

PYCHOANALYSIS AND CONSEQUENCES

JOAN COPJEC

INTERVIEWED BY COLBY CHUBBS

*Joan Copjec is a leading American psychoanalytic and film theorist. She is currently Professor of Modern Culture & Media at Brown University. Her first book, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (1994), establishes Lacanian psychoanalysis as a theoretical framework irreducible to prevailing trends in post-structuralist theory—especially as represented by the work of Michel Foucault—and employs this framework to radically re-think film, cultural studies, and feminism. Another notable book, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (2002), develops two seemingly incompatible strands of Lacan's thought—sublimation and feminine sexuality—in order to establish an ethics beyond questions of identity. In addition to her two major books, Copjec was editor of the journal *October*, the book series *S* from Verso Press, as well as the journal *Umbr(a)*. Her latest research brings her psychoanalytic background to bear on Iranian cinema with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the work of Iranian film director, Abbas Kiarostami, and medieval Islamic philosophy; her book manuscript, *Cloud: Between Paris and Tehran* is forthcoming from MIT Press.*

This interview was conducted during Dr. Copjec's visit to London, Ontario in March 2019 where she delivered a lecture, "From the Cloud to the Resistance," hosted by The Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism at Western University, Canada. We wish to express our gratitude to Dr. Allan Pero, who made this interview possible, and, of course, to Dr. Copjec for her generosity and thoughtful engagement with us.

Colby Chubbs: I will begin with a point you stated in your “Introduction” to *Television* that “psychoanalysis is a system of relations which does not borrow its form from the family”.¹ Given the well-worn clichés about psychoanalysis, this statement is particularly important, as it seems the critique of the supposed dependency of psychoanalysis on the structure of the family unites the early detractors of Freud, such as his daughter Anna Freud and the rise of ‘ego psychology,’ and also later criticisms of Freud in France, perhaps most notably presented in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*; there seems to be this equation of psychoanalysis with the institutional structure of the family. How is psychoanalysis incommensurable with the family, and what kind of institution is it, if it is indeed one?

Joan Copjec: The position of psychoanalysis is often the reverse of the way people ordinarily think of it. I’m thinking at the moment of Foucault, specifically, who is of course no ordinary person but donned the mask of one in his *History of Sexuality* to criticise psychoanalysis not on the level of what Freud or Lacan actually said, but on the level of *doxa*, that is, of what others have said psychoanalysis said. Throughout the *History of Sexuality* Foucault focuses on the ‘repressive hypothesis’ of psychoanalysis and argues that Freud colludes in the modern attempt to ‘out’ sexuality, to make subjects ‘confess’ it, as though sex were a secret identity that had to be openly declared and thus easily monitored. The first problem is that Foucault pays no attention to primary repression and builds his whole argument on the far less radical idea of secondary repression. If one begins from the premise of primary repression, it is impossible to suppose that sex can be ‘outed,’ that it can be revealed. Sex is, rather, a negativity; it cannot therefore found a subject’s positive identity. More, Foucault makes psychoanalysis out to be a kind of ‘culturalist’ theory, that is, a theory of the way cultural or social forces ‘make up’ or produce people.

1 Joan Copjec, “Dossier on the Institutional Debate: An Introduction,” in *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, by Jacques Lacan, ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier (New York: Norton, 1990), 51.

In a short passage in *Television* Lacan completely reverses the assumptions that underlie this ordinary view of psychoanalysis. If one begins [with primary repression], as Freud, gradually comes to do, then the scales tip toward the second topology. At this point, repression is what produces suppression and the family—even society itself—is built up from repression. While there is such a thing as suppression that comes from the family and society at large, we must not confuse this with primary repression, which is responsible for the irrepressibility of sexuality.

Chubbs: Exactly, this ambiguous Freudian *Urverdrängung*. You touched on something there that leads me to my next question. There is an antagonism set up in your work, which persists from *Read my Desire* to a more recent article, “The Sexual Compact,” between Lacan and Foucault, or, as you put it, between historicism and psychoanalysis. Yet I find it rather strange how in academia today people uncritically assimilate Foucault with psychoanalysis, even though he’s obviously working from it in a certain way. There is an incommensurability between the two thinkers, and I was wondering if you can discuss that, especially around the question of sexuality?

Copjec: That’s interesting because I just read again the early essay, “A Preface to Transgression,” in which Foucault sounds very much like Lacan. A lot of Foucault’s early work is very much on the side of psychoanalysis. There’s something very bizarre about Foucault’s sudden turn against psychoanalysis that I’ve never been able to understand. In his early years he seemed to be a strong defender of Freud. It was the notion of power that seems to have caused Foucault to take up a counter position.

Chubbs: Treating psychoanalysis as a straw man in a certain way.

Copjec: And what’s particularly odd is that he never cites a single psychoanalytic text in the *History of Sexuality*. Foucault is an excellent reader but does not cite a single text there, but chooses to

argue from hearsay.

Chubbs: I agree that one could read Foucault against Foucault there. Perhaps there is a broader issue concerning the way in which psychoanalysis functions as a knowledge. I'm specifically thinking of Lacan's famous 'return to Freud': on the one hand, people accuse this return as being a dogmatic repetition of Freud's statements, preserving something, as not really starting something new; but clearly, on the other hand, Lacan returns to Freud in a way that interrogates every single detail and looks at every single concept, fills in certain voids in Freud's work that Freud left untouched, etc. One can point to, amongst many other things, Lacan's radical reconceptualization of 'sublimation,' 'sexual difference,' 'transference,' etc. What is at stake in this return and what are its consequences for how psychoanalysis transmits knowledge? Is this form of transmitting knowledge beyond the frameworks of thinkers like Foucault?

Copjec: The first few seminars of Lacan's are very close readings of the texts of Freud. Lacan insists first, above all, that people return to the texts of Freud and read them carefully, exactly what I'm accusing Foucault of not doing in the *History of Sexuality*. Yet at one point Foucault and Lacan were on the same page, as it were. For, in "What is an Author?" Foucault himself insisted that an author is *rare*, that is, not every text has an author. (I must say parenthetically, that I recently realized that Foucault makes in that famous essay the exact same argument as the *Cahiers du cinema* critics did when they invented their *auteur* theory. Not every film director, they argued, is an *auteur*. Only a few are; the rest are hacks who work as if they were on an assembly line.) Foucault basically names Freud and Marx as two *auteurs*, by which he means that they are founders of discourses. As a consequence, no psychoanalytic or Marxist thinker can claim to participate in the discourse without returning to the letter of these founders' texts—this, according to Foucault! Psychoanalysis and Marxism cannot be falsified or surpassed without reinterpreting the founding texts. With the

benefit of Lacan's perceptive readings I find that I am able when teaching psychoanalysis to make students see that what they have been told about it is very often wrong, by simply making them read Freud. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* is a bold and brilliant text and students are able to see right away that Freud has been badly misrepresented. Now, the second and third essays are harder to swallow, but one can demonstrate that even when Freud begins to head in the wrong direction, he seems to sense that something is not quite right. I've never had an experience in which students were contemptuous of Freud after reading this text.

Back to Lacan's reading of Freud. Lacan becomes bolder as his seminars go on and he begins inventing his own concepts as he 'updates' Freud, or clarifies him, or sides with part of his argument rather than another part (because Freud was forging a new path, he sometimes hesitated about the direction to take, but he always flagged his indecision, wondered out loud about the soundness of his decision taking one route rather than another). Lacan not only makes Freud's theory seem 'fresh,' it also demonstrates that fidelity always demands some infidelity, rather than slavish imitation.

Chubbs: The other thing I'd like to get at, which is another aspect you touch on throughout your work, is the relation between psychoanalysis and the university. One can point to Lacan's university discourse and in general his response to May '68 (which was an event that had the status of the university at the forefront). Indeed, it's difficult to consider his later seminars, especially *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, without that background. That is a way of asking: what is the relation between psychoanalysis and the university?

Copjec: Lacan was critical of what we now conceive of as the 'neo-liberal' university because he believed it produced only knowledge or a fetishized knowledge, knowledge without know-how, or knowledge that effaced the negative dimension of sexuality. He associated the university discourse with capitalism, with the issuing of 'credits' to students, or knowledge producing knowledge.

One could say that he agreed with the student demonstrators who protested that ‘structures don’t march in the streets,’ Or: structures don’t have any consequences in the real world. But Lacan very wittily argued that his structures had ‘little feet,’ that is, his structures described four kinds of social relations available at the time. To the university discourse he opposed the discourse of psychoanalysis, which teaches us that there is an unknown knowledge, a knowledge that cannot be known, i.e. unconscious knowledge, which had consequences for the way our relations to others were formed.

One should also draw attention to the fact that Lacan’s thinking about how to teach in general was also informed by the need to train psychoanalysts. The question of how to transmit psychoanalysis was in the forefront of his mind and he thus develops a notion of ‘transmission’ that stands in for ‘teaching.’ Lacan was famously ‘excommunicated’ from the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1953, founded his own school of psychoanalysis, and later dissolved it. The question of how to teach or train analysts, how to transmit psychoanalytic knowledge was at stake in each of these moments.

Chubbs: Do you think this is related to one of Freud’s *bons mots* that “psychoanalysis is an impossible profession”?² What do you make of that impossibility?

Copjec: Yes, Lacan himself mentions this claim of Freud. And yet one must note that ‘impossibility’ comes to have a conceptual rigor in Lacan that it didn’t have in Freud, at least not overtly. Impossibility is associated with one of the most important concepts in Lacan, the concept of the real. The real is an inevitable impasse of formalization. I think often, in this context, of Deleuze’s statement, “one must be forced to think.”³ This strikes me as a very

2 Sigmund Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James and Alix Strachey, vol. 23 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-1974), 248.

3 Cf. Gilles Deleuze, “The Image of Thought” in *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994 [1968]),

Lacanian thing to say. Without encountering some impossibility, some impasse, one is not able to think; one simply continues, automatically. An imperative—a ‘must’ -- issues forth only from the encounter with an impasse.

Chubbs: That’s interesting, do you think in someone like Deleuze there would be room for Lacan’s notorious assertion “there is no sexual relationship”? That is to say, that there is a non-relation but there’s something productive that works from that negation in a certain strange way.

Copjec: On the question of relation, Deleuze remains at odds with Lacan in an important respect. Influenced by Hume here, Deleuze maintains that relations are external to the terms they relate. For Lacan, on the other hand, relations are not purely external but ‘extimate.’ As is known, Lacan invented this term, ‘extimate,’ to describe the “superlative of intimacy,” a part of the subject that’s so intimate that it cannot be comprehended.⁴ Closer to oneself than one’s jugular vein, as Ibn ‘Arabî said centuries before Lacan came along.

Chubbs: That’s an interesting point. The other thing I want to segue into here is this term many scholars use today: namely, affect. Given that you’ve written on affect in your essay “May ’68, the Emotional Month,” what would Lacan have to say about affect?

Copjec: Many people—and most famously André Green—have accused Lacan of being so intent on developing his return to Freud on the model of linguistics that he over emphasized the intellect and forgot to take affect into account. This accusation is, on some level, absurd. What is *jouissance*—a Lacanian concept if ever there was one—after all, if not a by-product of language that arouses af-

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⁴ See Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 139.

fect? The problem with the ‘affective turn’ we are witnessing today is that it mistakenly believes that affect and language are opposed to each other. Lacan cites Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* particularly to make the point that rhetoric is the study of the affective dimension of language. Affect is not a separate thing beyond language, but a dimension of it. Much of the current interest in affect is associated with the new ‘materialist’ trend, which pines for the ‘great outdoors,’ for that which is beyond language, beyond representation. New materialists and affect theorist (of a certain stripe) want to escape what Jameson once dubbed the “prison house of language.” Lacan teaches, however, that language is an unlimited prison from which it is impossible to escape. This doesn’t mean we have no means of getting beyond impasses of thought or action, for the impasses themselves are sites of affect, which can incite invention.

Let me add quickly that one does not have to be a declared Lacanian to get the idea that language and affect are intimately related, rather than opposed. Think for example of D. A. Miller’s ‘too close’ readings of Hitchcock, of course, but also of Jane Austen. Miller brilliantly shows how easily the hermeneutic pursuit, the hunt for meaning, tips over into or becomes contaminated by affect.⁵ What, after all, is free indirect discourse if not this very contamination of meaning by the affective link with otherness?

Chubbs: Related to this immanent relation between *jouissance* and language is Lacan’s paradoxical place within the structuralist tradition because Lacan seems to elaborate a variant of structuralism, albeit with a subject (though he is clearly not a humanist). In a sense, there’s kind of a weird paradox at stake there. How do you see Lacan’s relation to structuralism then?

Copjec: Lacan’s linguistic turn led him first to embrace Saussure and his structuralist theory of language. But Lacan was also quite critical of Saussure (see, for example, “The Instance of the Let-

5 See D.A. Miller, *Hidden Hitchcock*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

ter in the Unconscious”) and thus had recourse to other linguistic theorists as well. I think particularly of Lacan’s turn to Jakobson in the *Encore* seminar. Already in “The Instance” essay it was the example of sexual difference (specifically of the signifiers ‘gentlemen’ and ‘ladies’ on two bathroom doors that looked precisely the same) is offered to suggest the way Saussurian linguistics falls short. Lacan pounces particularly on the idea that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. For Lacan, language is not arbitrary but enters reality. But not—definitely not—in the ‘performative’ sense of bringing something into being by naming it. A problem arises if structures are thought as overly rigid. Lacan always stressed the precariousness of structures, their ‘wobbliness’—attributes he ascribes to reality itself. I think once again of the ‘little feet’ with which Lacan fitted his structures to allow them to navigate the streets of actual existence. By adding the ‘object *a*’ and the barred subject to his structures he completely transformed the structures in a way that cannot be summarized here. *Seminar XVII: the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, the seminar in which he discusses these structures is, I would urge, a must-read if one wants to see how far Lacan takes the structuralism he inherited.

Chubbs: Yes, and hence his gesture towards Jakobson at the beginning of *Encore*. I would now like to shift the conversation to another area of your research: the relationship between psychoanalysis and film. In a previous interview you did, you made an interesting point about the rise of psychoanalysis in America in the 1940s-‘50s coinciding with the golden age of Hollywood.⁶ Why is film an appropriate medium for thinking about the unconscious for example, and psychoanalysis more generally? Copjec: Hollywood itself believed it needed Freud; it courted him relentlessly. Everyone knows the anecdote about Freud arriving in America and announcing that he was bringing the plague. He expected to encounter some resistance because his theory, he be-

6 See Joan Copjec, “Inheritance of Potentiality,” interview by Jennifer Murray, *E-rea*, no. 12 (2014): <https://journals.openedition.org/erea/4102>.

lieved, was opposed to the American way of life. But Freud suffered a worse fate: rather than resistance, acceptance—for all the wrong reasons. Hollywood embraced his theory and wanted to make films out of it, about dreams, hallucinations, unconscious formations of all sorts and people going mad. But, of course, what intrigued Hollywood were bastardized versions of his concepts and a kind of character psychology that had nothing to do with psychoanalysis.

It is interesting, given this early Hollywood embrace of Freud, that the first of Lacan's seminars to be translated into English was *Seminar XI*, which contains the theory of the gaze. The first avid readers of Lacan, then, were film enthusiasts. At this very moment film theory was being constructed as a new discourse that one could study in a university for the first time. In order to elevate this new discourse to a reputable field of study, its founders turned to semiotics, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan, who provided the field with some of its most (in) famous concepts: the gaze, suture, anamorphosis, the apparatus. For approximately a decade, Lacanian theory was widely embraced by film theory. The decade ended, however, when historicism swept over not only the discipline of film theory, but those of literature, art, architecture, and political theory as well. Historicism directly opposed itself to psychoanalysis and its theory of the divided subject. The era of the plural subject emerged at the end of the '80s and is still with us today.

Chubbs: Of course, when Hollywood is interested in psychoanalysis it's really a particularized version. You really wonder if they read Lacan or Freud's texts when they had analytic sessions depicted in films, as they were portrayed as a means for solving problems and a cure.

Copjec: Hollywood wanted to put dreams on film. Many films that were about psychiatrists and medical cures were made in the '40s and '50s. It is no coincidence then that this was also the period in which subjective shots were most frequently used. Point-of-view

shots—shot from a position aligned with a particular character—are very common. In these shots, the image itself appears to be objective. *Subjective* shots, on the other hand, are very rare; they are used to indicate an impaired state of mind: drunkenness, for example, impaired vision, or a drugged state. In these shots the image itself is marked as subjective because it is blurred; or seems constrained, as though peripheral vision were lacking; or the image fades as if to indicate a swoon to unconsciousness. Flashbacks and dream sequences were also common and were also marked on the level of the image as non-objective. Again, these devices were all connected to individual psychology and had nothing to do with the subject as conceived by psychoanalysis

Chubbs: Another aspect of these films is the relation between psychoanalysis and sexuality. This being another crucial strand in your work, my next question is: what does psychoanalysis tell us about the relation between sexuality and subjectivity?

Copjec: I cannot say this strongly enough: psychoanalysis is the study of sexuality; there is no other discourse that takes sexuality as its field of investigation. Psychoanalysis is coextensive with the theorization of sexuality. Outside psychoanalysis sexuality is conceived to occupy a limited arena or corner of a subject's life. It's taken as a secondary characteristic of the subject, as an attribute that particularizes the subject. For psychoanalysis sexuality is primary; part of the very definition of the subject as such. The question, 'what is sex?' is [ordinarily] never really posed, but taken for granted. One 'knows' it when one sees it. And in many instances one would rather not see it, since it is and should remain a 'private' affair; or else one is obsessed by it and watches porn in order precisely to see it. In psychoanalysis, however, sex is taken as a kind of misfire, as the name for the failure of identity, rather than an identifying mark.

Many, including Foucault, have criticized Freud for reducing everything to a single cause: sex. But this is far from true. Sex is not for psychoanalysis a single irreducible cause so much as the

occasion for rethinking cause. And we know how that ended up, or we know how Lacan ended up redefining cause: as that which is found only in what does not work. We spontaneously think of cause as a single force that sets things going. But even Aristotle listed four causes, even if he thought of each of them as a positive thing that impacted or produced a second thing. Statistics is probably the phenomenon most associated with the decline of causal thinking. Too many variables are at work at any moment to attribute a cause for what happens. So, either the idea has been abandoned or notions such as structural or aleatory causality have been proposed. But cause here still remains positive. Lacan chose not to abandon the notion of cause but to conceive it, rather, as a break or interruption. He doesn't ask what causes the break but so much as he defines the break as an eruption of a negativity, a gap, from which eruption a new fantasy must be woven to sustain living.

Chubbs: And, of course, what you're saying is related to the title and topic of Alenka Zupančič's latest book, *What IS Sex?* How would you say that this ontological approach for thinking about sexuality is different than the prevailing approaches today, which reduce sexuality to a question of gender identity? But more generally, what does psychoanalysis have to say about identity politics and questions which closely accompany the effacement of sexuality by gender?

Copjec: It throws it out almost immediately. There is no way one can use psychoanalysis to support identity politics. Identity politics is as much, or more, of an anathema to psychoanalysis as it was to Foucault. The subject is not identical to itself and all attempts to think of the subject, or a group, or the human, as self-identical leads inevitably to establishing a boundary on the other side of which are those we do not like because they are not like us. The establishing of strong boundaries is what ego psychology recommends; it is also the protective gesture of identity politics. Establishing a politics on the basis of identity is not only reckless politically, it is also theoretically unfounded: identity is a fiction.

Chubbs: This leads me to another question. In the final chapter of *Read my Desire* you claim that in reducing sexuality to gender identity, we are engaged in “the euthanasia of reason.”⁷ Is this euthanasia of reason still with us today, or is it more true today?

Copjec: I think it is more true. Even though there are pockets of theorists who are doing wonderful new work on psychoanalysis—which makes me hopeful—I have a sense that psychoanalysis is becoming more marginalized than ever. I think the erasure of negativities such as sex and the unconscious is growing stronger. In his television interview Lacan warned that the first thing capitalism tries to get rid of is sex. He could easily have added the unconscious as a target of the capitalist discourse. Negativities are, if I can put it like this, luxuries capitalism cannot afford. They jam the perpetual motion machine that keeps financial markets afloat. We are used to thinking that capitalism can find a way to capitalize anything. This is not true; those things that capitalism cannot financialize, it simply ignores or in another way effaces. This has proved to be a much more economical strategy.

Chubbs: Now, for the final question. In terms of future projects, I understand you’re writing a book on the Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami. Can you say more about what this project is about and how it fits into your work overall?

Copjec: Besides my work in psychoanalysis, I am also a film theorist. I received my PhD in cinema studies and teach in a media department. So, several years ago I decided to write a book on Kiarostami simply because I was fascinated by his films, which raise very interesting questions about cinema and about censorship and sexual difference and sexuality—because the modesty system creates a rigid division between men and women and problems about

⁷ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. (New York: Verso, 2015), 201.

what can be shown on screen. As I began thinking through these problems I again started to turn to psychoanalysis for help. I began then to worry about this because I didn't want what I wrote to be rejected automatically—it is silly to write if you do not believe anyone will listen to you or take you seriously—because I was a 'Western' thinker with virtually no knowledge of the culture in which the films I was writing about were produced.

My solution was to pick up the work of Henry Corbin, a well-known and respected French philosopher who introduced Heidegger's work into French circles and was also a specialist in Islamic philosophy. It soon occurred to me however that there was absolutely no guarantee that this solution would prove useful. Why would studying Islamic philosophy from the 11th to the 18th centuries, help me understand films made at the tale end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st? It turned out that I had *blundered* (the apt word here) into a rich source of material. A book *Religion after Religion*, by Steven Wasserstrom, gives a solidly researched but very critical account of Corbin's ideas and relations with a group of religious thinkers who worked together during the Cold War to establish a conversation among the three religions of 'the Book': Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. At the center of this book Wasserstrom stages a kind of confrontation between Corbin and Khomeini over the 'soul of Islam,' which ends with the Iranian (or Islamic) Revolution, at which point Corbin died and Khomeini returned to Iran to lead the Revolution. My book locates a 'turn' in Kiarostami's work around the time of the Revolution and sides with Corbin's account of Islamic philosophy over Khomeini's (he, too, was a philosopher).

What's more, I take two of the most important conceptual inventions of Islamic philosophy—the concepts of the 'cloud' and the 'imaginal world'—and attempt to show not only how they inform Kiarostami's cinema, but also how similar they are to some of Lacan's ideas. Corbin and Lacan happen to have been contemporaries and colleagues and it is quite clear, especially in *Seminar XX: Encore*, for example, that Lacan had learned a thing or two about Islamic philosophy mostly likely from Corbin.

I fully admit that my initial blunder turned out to be a fortunate one, that it was chance that saved my project. I am also happy to point out that I have discovered that I am not working alone in my endeavour to forge a dialogue between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Islamic philosophy; a long list of thinkers are involved in this effort—from Christian Jambet and Fethi Benslama, to Stefania Pandolfo, Omnia El Shakry, Philipp Valenini, and Mahdi Tourage, and a growing list of others.