

Lacan: Ein Lehrstück

The libretto for the musical work *Lacan: Ein Lehrstück* is the composer's compilation of quotes and paraphrases from a range of sources. This includes the writings of Jacques Lacan in their translations by Bruce Fink and John Forrester, as well as Lionel Bailly's lucid introduction to Lacan's work. Another important influence on this libretto is Slavoj Žižek's work, which resonates strongly with Lacan. The remark 'we are animals sick with language' at the end of the 1st Movement comes from Gérard Wajcman, and it recalls Lacan's observation that we are animals at the mercy of language. The 1st Movement concludes with a well-known statement from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.' The quotations from the Old Testament (Exodus) about noise and speech in the 2nd Movement were prompted by Mladen Dolar's observations about the unsettling quality of a wordless voice. The 3rd Movement incorporates a setting of the composer's translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem *Eingang (Entrance)*. The libretto concludes with two quotations: Siegmund Freud's statement about the quiet but persistent voice of reason and Lacan's paraphrase in which the voice of reason becomes the voice of the intellect.

Libretto

1. Introduction and Lacan's Symbolic

Jacques Lacan. And who would that be? Writer, psychologist, and psychiatrist. And not to mention: one of the most cited authors of our time.

He has said a lot of puzzling things - this Lacan. But once you start thinking about them a little, you realise he has come up with some amazing stuff about who we are and what we make of our lives.

So for Lacan there are three major things that make up our existence. Number one: the Symbolic. Number two: the Real. Number three: the Imaginary.

Don't get me wrong: these are not just three little concepts that you can separate from each other. No! They are intertwined and they necessitate each other. We are caught up in all three at the same time.

Let's look at them more closely.

The Symbolic: it's all about language and how it is given to us, without you or me having a say in it. I mean, nobody asked you whether you wanted to grow up with Russian, or French, or Chinese, or whatever. Nor do we make up our own words, as Shakespeare did. And so our language speaks us, as it were, and not the other way around.

We all share in a universe of symbols.

And then there is the meaning of words, which is part of the Imaginary. The meaning of words seems to be straight forward, at least with simple words. You know, like 'tree', 'chair', 'roses', or 'chocolate cake'. But take for example a word like 'happiness' or 'consciousness' or 'morality' or 'asylum'. You can never be too sure what these words mean for different people at different times.

And this is why we have to explain our own version of happiness. And how do we do this? You guessed it: we use words! So, one word explains another, and then another, and another. Until the cows come home!

Signification never comes down to a pure indication of reality, but always refers to another signification. We are caught up in a symbolic chain.

Let's be clear: the sound and spelling of the word 'happiness' are pretty much fixed. The word in its material form is given to us, but its meaning varies. Meaning is a slippery slope. There is an incessant sliding of meaning in relation to the fixed symbol. Speech is in its essence ambiguous.

We are animals sick with language.

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

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2. The Real

Lacan's Real is not simply reality. The Real is all the things we cannot express in words. It is precisely that part of reality that cannot be named. It is by its very nature indescribable, unrepresentable, ineffable.

The Real resides in the gap between the words and their meaning.

'Th' 'e' 'R' 'ea' 'I' 'r' 'e' 's' 'i' 'de' 's' 'i' 'n' 'th' 'e' 'g' 'a' 'p'. [enunciated phonetically]

When you are lost for words you are close to the Real. When words sound hollow, that's when the Real is just around the corner. Even when you talk to a close friend, some things are always left out. The Real is what language fails to capture.

The Real is that rock which resists symbolization.

The Real expects nothing, nothing, of speech. But it is there, identical to its own existence, a noise in which one can hear everything. Everything!

The Real can be both terrifying and blissfully exciting. Panic and absolute enjoyment.

The Real lurks in voices stripped of words. A voice of pure sound, unsettling and uncannily beautiful.

Unheimlich.

And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and the voice of the trumpet exceedingly loud.

They all feared and trembled!

And the people said unto Moses: "You speak to us, and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we shall die."

The wordless voice is an example of Lacan's Real. A voice without speech. A voice of pure presence.

The Real expects nothing of speech. But it is there, identical to its own existence, a noise in which one can hear everything.

3. The Imaginary

Lacan's Imaginary is the image we have formed of ourselves and of the world around us.

It is our view of the world. It is all the things we believe to be true.

The Imaginary is the meaning we attribute to our life, and the meaning we attribute to the words we say and hear.

It is a mix of recognition and misrecognition, as we oscillate between revealing and hiding reality.

The Imaginary fascinates and seduces, and often we imagine things to be more pretty than they are. We rarely grasp the world for what it is.

[**Entrance** by Rainer Maria Rilke]

Whoever you might be: step out into the evening
 out of your room, where everything is so familiar;
 your house stands as the last thing before the distance:
 Whoever you might be.
 With your eyes, which are tired and can barely
 free themselves from worn-out thresholds,
 very slowly you lift a black tree
 and raise it up against the sky: slender, alone.
 And you have made the world. And it is large
 and like a word, which still ripens in silence.
 And as your will grasps their meaning,
 gently they let go of your eyes ...

The voice of reason is quiet but persistent.

The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest until it has gained a hearing.