *engagé*. We may regret that the philosophies of the past, when they didn't have psychoanalysis, still managed to rein in desire, . . . seeing it. This kind of regret might, I grant you, be amazed to know that there was, for instance, sufficient cause. You may try to mimic those wisdoms of the past and go with them, perhaps following some Oriental tradition. You go to wisdoms of the past especially when psychoanalysis doesn't stand up to its calling. But, I believe those wisdoms are narrow and fundamentally inoperative.

Precisely what we cannot consider is a disturbance introduced by me unconscious when it takes on the consistency which produces subtext. Yet, it's true that symptoms interest psychoanalysis as long as they are interpretable, that is to say, as long as you may consider the symptom as a message whose meaning the subject refuses to understand. That we say is a Lacanian translation of repression—the desire not to know—which is stronger and more fundamental than all the pretense of loving knowledge.

There is no one theory regarding the symptoms, symptoms which psychoanalysis supposedly *has* cured. I would say that there are three distinct theories of Lacan, and contrary to Freud's fundamental point of view, I maintain that there's nothing fixed or blocked in the teaching of Lacan. That is, it is a logical development of some basic assumptions, but in this progress, sometimes he comes to say, not only something different from what he said before, but sometimes, something

contradictory. That is to say, in spite of his theatrical style, or as the *Village Voice* says, his "oracular style," his teaching is a research. But let's go quickly through the theories of the symptom, the last one being in *Television*.

Lacan's point of departure on the symptom is that you can cure the symptom by making sense of it through speech. That is from Lacan in 1953. What cures the symptom is sense. But in *Television*, you hear exactly the contrary, that in fact, psychoanalysis doesn't operate on the level of sense. Psychotherapy, yes, offers to give sense to the symptom. But what is important is going back to the causal signifier, before sense, to the causal signifier as non-sensical. At the core of a psychoanalytical symptom, there is always, we might say, a misunderstanding: a non-sense. So, the second theory of Lacan concerns, rather, a devalorization of sense, for the benefit of the signifier. And that is the most popular part of Lacan's teaching, if I may say. But it's not really popular, I admit, among Lacanians. Here, in *Television*, you have for the first time in Lacan's teaching, a third theory of the symptom. To the side of sense, you hear Lacan propose another side, and following what he says before, we could say it before himself. To the side of sense, he opposes the side of the signifier without sense. And it cuts, it is a cut. That he doesn't say the signifier—he says the sign—makes it look like a regression, a conceptual regress, because the sign is usually defined as having a representative function. Lacan frequently quoted Charles Sanders Peirce and his definition of the sign as something which represents something for someone, whereas Lacan had already defined the signifier as relating, not to the consciousness of anyone, but only to another signifier, the subject not being the someone for whose benefit everything is represented, but only a subject as represented by a signifier for another signifier. So, for people who really try to understand Lacan, to understand why the sign comes back in this teaching of his, it's an occasion to see why. As a matter of fact Lacan never said that the field of language is exhausted by the function of speech. And perhaps his theory will come as a surprise to you, many of you, after *Television*. The signifier taken as a function of structural linguistics is a one-sided approach to the sign. When we speak of this signifier, we consider the sign only according to its signified effect. This thematically refers us back to what Lacan called the algorithm, capital S over s: S/s. And you see the consequence of this small algorithm which captures the sign only by considering its signified effects in the construction of what he called his graphs which we find in his *Écrits*.

You are not master of the sense of what it says. It depends on the other, on the way he will hear you. For instance, will he accept your hate at face value, or will he consider your hate in its guise as love? So, the sense is always the sense of the other. And, the problem is that you do not cure the symptom by making yourself the master of sense. The analyst is no master, precisely because he refuses to exploit the civility of using therapy as master.

So, Lacan comes to what we now call his third theory of symptoms. It is new, I would say, because contrary to the main emphasis on the symptom depicted as screen-memory, there is something more. The symptom is not only the message. In discovering the limits of interpretation which he called "negative therapeutic reaction," Freud discovered that something lies beyond the screen memory. That is to say, somewhere, the patient doesn't want to be cured. And, if the symptom seems to resist once it is being treated, and you can't understand how it resists when the message, the symptomatic message, has already been translated, you cannot understand that if you do not suppose an unconscious pleasure. That is to say, pleasure which the analysand knows through pain. So it is a paradoxical pleasure. You can see this already at the beginning of Freud's work when he says that fantasy is embedded in the symptom. It is to this paradoxical pleasure that Lacan gives this apparently untranslatable word, kept in the original in *October*, the word: *jouissance*. That is to say that, by contrast to the doctrine of the signifier, language does not only have a signifying effect, but it also has an effect of *jouissance* which is beyond the pleasure principle, and which binds the subject to the return of the same sign. And you have to consider the effect of *jouissance* in the field of language. Perhaps we should say the *jouissance* effect. The *jouissance* effect poses a limit on the importance of sense. And this is why, in Lacan's theory, this little word comes back: the sign. But perhaps you know that already. After his first theory Lacan had quickly to predicate the conclusion of speech with something else, which he called the *instance* (insistence) of the letter. The letter is precisely the sign considered in its materiality, as object, as distinct from the signifying chain. So, it is not only sense that will appear in Television when Lacan equivocates between *jouissance*, and in French, *jouis-sens* (the enjoyed sense), but the *jouissance* effect, that means you enjoy your own unconscious, be it through pain.

The unconscious is language, that is to say in the words of Freud, the unconscious is enjoyment playing through substitutions, and *jouissance* is nowhere else other than in jargon itself. Lacan says that *jouis-*

*sance* consists in the logical straits that are revealed to trace desire. And it is *jouissance* itself which is to be desired. This sole condition gets a tremendous theoretical importance because it is simply a shift of emphasis in the doctrine of language. When you're led to desire the signifying effect, you're led to the insistence of the Other. You're led to the question of desire, which is always related to the Other: and, it's a sense. Sense is always the sense of the Other, and desire is always the desire of the Other. So, when one desires a signified effect, the unconscious is the desire of the Other. But when you emphasize the *jouissance* effect, or more precisely, the production of *jouissance*, the picture is completely different because *jouissance* as such is not Other related. It is, I would say, primarily egotistic. *Jouissance* by itself does not offer an intention. It is only through psychoanalysis that this language of the unconscious can be

organized in discourse. That's why you find this seemingly aphoristic saying in *Television*: that the unconscious exists only through discourse. So, analysis has to answer this question. How can you change the way the subject enjoys his unconscious? For this, the patient, the would-be patient, has to give up something of his *jouissance*, to convert the symptom into symbol, if we understand by symptom the coalescence of sign and *jouissance*. As a matter of fact, the invitation to free association is an invitation to use the sign as signifier and not as symptom. In *Television* Lacan says that the symptom is the presence, or not, the special sense effect, of what he called the subject-supposed-to-know. That is not to say that the analysand must believe the analyst to know (he may very well believe the contrary), but that he has already interpreted his symptom as something about which there is something to know, something to decipher, the condition being that he not be engulfed in the *jouissance* of his unconscious. So, the sense effect and the *jouissance* effect must be separable. You have what Lacan called a discourse only when those two effects are separate. I believe that I will cut this short so you can hear Lacan now, and give only these concluding remarks.

You will see that Lacan's argument needs deciphering, a deciphering which shows that what appears to be molecular is, in fact, as I tried to explain to you, supported by a tightly woven argument where every sentence is a consistent statement. So, why is his meaning silent? Is it silent because we can find some *jouissance* in Lacan's transference or is it a deciphering of Lacan? Is it silent precisely in order to prevent the *Village Voice* from depicting it in its absurdal elegance? As a matter

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of fact, as you will see, no one can confuse Lacan's voice with the *Village Voice*.

It's true that we're meeting near the village, out of reach of cities and universities. The analyst doesn't go around in fact, asking everyone about truth's desire, but rather, like the Saint, to whom Lacan compares the analyst in *Television*. He compares the analyst to the Saint, not to compare the analyst to the wise man or to the scientist. But, like the Saint, the analyst takes the desert with him when he functions. Or rather, the analyst is himself such a desert. He is the silent, vacuous place where one who has escaped from the villager's voice may find his own path, and his own voice. Hearing, now, this very distinctive voice of Lacan, you hear, I'm sure, through his obscure phrasing, the enormous sense which his words emit. Let me give you an example of this that you will understand. No matter what sense you make of what he says, you will understand that when he didn't speak, but concentrated on hearing you, his silence was no common silence. It was the silence of this discourse you are going to hear. And, perhaps you will have a hidden sense precisely because he's so different, and so committed to his difference, that you may go with him because of his oddness, that you could have spoken to this man in your very own jargon, and say, perhaps, what even you never suspected you knew or felt. And you will recognize, as if you knew him already, *an* analyst, not the analyst. *The* analyst doesn't exist. Just an analyst. But who, after Freud's death, has restored psychoanalysis to its conceptual action and rationality, who restored psychoanalysis to its practical effectiveness, and also, at the same time, to its connection to failed power and scabrous comedy; that is to say to the salubrious acceptance of what is incurable in humanity.

*Transcribed by  
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## NOTES

1. An interview with Jacques Lacan was aired on French television in two parts under the title, *Psychoanalysis in January, 1974*, directed by Benoît

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Jacquot. The interview was published under the title, *Télévision* (Paris: Seuil, 1974). That text is reprinted in *October* 40 (Spring, 1987): 7-50.

2. Guy Trebay, "The Opiniated Survey of the Week's Event," *The Village Voice*, April 8-14, 1987: 77.

3. Jacques Lacan, "The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis," in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York; Norton, 1977), pp. 30-113.

4. King Henry II of England asked, in regard to St. Thomas à Beckett: "Who will rid me of this troublesome priest?"