the four (Lacanian) forms of discourse

Lacan proposed four distinctive forms of communication ("discourse") by characterizing the positions taken by four components: the barred subject ($), knowledge ($S_2$, relations among signifiers, chains of signification), the "master signifier" ($S_1$, an irrational universalizing, i.e. not a "class-logical," function capable of organizing signifiers in a field), and $a$, the "object-cause of desire," an a-symbolic materialization of the subject’s desire, characterized by loss, absence, and the gap created by the difference between demand and drive. These terms are like four players that maintain their serial order, $S_1$, $S_2$, $a$, $\$, as they rotate across a fixed field defined by four positions: agent, other, production, and truth. Clockwise rotation results in the discourse of (1) the master, (2) the hysteric, (3) psychoanalysis, and (4) university.

Quadrature of the underlying field of discourse establishes two main divisions. The first, left-right division allows Lacan to define varying qualities of the exchange between agency and truth, on the left, and the other and production on the right. Each discourse would seem to establish a "synchronic" state of affairs, where positions may be taken up by interactive representatives. Slavoj Žižek has, however, gone a step further and suggested that the discourses themselves may be present simultaneously within single works of art (Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology). He uses the operas Don Giovanni and Parsifal to identify the dynamics that allow main characters to play out the possibilities of two terms that supersede the system: consistency/inconsistency and authenticity/inauthenticity. Thus, Leporello in Don Giovanni and Klingsor in Parsifal are "inauthentic and consistent" in their manifestations of university discourse. Žižek establishes the principle by which the discourses and their configurations serve as a kind of Ouija board that maintains a strict limitation on one hand while affording a broad interpretative range on the other. The aim of this summary is to minimize the damage done to Lacan’s original idea while suggesting an independent extension in the spirit of Žižek’s.

The discourse of the master-servant is drawn from Hegel's analysis of this condition in his Phenomenology. The master is self-subordinated to an imagined other, which can be seen as "other masters," which he must eternally confront on a "field of honor." The concept of mastery subordinates the master, who can be seen as the barred subject; and in this case the bar stands for the irony by which the master is more slave than his servant. Because $S_2$ is also knowledge, which the servant possesses on behalf of his/her master, the element of pleasure is concealed within the servant’s freedom. If $S_1$ is considered as a master signifier, the diagonal role of surplus jouissance, $a$, is clear. In the place of production, it maintains a circular, continuing authority that perpetually bars the subject from escaping its "ideological" power. $S_1$ organizes other signifiers, $S_2$, so that it may conceal its authority within the idiotic symmetry of its irrationality. This discourse type resembles Stephen Pepper’s “organicism” in that a (false) thesis of perpetual motion is derived from the political structure of the master signifier, which is able to shift from container to contained unpredictably. [Arrows indicate rotation to the next form of discourse, that of the hysteric.]

In the "expanded field" of (Groucho) Marxian analysis, Lacan’s theory of discourse is carried to the level of the performative. Groucho alternatively woos and insults Margaret Dumont, debriefs Emanuel Ravelli (Chico) until he doubts that he is himself, but is undermined in his own "mirror stage." In Duck Soup, Harpo, to conceal a broken mirror, dresses in a nightgown and cap identical to Professor Firefly’s (Groucho) and mimicks Firefly’s every move — this is the logic of Plautus’s identity play, Amphitryon, where Hermes appears before Sosia "as himself." Freud's two main themes of the uncanny, identity and optics, are settled within this "matrix of a matrix." Falsification/authentication combines with confession/obversion to allow for a realization of discourse as a fractal set. In citing Jacques-Alain Miller’s reference to the "extimacy of the Other," Mark Bracher et alia in Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society note that the division between audience and actors is akin to that between the dead and the living, the "uncanny" transactions between the un-dead audience and the scripted (=fated) characters on stage are nothing less than apophrades, both the "return of the dead," and half-speech (mi-dire). Harold Bloom’s “revisionary ratios” apply.
COMMENTARY

Think of the Lacanian system in minimalist terms. It is a 4-space that fits into two dimensions, against which 4 conditions rotate. Because their order is fixed, we don’t get the usual 4! result of possibilities, just the four-on-four combination of four. This kind of space is linked to projective reasoning. There is a reasoner and, in front of the reasoner, a blank piece of paper, on which the demonstration will take place. If the Gödel principle of non-interference is respected, the reasoner will take care to keep the two zones separate. That is, there must be a separation of use and reference. We cannot use what we refer to and vice versa. This is the linguist’s and psychologist’s (and every other human scientist’s) problem. You can’t talk about language without using language. You can’t think about the thought of others. Contamination of the study with the studied is inevitable.

Rather than avoid this problem, most social science do theorists through double-blind experimental designs and strict customs separating subjects and theorems about subjects. Žižek has “jumped directly to the end-game,” i.e. he has assumed the responsibility of the Gödel theorem and come to terms with its alternatives, i.e. the choice between consistency and completeness. Like Lacan, he has opted for consistency, and used the same logic of the part to apply to the structure of the whole, but in the process he has "fractalized" the system so that it appears at every scale level. In other words, Žižek has done a <> on us, a reversed predication (RP), extinguating the system, making it the contained.

How has he done this? He has taken two hitherto invisible aspects of the system, authenticity and consistency, and tagged each discourse. How? and Why? It seems that Žižek recognizes from the start that the consequence of not being able to discuss discourse without engaging the problems of recursion and self-reference, immediately drops to the level of characterization. This is the ultimate, in my view, "partial object," a concept that, once articulated, becomes a person with its own free will, proclivities, and destiny. This is discourse as the "un-dead." What projective explanation hopes to do by "killing" its subject and thereby allowing it to be dissected as in an anatomy lesson — has done undone through the partializing process. Each discourse, incarnated as a character, is able then to interact with other characters in a "comedy of manners" (literally).

By moving from the high-art examples that Žižek uses (Parsifal, Don Giovanni) to the Marx Brothers, we access two new insights. The first has to do with the correlation Žižek himself has already made, between the three "standard" Marx Brothers combo transformation and the three-part Freudian psyche: super-ego, ego, and id. Žižek has already, in this comparison, evidenced a capability for personification. If parts of the psyche can not only separate but have their own routines and qualities, interact with others, make and accord to demands, then the principle is established. The system parts are able to partialize — i.e. enjoy an independent existence outside the system — and, in effect, reversely predicate.

Reversed predication, we should remember, is the ability to flip from being framed to being a frame. It is the consequence of extimacy (extimité) and its ongoing physics, energized by the unconscious’s sleepless and automatic organization of the world. If we need to, we can draw up the situation in (Spencer-Brown calculus terms: )) ... (— in the limited typography of the computer keyboard. In other words, the last term in a series finds that it can enter into a position before the first term of the series. It can "flip" from a predicating to predicated condition (and vice versa).

The flip is evident in Groucho’s and Margaret Dumont’s relationship of inconsistency. In global terms Groucho’s reverses reverse the relation of the knight to the Lady of the Troubadours. Instead of the enigmatic Lady, giving the knight/singer impossible tasks, Groucho lays into Margaret Dumont’s character with ruthless discourtesy, despite her character's consistent and steady attentiveness and this rude behavior. "Inconsistency" marks both his position as Master and super-ego, in keeping with the Hegelian master’s inconsistent status, between imperious lord and cringing wimp. For a reality check, compare the character of the boss in the 1980 comedy film Nine To Five, Frank Hart (Dabney Coleman). His two settings, arrogant jerk to compliant slave, can flip polarities in an instant — once his captors’ backs are turned.

If the Master discourse and the hysteric discourse are tied together by their inconsistency, the tie seems natural. Hegel makes it clear that there can be no "neutral" master who is at a mid-point compromise between his authority and subjection/abjection to his own rule. Similarly, with the hysteric, there is no happy middle between victimization and enigma. Compare the 1974 film, The Night Porter, about a holocaust survivor’s encounter with her former Nazi camp guard. In the film a traumatised psycho-analytical structure, the enigmatic super-ego oscillates between flattnery and ruthless discourtesy, after all (what could be more super-ego than an angel of the Lord?) The inconsistency theme is carried into the question of Mary’s virginity — How? No less a theologian than St. Jerome discovered this inconsistency theme and, without the benefit of Lacanian discourse instruction, came to the same conclusions. Inconsistency and hysteria are the stuff of divine incarnation. The womb “moves about.”

On the side of consistency, we have the discourses of the university and analysis. This is the Gödelian honesty position: if I can’t say everything, Lacan posits, then I must be consistent. Here’s where honesty plays a key role. Inauthenticity must be the rule in the discourse of the university. This is why the Si: must “pull the strings” beneath the enigmatic signifiers that constitute knowledge. The arrangement of topics a>b>c>… must constitute an ideological order; the real punishments in the university are therefore directed at those who wish to break away from or skip elements in the order … or who, as in the case of serious Buddhists or feminists, jump ship to take up an entirely different order.

Anyone knows that if you’re looking for authenticity, the university is a bad place to start. In analysis, authenticity comes at the end, in the so-called “transversing of the verse”. When the analysand takes responsibility for his/her constructions of the Other and relations to the traumatic-Real. The unconscious cannot be paraphrased (i.e. “falsified”). It can only be traversed in the form of the fantasy construct. Dante had a grasp of this traversal in his principle of showing how the punishment was imminent to the crime. In the figure of Paolo and Francesca di Rimini, the (detached virtual) incident of reading the romance of Lancelot and Guinevere was not a case of incitement to illicit love — the original story was about a fated couple, and reading became a vector of showing how the punishment was imminent to the crime. In the figure of Paolo and Francesca, and one “stands in” the other in the same way the punishment is always-already implicit in the crime/sin.

I would say that at Penn State, one is more able to see how this works than most other universities. The conclusion of the Louis Freeh report (2012) was that Jerry Sandusky’s crimes were “implicit” in the university culture that smoothed it over and covered it up. Freeh was not explicit enough, of course. Had he been a Lacanian he would have gone as far as to say that there are multiple Sanduskies. “Usque ad finem” means “to the very end” (please, no literal translation over and over, as were Paola and Francesca in their own Sandusky loop. The university is corrupt by nature, because university discourse is, as Lacan explained, a consistent discourse with ruthless discourtesy, after all. (What could be more super-ego than an angel of the Lord?) The inconsistency theme is carried into the question of Mary’s virginity — How? No less a theologian than St. Jerome discovered this inconsistency theme and, without the benefit of Lacanian discourse instruction, came to the same conclusions. Inconsistency and hysteria are the stuff of divine incarnation. The womb “moves about.”

So, while the university is consistent (the continuous loop), its inauthenticity (Si/Sl) and its crime (a/$) can be addressed only by analytical discourse and the positioning of knowledge under the sign of truth, which from its position beneath the bar must be the fantasy we must take seriously — i.e. structurally, in relation to its own generative/generated unconscious — as the efficient cause of experiential pleasure (jouissance) and pain (trauma). Remember that, as hysteria teaches us, there is no essential — meaning, “for the unconscious” — difference between the two.

Where the university discourse’s emblem would most likely be the gapped circle — whose missing element is the enigmatic ‘a’ — Enjoy! — we must reverse the vector of falsification (see the diagram) that made the master’s discourse an unbearable political form of the unconscious’s subordination of subjectivity beneath the castrating Symbolic and the spectral Imaginary. Just as university discourse “obverted” the inconsistent but authentic discourse of the hysteric into its own consistent inauthenticity, the discourse of analysis has to reverse-engineer mastery.

That this is the first principle of analysis in the clinic, “on the couch,” is a test-of-concept proof that the placement of analysis beneath master-servant discourse is essentially accurate. The analysand’s conscious presentations are irreversible. The analyst listens for — is silent for — the slips and faults, the limits of mastery that have, without analysis, successfully held the unconscious at bay. Thus, near the conclusion of analysis, falling in love with the analyst is the unconscious’s last defense (cf. Mladen Dolar) against exposure. If love is not the answer, so to speak, then it may be the question, “So, this is love?”

The authenticity/consistency of analysis, the antidote to mastery’s inauthenticity/inconsistency, a dressing-down of the super ego. Truth/analysis must kill the structured dominance of the paternal and maternal super-ego, which is to say it must be a déjà-vu return to a primary landscape, the "maternal place" guarded by the fierce paternal dragon, which gives way to password-protected passage, the end of analysis. In this respect Eleusis had it right.