Review Article

"The Thing You Can't Explain": Theory and the Unconscious

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In 1932, Q. D. LEAVIS argued in *Fiction and the Reading Public* that an essentially unified readership in the mid-nineteenth century had split into two reading publics by the century's close, an élite which read Henry James and a philistine audience which could aspire no higher than Marie Corelli. Leavis argues for high literature, as she sees it, and against all that is its foe: bestsellers, of course, but also movies, advertising, and that serpent in culture's bosom, radio.

Fiction and the Reading Public thus has all the virtues and vices of any jeremiad. The virtues cluster around Leavis's highly-coloured and opinionated pronouncements. After all, what good teaching is not pointed, arbitrary, even prejudiced?[1] The vices are found partly in the attitudes that underlie the pronouncements, all of which are hopelessly outdated. What parent would not be overjoyed to see his or her headphone-sprouting teenager hunkered down with *The Sorrows of Satan* or *The Mighty Atom* or any other book by Corelli—any book by anyone, for that matter—rather than sitting glassy-eyed before one more death-metal video?

Yet Leavis's biggest mistake is that she sees as permanent a cultural playing field that was paved over long ago, a greensward occupied at various times of the day (but never the same time) by either reedy, insectile Jacobians or else the unbuttoned devotees of Corelli's melodramas. But education is universal now, information cheap, and concrete everywhere. Culture is played out in shopping malls, where bank presidents and belly dancers lick frozen yogurt as they stroll from book shop to record store, pursued by mimes.

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Like culture, theory too tends to be a little hyper these days. To take a not-so-extreme example, Susan McClary, in her foreword to Catherine Clément's book on opera, notes with accuracy that Clément's writing "seems to owe little to standard academic procedure: it more closely resembles the web spun by a first-rate storyteller, the free-association ramblings of a subject on the psychoanalytic couch, a piece of music" (Clément x). Many readers like both stories and music, though they may prefer to enjoy them separately, and probably few would go out of their way to mix these forms of expression with the "free-association ramblings" of a psychoanalytic patient. Still, we live in crowded times, so it is not surprising to find even relatively conservative theoretical studies going off in two directions at once, as E. Anne Kaplan's does.

Motherhood and Representation[2] is really two books. The first is a succinct though fairly complete and largely successful attempt at a unified field theory of semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, feminist theory, and cultural studies generally. This first "book" is ambitious and hopeful, whereas the second, smaller study, which deals with the specific subject described in Kaplan's subtitle, is unfinished and, if not pessimistic, at least somewhat wistful in tone.

Obviously there is much room for overlap here, and, in fact, Kaplan's two "books" begin as one, with an analysis of three mothers: the historical mother, who is socially constructed ("the mother that girls are socialized to become" [6]); the psychoanalytic mother, who is articulated by Freud and later analysts and who dwells in the unconscious; and the fictional mother, the mother of films and novels who is a combination of the historical and the psychoanalytic. In her preface, Kaplan hints at a fourth mother when she alludes briefly to her own experiences. I would call this one the personal mother and I regret not hearing more from her; if there is value to a book like Clément's, it is that it encourages us to mix personal experience with scholarly observations, no doubt to better effect.

Kaplan points to three "eruptions" (17) that contribute to the construction of the historical mother as we know her today. The first of these economic, political, and technological convulsions

is the Industrial Revolution, which turned the wife/mother from blue-collar producer in a communal setting to middle-class consumer and center of the nuclear family.

This early-modern mother, as Kaplan calls her, becomes the high-modern mother during World War I, or the second eruption. The nuclear family is now threatened by a variety of trends: women's return to the work force, the suffrage movement, the large number of women entering higher education or remaining childless or choosing lesbian relationships. The mother's position in the nuclear family is still central, though it is now a defensive position.

With the third eruption, World War II, the role of the traditional mother changes significantly, as does that of the other family members in the nuclear configuration: Mom goes to work, Dad does at least some of the nurturing, and the kids learn how to make their own snacks. When the house is quiet and the bedroom door is closed, what goes on between wife and husband is shaped by new attitudes and procedures, and the woman can delay, prevent, or accelerate both orgasm and conception. As of this writing, in fact, she can now exercise a prerogative heretofore available only to men and become a parent in old age, using her pension payments, if she chooses, not for dance lessons and cruise vacations but for diapers and baby food.

Initially, it is this historical mother whom Freud scrutinizes as part of his attempt to describe a formation, vast and inexorable, that he perceived as underlying ordinary human consciousness. To Freudians, the Oedipal conflict is the key to one's social construction, and those who handle the conflict successfully will be well-adjusted and productive, while those who do not can anticipate unhappy relationships and destructiveness. This "humanist/sociological" (28) view is based on parent-child interactions, and, while it is important to Kaplan, she gives greater emphasis to Lacanian theories which stress, not historical construction of social roles, but construction via linguistic and cultural systems. We may say that Lacan expands Freud's ideas horizontally, giving more attention at one end of the developmental period to the child's pre-Oedipal or "Imaginary" life, where pleasure takes the form of a fusional bodily ecstasy called

jouissance, and, at the other end, to the child's entrance into the "Symbolic" sphere where his or her sexuality is constructed by language and culture.

Other theorists modify Lacan's teaching, and Kaplan emphasizes the writings of Luce Irigaray, who suggests that women can avoid the oppressive codes of the Symbolic by using the language of the body; Hélène Cixous, whose ideas are similar to Irigaray's yet who emphasizes voice over touch; and Julia Kristeva, who implies (to Kaplan's demurral) that men achieve *jouissance* through language, women through biology—specifically, childbirth. Since consciously-experienced language and culture are more malleable than unconscious experiences, Kaplan sees Lacan, Irigaray, and Kristeva as more optimistic than the humanist/sociological (that is, deterministic) Freudians.

Yet Kaplan objects to a too-narrow focus not only by Lacan but also, by extension, those who work within his paradigm. As she sees it, Lacan and the Lacanians emphasize the linguistic phenomena of the Symbolic at the expense of what she calls the "here-and-now" (51) bonding of mother and child. To Kaplan, Lacan's Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real (where deaths, wars, and natural disasters occur) are givens, but she does not see the phenomena of the Imaginary as obscure and beyond understanding. In this view she is supported by David Stern, whose writings on early childhood argue for a mutuality between mother and child, even an agency on the child's part. Whereas Freud and Lacan would argue that an adult seized by erotic fantasies toward others is reliving an unconscious memory of oneness with the mother, Stern would say that the mutuality one practiced as a child with one's mother may now be practiced in an open and healthy manner with other adults. The actions described in each model are not so different, but Stern's outlook is more optimistic than Freud's and even Lacan's because of his emphasis on agency, that is, on the possibility for change.

Good, because the way mothers are portrayed in the twentieth century, they are going to need all the possibilities for change they can get. In the second part of her book—the second "book," really—Kaplan examines fictional mothers in *East Lynne*, *Now Voyager*, *Marnie*, and other films. What she finds again

and again is a kind of slippage from a purported examination of the historical mother to an unconscious treatment of the psychoanalytic mother. That is, the filmmakers, prompted by some social anxiety (over mothers entering the work force in large numbers, for example), make a film that is ostensibly about the socially-constructed mother yet which confuses her with the other, earlier mother, toward whom an unconscious hostility is projected. Kaplan finds that "realistic and non-paranoid mother images" appear only at times when women are making "few explicit or public demands" and that we see "how quickly paranoid representations return once women begin to articulate their oppressions" (179).

If readers find Kaplan's second "book" less interesting than the one which explicates and unifies different schools of critical theory, the fault lies in the examples used to bolster the argument rather than in the argument itself. Indeed, this is a generic difficulty: examples, especially ones examined in meticulous detail, as is the case here, are almost always less interesting than the arguments they support. In this instance, one needs to bear in mind that most films are made by only a handful of people and most are neither commercially nor critically successful. Thus it is hard to be convincing about the relevance of a small sample of films to a sweeping argument about social attitudes.

In fact, it is only in the last chapter that the second "book" really redeems itself, for here Kaplan uses numerous and varied examples from all sorts of media to support her thesis and not simply a few films. Here she discusses the cultural paradigm shift knows as postmodernism, drawing on the writings of Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, and Jean-François Lyotard. Whereas the first three phases of historical motherhood occur in the machine-age phase of the Industrial Revolution, Kaplan sees a fourth phase occurring as the machine age becomes the electronic age. According to Baudrillard and the others, postmodernism means "the blurring of hitherto sacrosanct boundaries and polarities" as well as "the elimination of any position from which to speak or judge" and "the reduction of all to one level, often termed that of the simulacra" (181). Kaplan is entirely convincing here because she uses a variety of supportive examples, each

of which is treated succinctly, to show how the simulacrum has come to dominate postmodern motherhood.

Two especially memorable examples are a televised *Mother-Daughter American Pageant,* a sort of cross-generational beauty pageant in which dress-alike pairs unconsciously (and grotesquely) parody true mother-daughter bonding, and *Video Baby,* the latest in a series of tapes which includes *Video Cat* and *Video Dog.* Kaplan quotes a *Wall Street Journal* article which says that *Video Baby* makes it possible for people who don't have time to create families of their own to enjoy "'the full, rich experience of parenthood without the mess and inconvenience of the real thing'" (201). Without "'the mess and inconvenience of the real thing,'" of course, there would be no artists to create, no audiences to appreciate their creations, and no theorists to study creators, creations, consumers, and other theorists as well.

Gender, Language, and Myth[3] covers many of the same areas as does *Motherhood and Representation.* Since it is a collection of essays, there is no single thesis, though clearly this book is a response to the sort of question Kaplan poses, namely, where does art come from? Some of the answers are the same, too: just as Kaplan links certain representations of motherhood to corresponding social changes, so, for example, does Jane Tompkins trace the rise of the western to "women's invasion of the public sphere between 1880 and 1920," believing it to be "no accident that men gravitated in imagination toward a womanless milieu, a set of rituals featuring physical combat and physical endurance, a mise en scène that, when it did not reject culture itself, prominently featured whiskey, gambling, and prostitution—three main targets of women's reform in the later years of the nineteenth century" (121).

In one way or another, each of these essays looks at genre fiction—the western but also romance, horror, science fiction, detective, and spy novels and films. As Umberto Eco observes, one crucial (and theoretically enticing) requirement of genre writing is that the writer must create, "not the Unknown, but the Already Known." Thus reading an Ian Fleming novel, says Eco, is like watching the Harlem Globetrotters play your local team: since "we know with absolute confidence that the Globetrotters

will win," then "the pleasure lies in watching the trained virtuosity with which they defer the final moment, with what ingenious deviations they reconfirm the foregone conclusion, with what trickeries they make rings round their opponents." Eco draws a similar conclusion about the James Bond series, though he tosses in a gratuitous sneer à la Q. D. Leavis when he says that "the novels of Fleming exploit in exemplary measure that element of foregone play which is typical of the escape machine geared for the entertainment of the masses" (166). What is missing here is that intellectuals are part of the masses, too, and that while readers who prefer Marie Corelli are unlikely to read Henry James, those who prefer James will also read Corelli nonetheless.

Yet Eco's point about audiences' love for the Already Known is not only valid but compelling. Is it true that, as Irigaray has suggested, "we live in a homosexual culture privileging the male, who can only function with others modelled on himself, others who are his mirror reflections" (Grosz 107)? There is something to this: anyone who has ever watched a couple in a video store has seen the woman propose one film after another, sometimes with a plaintive appeal to the higher authority of the admiring critic quoted on the jacket, only to have the man shake his head again and again as he waits for her to bring him the perfect movie, the one that he has seen repeatedly, even though the title is never the same, and whose subject is himself. Certainly this insistence on the simulacrum shapes the various genres, which become ritualized in half-conscious patterns that are neglected or defied at the writer's peril: returning to the western for a moment, John Cawelti notes that one must not increase the level, randomness, or ambiguity in "the relatively orderly rituals of violence characteristic of the traditional western," because "there is a kind of redemption . . . through violence when it is used appropriately by the heroic individual" (97). Put a few bullets in the right place and you have saved the culture; put a few more bullets in the wrong place and you get a massacre.

Kaplan and Irons's authors agree, then, that popular artists respond both to unconscious psychological realities and to social change by creating ritualized artifacts that mirror the anxieties

and desires of the masses in a funhouse-explosion of competing simulacra. But even if it is true that we love the Already Known, one question still remains, and it is one that will keep theorists in business for as long as artists are, namely, what is it that we Already Know?

Freud may have answered that question long ago with his idea of the contrary, that is, an object or idea in which two opposites not simply co-exist but mutually interpenetrate each other so deeply that it is impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins. "Ideas which are contraries are by preference expressed in dreams [and works of art, he might have said] by one and the same element." For this reason, meanings proliferate rather than diminish: "'No' seems not to exist so far as dreams [and art works] are concerned" (661). One such contrary is the romance of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler; in his contribution to *Gender, Language, and Myth*, Leslie Fiedler notes that many readers of *Gone With the Wind* assume that Rhett will one day return to Scarlett's arms, "though the single line they are likely to be able to quote from the book is the one Rhett speaks as he leaves her, presumably forever, 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn'" (60).

Regardless of the social pressures that helped generate *Gone With the Wind*, it is clear that the contrary Scarlett, at once the irresistible femme fatale and the easily-discarded reject, can only have come from the unconscious, which is where the light of understanding flickers and expires; we blow out that light ourselves when we affix the prefix "un-" to that other human quality that we are so proud of, that sets us apart from (indeed, above) the other animals.

This is why Harold Schechter, writing of Tobe Hooper's film *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, writes, "in a very real sense, the appeal of Hooper's movie—the fascination it exerts—is beyond rational comprehension" (248). It is why Carol J. Clover observes that "the processes by which a certain image (but not another) filmed in a certain way (but not another) causes one person's (but not another's) pulse to race finally remains a mystery—not only to critics and theorists but even, to judge from interviews and the trial-and-error (and baldly imitative) quality of the films themselves, to the people who make the product" (256).

At an art show recently I saw an uncredited quote by Georges Braque, who said, "In art there is only one thing that counts—the thing you can't explain." Braque's pronouncement may be seen as tinged with determinism, perhaps even pessimism, as though one has to stand helpless and with eyes averted before the all-powerful Mystery. However, there is a way to agree with his assertion without sinking into a morbid anti-intellectuality. After all, as we ask ourselves where art comes from, it is possible to go altogether too far in the other direction, that is, away from mystery and toward clarity and free will.

We have already seen that Kaplan endorses David Stern's belief in personal agency over the determinism that others see (not always correctly, I feel) in Freud's writings. And it is not uncommon for some theorists, especially those whose writings are politically-based, to rank other theorists in terms of their advocacy of the possibility of agency. Here, for example, is Susan McClary on Foucault versus Gramsci and Bakhtin:

> While they offer extraordinary insight into the political machinations of culture, Foucault's formulations often are somewhat pessimistic, for they rarely admit of the possibility of agency, resistance, or alternative models of pleasure. Here the models of political criticism developed by Antonio Gramsci or Mikhail Bakhtin can serve as empowering correctives, in that they recognize and focus on cultural contestation, counternarratives, and carnivalesque celebrations of the marginalized. They conceive of culture as the terrain in which competing versions of social reality fight it out, and thus they permit the study of the ideological dimensions of art while avoiding the determinism that too often renders such analyses reductive.
>
> (McClary 29)

Gramsci and Bakhtin may make for cheerier theory, but do their well-lit, clear-headed formulations cover the entire terrain—cannot Foucault's "archaeologies" provide valuable information about what prompts, thwarts, and complicates the struggle between competing versions of social reality?

Too much reason leads to a kind of unreason, after all: in her foreword to Clément's condemnation of opera, McClary calls opera "an art form of the past," apparently not noticing that new ones are being written every day (Clément xvi). And though McClary maintains that Clément loves opera, the book ends with

Clément's self-indulgent description of her dream of a New Age "pagan" festival that takes place in a world where "opera will no longer exist" (Clément 177). Free-association ramblings of a subject on the psychoanalytic couch, indeed: McClary's and Clément's pronouncements against opera are set out with a clarity as brutal as that which informs Leavis's censure of movies and bestsellers. If we abolish both operas and soap operas, then the art world will be severely truncated at both ends, and a cold, inhuman lucidity will dominate what remains.

When I encounter calls for more representations of personal agency in art, I am uncomfortably reminded of a desire on the part of certain naive students that the novels I assign them be about affable, good-natured, sure-to-succeed sorts instead of the outcast adulteresses, runaway slaves, and other marginal types who figure largely in the pages of fiction. But part of art and, if not the largest part, at least the most important part—"the thing you can't explain"—comes from the unconscious. The unconscious gives birth to those contraries that, more often than not, lead not to corporation presidencies and happy, stable marriages, as the naive students want, but to tragedy.

Comedy may be easier to take, and, personally, I would rather watch a performance of *As You Like It* than one of *Macbeth.* Still, tragedy is the most resonant of the genres: in one of the best books on the creative process, Albert Rothenberg writes, "Literary tragedies arise from . . . antithetical elements, such as freedom in slavery, pride in humility, or triumph in defeat. When these antithetical qualities are revealed or elaborated as a tragic novel or play unfolds, there is always an element of surprise, the culmination and overall impact of the suspenseful journey the creator has given us" (232). It is hard to think of reading a book or watching a movie or play that contains no element of surprise. Even when we are dealing with the Already Known, we will be disappointed unless we stumble unexpectedly across what we Already Know.

These last paragraphs should not be taken as an endorsement of obscurantism. After all, we are talking about the smallest component of art here. "The thing you can't explain," while crucial to an art work, is in the same proportion to the rest of the

work as the spoonful of yeast is to the cupfuls of flour, water, and so on that combine to make a loaf of bread. Theory measures everything that it can, which is almost everything; the unconscious provides the rest.

In addition to literature classes, I also teach writing workshops, and I have discovered that there are only two kinds of writers, namely, what I call the "unconscious" writer who produces very "conscious" material and his or her antithesis. This first type of writer is the one who proclaims defiantly a contempt for tradition and who then, in total ignorance of what he or she is doing, writes the most cliché, hackneyed work imaginable. The second type of writer, the one who consciously connects to other writers through study and discipline, is the writer more likely to produce work rich with deep unconscious resonances, that is, the only kind of work that truly satisfies.[1]

Thus, while he or she is waiting to be surprised by the products of his or her unconscious, the writer who wishes to ensure artistic success can do no better than to devour other writings that are thoughtful, complex, and provocative—books like those presently under scrutiny, for example.

NOTES

[1] However, given the rise of fascism in Europe during this period, Leavis is naive or worse when she writes, for example, in a chapter entitled "Disintegration of the Reading Public" (and a sub-chapter called "Levelling Down"), that "the individual has a better chance of obtaining access to the fullest (because finest) life in a community dominated by 'society' than in one protesting the superiority of the herd" (202).

[2] E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama.* London and New York: Routledge, 1992. pp. v, 250. $52.95; $16.95 pb.

[3] Glenwood Irons, ed., *Gender, Language, and Myth: Essays on Popular Narrative.* Toronto, Buffalo, and London: U of Toronto P, 1992. pp. xxviii, 318. $50.00; $18.95 pb.

[4] Not all artists, and not even the best, understand how much they are indebted to other artists and how little, comparatively speaking, to their own inner voices. For example, when Joseph Brodsky was tried for the crime of "social parasitism" in 1964, he had the following exchange with his judge:

Judge: Did you study this?
Brodsky: What?
Judge: To be a poet? You did not try to finish university where they prepare . . . where they teach . . .
Brodsky: I didn't think you could get this from school.
Judge: How, then?
Brodksy: I think that it . . . (*confused*) . . . comes from God . . . (142)

As Brodsky has often referred to the process by which he has defined himself through his use of such models as Dante, Donne, Auden, Mandelstam, and Tsvetaeva as well as through his quarrels with Nabokov and others, here one must admit, however reluctantly, that the judge knows more about the origins of poetry than does the poet.

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