

Lacan's Three Concepts: The Imaginary, the Borromean Knot, and the Gaze

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A salient feature of Lacanian concepts is their intrinsic interrelatedness and interdependences. Such associations also underline Lacan's principle focus on the conceptualization and synthesization of ideas. This foundational physiognomy helps us to a greater degree to see and examine the logical grounding upon which his concepts stand. This also helps us to clarify and untangle the theoretical net of Lacanian challenging thoughts. For a comprehensive understanding of his individual concepts, it is crucially important to locate their places in Lacan's discourse and trace the thread that ties them together. In this essay, I attempt to examine three key Lacanian concepts, the imaginary, the Borromean Knot, and the gaze. The imaginary identifies the first constitutive encounter of the self with the world where due to the lack of the language and the signifiers, the infantile cognition is based on visual field, especially the images. In this preverbal period—the mirror stage—the identification of the self (the ego) and the other is determined by the images. The imaginary is correlated and simultaneous with the other two registers, the Real and the Symbolic. The theory of the Borromean Knot draws a topological account of the formation of the three register, which can be understood in their co-implications. Even though the gaze belongs to the Symbolic and functions as object *a* in the desire of the subject, it still has close kinship with the image and the imaginary.

The Imaginary

A dictionary definition of the adjective, *la imaginaire*, the imaginary implies that the imaginary is something or to be more precise an image/picture that exists only in the mind. This image is not an objective real, but it is real as image. This description is also rooted in the sense that Lacan wants to set forth by developing his three registers, the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. The imaginary order is based on an inescapable relation between the subject and a specular image or "the image of the," the subject's "counterpart (*la semblable*)," (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, 210). However, this dictionary meaning of the imaginary in psychoanalysis goes beyond its meaning in language. The imaginary refers to a host of intra-subjective and intersubjective relationships, which are imagined and

internalized. These complicated relationships are rotating around the self (ego) and the other—the image of the Other. The link between the ego and the Other is cut off by the intrusion of the unconscious and the persistent and unbreakable bond between the ego and its other. These links are always subject to deception, misunderstanding, erotic implication, aggressiveness and so on. The centre-stage for this interminable game is the ego and its narcissistic relation to the subject, and the other (Ibid). The imaginary is the earliest concept that has appeared in the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan when he developed his theory of the mirror stage in 1936. In the mirror stage, the imaginary consistency empowers a human subject to forestall its illusive unity, autonomy, and bodily coordination as a compensation for its irreducible corporeal fragmentation and disunity. The mirror stage encompasses an infantile period between 6-18 months. The imaginary register will then carry the introjection of the external image to the adult life. In the other words, the entrapment of the ego by this external image will remain the site of this implausible yarn. Through the imaginary, the subject fastens itself to its mirror counterpart by identifying with an idealized image. This “imaginary unification comes about by means of identification with the image of the counterpart as total *Gestalt*; it is exemplified concretely by the experience in which the child perceives its own reflection in a mirror,” (Ibid, 251).

The imaginary order is the first encounter of the subject with the world in which the ego searches for itself an imagined identification. Lacan combines insight from Freudian theory of primary narcissism, the animal ethology, and the transformative power of Gestalt—the subject’s relation with the unitary image and the imaginary representation through which the subject sees and identifies other persons. In other words, prior to the formation of the discourse of the demand (acquisition of language), the imaginary structures the identification of the self, based on an interaction between the self and an external other, which is symbiotically attached to the narcissistic body. The ego and its counterpart endeavour as a loving or abhorring duo in an imaginary relationship. Between these two intertwined entities the whole imaginary universe is centred on the specular capture of an internalized external image. The exchange and the see-saw between the self and the specular image form the *I*, which is neither the Cartesian I nor the I of the Ego-psychology. The alienating effect of the imaginary makes the formation of the *I* as a by-product of *méconnaissance* (misunderstanding). Thus, the imaginary trade of the images remains deceptive because the images reflect the self as something *other* than the self. The specular image tasks like a decoy that makes unreal real in the imaginary plane. Meanwhile, the dual relationship between the images and the self is plagued with narcissistic attraction, rivalry and aggressive animosity. The attraction and aggressivity are caused by the subject’s chaotic relationship with its own body or in Žižek’s words, “the polymorphous, chaotic sprout of bodily drives”. In linguistic terms, the imaginary refers to the deferred signified and signification against the symbolic. Lacan answers the question of where the aggressiveness comes from in his *On the Name-of-the-Father*:

The ego’s imaginary function as the unity of the subject who is alienated from himself. The ego is something in which the subject cannot recognize himself at first except by alienating himself. He can thus only refind himself by abolishing the ego’s *alter-ego*. Here we see the development of the dimension that is already referred to an “aggressiveness”. (Lacan, 2013, 24)

The real, on the other hand, holds itself to the symptom and the unconscious. The real is unrepresentable—both the referent of the symptom in the first clause, to the signifier that refers

to another symptom. This can be conceivable only if we consider it with the imaginary and the symbolic.

Lacan's three registers of human experience, the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real, are only conceivable when considered together, linked as in a Borromean knot of three inextricable tied rings, the metaphor that Lacan will invoke by the 1970s to emphasize the interconnectedness of the registers of experience. (Eyers, 2012,17)

Through an imagistic identification, the ego (*I*) introjects a foreign image as an ego-ideal and then develop it into an ideal-ego, the image of the Other. The ideal-ego could be a thousand and one imagined objects (the beloved, the double, alter-ego, the other, the object cause of desire *a* (with roots in the real), God, to name but a few). To clarify, the ego-ideal is the imagined identity of the subject or the image that the subject wants to be. The ideal-ego, on the other is an idealized image of the ego by which the ego wants to attract the gaze of the Other of the symbolic. This is the ideal that the ego will obsessively follow. A crude chronology of the wandering ego (*I*) for an imagined identity will look like this.

The ego → the image of the other → the object a → ideal-ego

The Borromean Knot

As stated above, Lacan discusses in length the imaginary and its links with the other two orders, namely, the real and the symbolic in his *Seminar-XXII: RIS* (1974-1975). At the very beginning of the seminar he reminds his audience to read his seminar RSI as Rsi, where he lays emphasis on the real as the core of his triad of Real-Symbolic-Imaginary, where the persistence of the real determines the proximity of the symbolic and the imaginary. This means that in reference to each of the triad, we need to consider the reciprocal link that each has with the two others, for “their mode of connection that occupies now centre stage,” (Bowie, 1991, 194). Lacan illustrates his conceptualization of the triad of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary with the topology of the Borromean knot. The real holds itself to the symptom and the unconscious for it is radically un-representable. Thus, the referent of the symptom is always inassimilable real.

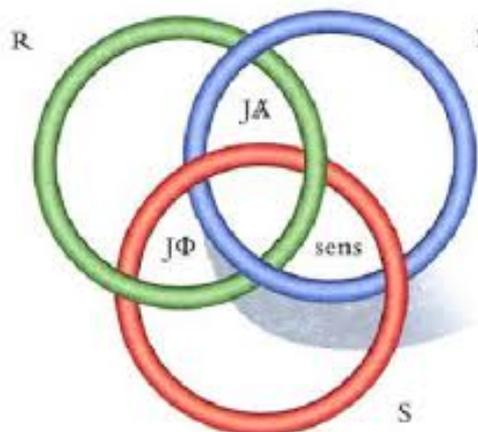
As a topological imprint of the triad, the Borromean knot is tied in a fashion that if one ring or register is severed the whole knot or the triad would fall apart. The knotting up of the triad of the registers is of the similar significance. This designation of the Borromean knot has to be taken at once as the first and the last word of Lacan's seminar. The Borromean structure was refined and altered later by adding a fourth ring to the former three rings of the Borromean knot in his next seminar on James Joyce. In this topology the fourth ring holds the other three rings together. The fourth ring was an invaluable present that the mathematician, Guilbaud gave Lacan as he reminds us in the seminar that the Borromean Knot, “fits me like a ring on my finger,” (Lacan, 107, IX, 7). With painstaking efforts, Lacan tries to develop throughout the seminar different topologies of the Borromean knot to bring new perspectives and stakes to his theories. In a topological term, Lacan draws a comprehensive structure of the subject and places the object cause of desire—object *a*—and the *jouissance* of the Other [JO or JA], a *jouissance* which is remains outside the language. This paradigm of *jouissance* is distinct from the phallic *jouissance* [JΦ]. We find the *sense* or meaning at the intersection of the three rings representing the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. In *Seminar XXIII*, Lacan formalizes Joyce's art and writing in *Finnegans Wake*,

which functions as the fourth ring—the *sinthome*. In the desire of the subject, demand is for the object *a* and its concomitant *jouissance*. The *sinthome* holds the other three orders together by a relative structural stabilization of the discourse. In Joyce, the *sinthome* thus replaces the imaginary plane into a real unconscious where the letter functions as an object *a* associated with the relevant *jouissance*. The signifier of the-name-of-the-father remains dysfunctional in Joyce’s writing and is replaced with the *sinthome*. The linguistic devices and techniques used by Joyce in his discourse provides letters as objects that reaches to the real with a stream of *jouissance*. So, writing for Joyce functions as a support for the relation of the author as subject to *jouissance*. The *Seminars XXII and XXIII* was thus the greatest contribution of Lacan to the literary studies.

I believe that it was necessary for Lacan to give the two seminars, “RSI” and “Joyce the Symptom” in order to conclude, after tentative steps and hesitations, that the triadic knotting of the three consistencies represented by a fourth circle that he calls *sinthome*. (Soler, 2014, 143)

It is important to note that Lacan locates the phallic *jouissance* and the Other *jouissance*, meaning, and object at the centre and intersection of the three registers. In other words, the *jouissance* and the hole (lack) lies within the knotted interdependence of the three rings.

At the intersection of the real and the symbolic is phallic *jouissance*, and we may note here the shift that has been made with regard to Freud and even to the earlier Lacan from whom we might have expected a diagram centred on the phallus. Between the imaginary and the symbolic is meaning, to which Lacan assigns a new value, the little *a* is at the centre, and it is to this a “that every *jouissance* is connected, and therefore what is external in each of these intersections.” The phallic *jouissance* at the intersection of the real and the symbolic is defined as outside the body, that is, outside the imaginary. In the same way, meaning is located outside the real... Finally, the *jouissance* of the Other [JA] is at the intersection of the imaginary and the real. This *jouissance*, about which nothing can be said, occurs without the intervention of the symbolic, as the formulas of sexualization [*Encore*] showed. (Vanier, 2000, 76-77)



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To summarize Lacan’s aims from his seminar, the Borromean knot is one crucial thing and that is the existence of what he calls an unfillable hole at the heart of human subjectivity. No

configuration of the Borromean knot can remove the existence of this hole. It would be reproduced as the same by the imaginary and the symbolic. In the preverbal space of the mirror stage, the subject is engrossed in his ego in the imaginary plane in order to obtain wholeness and a unity. In the symbolic, this hole is inviolable and in the real this hole persists in the unconscious and symptoms. This hole, lack, or emptiness ek-sists, which implies that it remains forever external from which the subject is never free. Lacan borrows the Heideggerian concept of ek-sistence—a kind of existence that is impossible to symbolize. Hence, the hole is in fact the real that is often an inassimilable externality, as Lacan says in the 9th session of the *RSI* (11 March 1975).

It ek-sists with regard to the Symbolic insofar as the Symbolic turns in circles around an inviolable hole, otherwise the knot of three would not be Borromean. Because that is what it means, the Borromean knot, it is that the hole, the hole of the Symbolic is inviolable. (Lacan, 1975, VII-9)

The Gaze, Image and Picture

In *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan spells out the genealogy of desire in a visual field. I would just like to sum up this by saying in a nutshell that desire places delimitation on the field of the visibility, where the eye functions in opposition to what the gaze may set to expose. In the theatre of desire, the object *a* plays a decisive role by symbolizing the lack upon which desire sustains itself. This object *a*, the object cause of desire is the gaze. Since desire is in the symbolic, according to Lacan, desire is essentially the desire of the Other. Therefore, in the field of visibility, *I see* turns into *I see just to be seen*. The unconscious desire of the subject does not lie in ‘*I see*,’ but lies in ‘*I see to be seen*’, instead. This makes a visual field the space of the gaze of the Other that calls for a subject’s look just to neutralize it. It is because the gaze triggers in the subject the awakening of the scopophilic drive. The implication of desire on the subject in a scopophilic field is enormous. The gaze that animates desire, in fact, entraps the subject’s look. The seductive and a taming role of the gaze amplifies the strength of the seen object, the image, the picture and so on. “The momentary feeling of unbalance when we chance to see something by accident perhaps as a result of the brushing glance as we turn away, is the gaze at work,” (Murphy, 2001, 80).

Let us have an example, Suppose I look at a picture, my desire to look is triggered by the gaze that is already hidden in the picture, which creates on its part what Lacan calls a spot or a screen that floods me with the light. The light is thrown by the gaze of the Other rather than the picture itself. The subject who sees at the picture is succumbed to the flood of light. In this context, Lacan argues that the subject is photographed by the picture or to be more precise by the gaze and the desire of the Other. Furthermore, the subject is determined by the gaze which comes from outside from where the Other is looking at the subject. The gaze is thus an ‘instrument’ through which, “I am photographed,” (Lacan, 1994, 106). Animals remain in the imaginary capture, but they are capable like humans to use the weapon of the capture in the scene of fighting by making gestures to defeat their enemies. The gesture is not the blow but a vicious attempt to freeze or pacify the enemy. The meaning of the evil eye that stops movement or as Lacan says, it is killing life, is imaginable from the arresting power of the gaze of the Other that turns the subject into a picture. Another example of the power of the gaze of the Other that Lacan gives us is the gestures of a dancer in dance. When a dancer

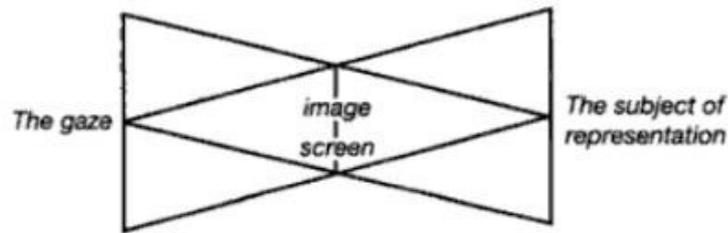
pauses and momentarily stops his fast movements makes of him/her self a marble statue in order to an arresting power of the gaze comes to life.

In order to elaborate further Lacan's theory of the gaze and picture, we need to disentangle the above theoretical contour by putting it in plain words. Lacan means that the object we see is turned into a displaced screen by the intervention of the gaze that masks that seen object. As a result of this, the observer is caught in the trap of the gaze. The gaze is independent of the eye and the control of the subject. This turns the object I see into the picture or image that sees me before I put my glance on it. Therefore, what I see replaces itself into what I desire to see. This is the meaning of Lacan's famous phrase, *you never look at me from the place from which I see you*.

For spelling out his theory of gaze, Lacan combines his own theory of the decentralized subject and the logic of the scopic science of the light, reflection, and refraction. He presents two interpenetrated triangles. The first triangle represents the subject or better the eye of the subject and the second signifies the gaze. As the diagram shows the eye of the subject is located at the apex of the second triangle and sees through this apex which belongs to the gaze of the Other. The image or picture that is formed at the point of the intersection between the two triangles is formed as the point towards which my desire is directed. What the eye sees is the screen or the trap laid down by the gaze which captures my eye. The trap belongs to the light of the gaze of the Other. Unlike the Cartesian subject, Lacanian subject is not the at the centre of its own visual experience. In other words, in seeing, the subject gets its light from the gaze that lies outside of the subject. The image that is formed in the screen by the gaze of the Other is marked out by the lack. By way of illustration, Lacan presents Hans Holbein's famous early Renaissance painting *The Ambassadors* as an example of that picture that contains within itself the trap of the gaze. This lack in this painting functions as the taming of the gaze, *dompte-regard*, symbolized by the anamorphic skull at the background between the two handsomely dressed young ambassadors. The skull in the painting is curiously visible when it is looked at from a left angle from below or right angle from above. Lacan argues that the skull represents the trap for the observing subject, which symbolizes nothingness, death and the lack or object *a* of desire. In the dialectic of eye as organ and the gaze as the look of the Other, the gaze is on the winning side because it entraps the observer in its snare, as the skull in the *Ambassadors* demonstrates. As this painting bears evidence, art is the guide that offers Lacan's theorization a full scope of exposition. In other words, art held within itself a hidden knowledge that needs to be discovered.

Because of the involvement of desire, the taming of the gaze is always accompanied by the deception in vision *trompe-l'oeil*. The similar logic may be applied to the social function of the object *a* as gaze when we analyse religious icons. They are pictures that holds within themselves the lure and capture because they function as the objects of desire as well as the object of the desire of God. "What makes the value of the icon is that the god it represents is also looking at it. It is intended to please God," (Lacan, 1994, 1113). Such icons symbolize the invasive power of the gaze which like Foucauldian panoptic eye are looking at everyone from all sides. This understanding of the religious iconography is fully sheltered in the analytical psychology of Carl Jung for whom the image was, synonymous with exposition of God.

From this power of the gaze of the Other, Lacan describes his theory of the evil eye and its



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hypnotic and freezing power. The eye that is revealed as an uncanny object is the evil eye of the gaze. The eye as an organ is separated from the body, the subject as an object *a*. The uncanny nature and the threatening feature of the evil eye reveals the separating function of the eye. Lacan mentions the social significance of the gaze symbolized by the iconography of the eye in the mythology and antiquity. Poe in his short fiction, *The Tell-Tale Heart*,” reminds us of the evil eye:

I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold...I made up my mind take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. [xroads.virginia.edu]

Lacan refers to the Augustine’s *Confessions*, where he presents the story of his childhood and his envy towards his smaller brother who was still at his mother’s breast. The lure of the picture that arises in the eye of the viewer, as it was said earlier, is also compared to the function of gestures and masked in the battle zone. Grimaces, masks, and gestures were used in classical wars and moderns war alike which all used as weapon. “A threatening gesture, for example? It is not a blow that is interrupted. It is certainly something that is done in order to be arrested and suspended,” (Lacan, 1994,116).

Lacan reminds us that in the scopic level instead of the discourse of the demand, we have the desire of the Other that is symbolized by the lack that gaze as the object *a* represents. Since the desire of the subject is the desire of the Other, in the field of visibility the subject is seen from all side, as it was pointed out earlier, the subject is already photographed. So, each picture or painting is recognized with its integral lure and trap. The gaze allows the photographing of the subject.

What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which—if you will allow me to use a word, as I often do, in fragmented form—I am *photo-graphed*. (Ibid, 106)

In conclusion, Lacan in *Seminar XXII*, restates the importance of the triad of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary and their centrality in the constitution of the self and its supportive and threatening *other*. The centrality of the three consistent orders elevate their status as the double spiral in the human subjectivity. They are interrelated and exists as three consistencies. As the Borromean Knot bears evidence, the registers are depended on one another. If one ring is cut the others will follow disintegration. The fundamental issue is the lack or hole in these three registers. The hole in the symbolic is radically unmemorable. In

the imaginary the lack is substituted in the specular field with the relationship between the subject and its other. In the theory of the gaze and the picture, what is at stake for Lacan is the configuration of desire in the field of invisibility. What the subject sees is determined by the exterior gaze that comes from the Other to which the desire of the subject is directed. The subject's vision is not centred in itself. It is superimposed by the gaze of the Other that often exposes a lack. Thus, the subject's eye is embedded in the gaze of the Other. The picture or painting functions as the confinement of the vision of the subject. The lesson of the Borromean metaphor is that the subject is endured by consistently knotting the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. This is the way that the subject saves himself from unknotting of the three registers.

Notes

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