

## **Lacan, Jacques (1901-1981): Kevin Jones**

In his famous 'Return to Freud' (Ecrits, 1977a), Lacan replaced what he saw as Freud's dependence on a theoretical framework derived from the biological sciences, with ideas taken from the surrealists, European philosophy, structural anthropology and linguistics. Using these sources he sought to re-establish what he saw as the subversive insight of psychoanalysis, that the division between the conscious ego and the unconscious meant that individual subjectivity was radically split or 'decentred'. The unconscious for Lacan, however, was less a realm internal to the individual than an inter-subjective realm in which desire is fundamentally expressed through language. Lacan's theories provoke many interesting ideas of relevance to art therapy about the relation of language to the nonverbal and the role of signification through the body, images and speech.

Lacan theorised the activity of the psychoanalyst in the clinical and social situation in relation to three orders: the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary.

The Real is a deliberately ambiguous term that suggests both material reality and that which cannot be symbolised and which is experienced as traumatic and 'the impossible'. The Symbolic and the Imaginary are opposed to the Real.

In his idea of the Symbolic Lacan is influenced by the view of Levi Strauss that societies are an ensemble of symbolic systems such as language, kinship and marriage laws, economics, religion and science that structure and govern communication and social exchange (Dylan, 1996; Marini, 1992). The child is born into pre-existing symbolic structures that 'speak through the individual' and which provide a subjective position from which a sense of identity in relation to others can be found. The child has to find a position for its desire in the pre-existing social networks and codes in society, which are experienced as the 'big Other'.

In 'The Mirror Stage' Lacan described how the child first experiences itself as a fragmented body which achieves a fictitious coherence through the ego being formed in an alienating misrecognition of itself in the mirror image (Lacan, 1977b). Narcissistic illusion and entrapment characterise this 'Imaginary order' and the aim of the 'dual identification' with the 'specular image' in the mirror is to deny the presence of absence or lack. The child, suffering a further sense of fragmentation by comparison of itself with the mother, 'desires the desire of the other' and tries to recover a sense of narcissistic unity by becoming the object of the mother's desire. This Imaginary relationship between mother and infant is broken up by the Symbolic order represented by the name of the father through the prohibition of incestuous desire.

For Lacan the key structures of the symbolic are 'the Law that regulates desire in the Oedipus complex' (Dylan, 1996) and the effects of the unconscious which is structured like a language (Lacan, 1977a). For Lacan, in the tradition of post-structuralism, language is composed of differential elements (signifiers) that only have meaning through their difference from each

other rather than through a stable relation to an outside referent (the signified). The signified is thus produced by the 'play of signifiers' leading to the inherent ambiguity of all discourse. The child has to express its desire in relation to this alienating effect of language linked to Oedipal law and the Symbolic. The child's attempt is always marked by subjective division through the gaps in signification, its desire for the lost object and the presence of 'the Real'.

From a Lacanian perspective, the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary link the movement of desire for the other in art therapy to the broader cultural, linguistic and social networks within which we live, work and love.

References:

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*See also: Sublimation, art and psychoanalysis: Sublimation theories in art therapy: Sublime: Lacan, his influence:*