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Foreclosure and Its Vicissitudes

Towards a theory on the logic of psychosis

Following his discussion on the status of the subject and the signifier, Lacan began to examine the principle of structure in psychosis. This thesis suggests that in psychosis a specific signifier, which concerns both the law and naming, is absent and as a result the structure of the Symbolic is unstable. He calls this signifier the ‘Name-of-the-Father’, and refers to its absence with the concept of ‘foreclosure’. Both of these concepts were introduced during his critical discussion of Freud's Oedipus complex. On the one hand Lacan considered Freud’s account of the Oedipus complex as interesting, since it describes a fundamental transition in human relations. On the other hand he believed it was too mythical and focused too strongly on specific neurotic fantasies, such as the little boy’s murderous wishes towards his father (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972). Instead Lacan presents a formalized explanation of the shift that takes place in the Oedipus complex. He proposes that the Oedipal transition takes place via two linguistic tropes: metaphor and metonymy. Foreclosure is seen as a shift at the level of metaphor that fails to occur. An important consequence of this absent metaphorization is that metonymy in the signifying chain is rendered unstable.

Lacan’s discussion of foreclosure is structural and logical. He provides a theory on the logic of how subjectivity is created in a social bond with others. Within this theory a number of logical steps are discerned that characterize the process of becoming a subject. These steps do not refer to actual incidents that would cause psychosis. A Lacanian psychoanalyst works with words and language, not with prospective information on human development, and is less concerned with making causal speculations with respect to arrests in mental development or problematic
family dynamics. In terms of Lacan’s model on the logic of signification, at a particular moment a psychoanalyst might intervene on a patient’s account of the past with an interpretation. These interventions function as punctuations and can have the effect of retroactively reorganizing the internal structure of the patients’ speech and his subjective position towards his story. It is not aimed towards correcting the accuracy of the patient’s story, even less any failures from the past.

Crucial sources of inspiration for Lacan’s theory of the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father were Claude Lévi-Strauss, and once more Roman Jakobson. For example, from Jakobson, Lacan became interested in the distinction between metaphor and metonymy and the suggestion that these figures of speech can be applied to clinical phenomena, such as aphasia and psychosis (Lacan, 1955–6, pp. 219–24; Ragland-Sullivan, 1986). Lévi-Strauss’s (1958) seminal text Structural Anthropology also influenced Lacan’s ideas on the functioning of social groups.

Two tropes; two processes at the level of the unconscious

Metonymy and metaphor are two tropes that have been discerned in classical rhetorics, next to irony and synecdoche. Lacan (e.g. 1956a, 1957b) attributes them to the work of the first-century Roman orator Quintilian, whose book Institutes of Oratory contains a detailed discussion of these tropes (Quintilian, 1856). These figures of speech particularly interested Lacan because of the new light they would shed on unconscious processes, as discussed by Freud. In Lacan’s interpretation metaphor and metonymy correspond with the two main processes Freud discerned at the level of the unconscious, namely condensation and displacement. Freud (1900) first discussed these processes in The Interpretations of Dreams. Here he discerned that when analysing dreams numerous fragments of the dreamer’s thought process seemed to coalesce into one stock symbol or dream element, which he understood to reflect the unconscious mechanism of condensation. In other words, condensation takes place when numerous latent thoughts are synthesized into one single image or idea that symbolically refers to all of the latent elements (Freud, 1900, pp. 279–304). Freud also observed other dream elements that were clearly associated with anxiety provoking material, but left the dreamer unaffected or detached when recounting them. He suggested that a mechanism of displacement was at work with such dream elements. Displacement is when the libidinal charge that is attached to one idea is transferred to another idea, which consequently becomes overvalued because of the weight it carries from the