

# Jacques Lacan



“in the unconscious is the whole structure of language”

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Quote from “The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud”, *Écrits: A Selection* 147.

- French psychoanalyst in the Freudian tradition—clinician and lecturer
- always claimed to be merely revealing what was already present in Freud (hermeneutic), but really introduced many new concepts
- major figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century continental thought
- ideas adopted by Anglophone literary and film theorists
- 1953-1980, gave 27 year-long seminars in Paris—his most influential work
- known in English mostly via *Écrits: A Selection*

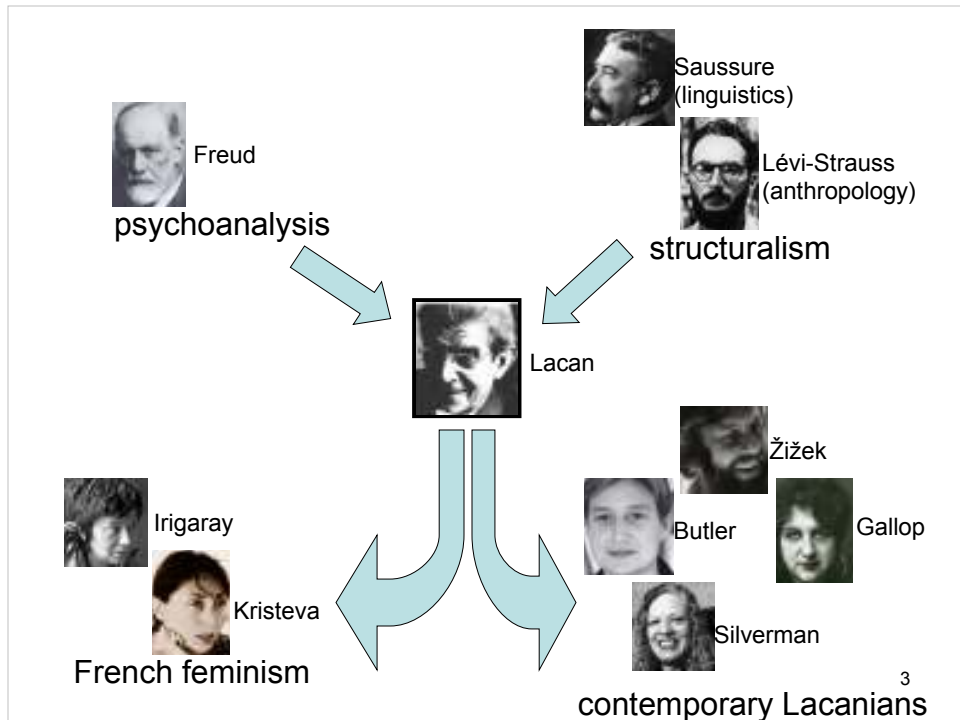
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hermeneutic: compare Augustine.

Film theory: particularly ideas about the gaze and desire; typical of work published in the journal *Screen*.

example seminar topics: “The Psychoses”, “Desire and its Interpretation”

*Écrits* is a collection of written adaptations of Lacan’s seminars and presentations. Most people have Alan Sheridan’s translation, containing Lacan’s own selection of pieces from the French edition.



Lacan combined Freudian psychoanalysis with structuralism, particularly the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand Saussure (and also Roman Jakobson, etc) and the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss; this led him to a theory of the psyche in which language plays a central role.

He strongly influenced the French feminists, such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva; some of their key ideas developed from arguments they advanced against his positions.

Some major contemporary Lacanians: Slavoj Žižek (who's said he would like to be Lacan's Augustine), Judith Butler (whose work is influenced by Lacan and the French feminists), Jane Gallop (who wrote *Reading Lacan*), and Kaja Silverman (an important film theorist).

# Lacan as Rhetorical Theorist

- the unconscious is structured like a language
- the unconscious is “the discourse of the Other”
- importance of the Freudian “talking cure”
- metaphor and metonymy as psychic operations
- theory of the “four discourses”
- discourse of the psychotic

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• “like a language”: Symbolic field (which reigns over the Imaginary and the Real); Law

-“discourse of the Other”: because the subject is split, we experience our own inner life as dialog; we are rhetors to ourselves

-“talking cure”: oratorical rhetoric (and drama of transference) as clinical practice

-“metaphor and metonymy”: L sees these as the two essential forms of the signifying chain, and that in turn as the most basic structure of the Symbolic field

-“four discourses”: L describes four kinds of discourse, defined by the relative positions of the split subject, the object of desire, the transcendental signifier, and the signifying chain: the discourse of the master (power), the discourse of the university (mask of objectivity), the discourse of the hysteric (symptoms of resistance), and the discourse of the analyst (subversion) → a rhetorical theory of discourse with political consequences

-“discourse of the psychotic”: specifically Schreber; the psychotic expresses “speech from beyond the subject”

# Lacan as Rhetorical Practitioner

- orator: most of his written work adaptation (sometimes just transcription) of seminars and presentations
- famously complex (and difficult!) style

Periphrasis, hyperbaton, ellipsis, suspension, anticipation, retraction, negation, digression, irony, these are the figures of style (Quintilian's *figurae sententiarum*); as catachresis, litotes, antonomasia, hypotyposis are the tropes, whose terms suggest themselves as the most proper for the labelling of these mechanisms. Can one really see these as mere figures of speech when it is the figures themselves that are the active principle of the rhetoric of the discourse that the analysand in fact utters? ("The agency of the letter in the unconscious, or reason since Freud", Sheridan's *Écrits* 169)

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“adaptation”: this includes most of *Écrits*; example of transcription is “God and the Jouissance of The Woman”

difficult style: I chose this passage because it's about rhetoric; it's actually one of his easiest bits.

## Lacan the Rhetor

- would not separate rhetorical theory and practice
- *Écrits* meant to be experienced like an analytic session, not “understood”
- knowing (*connaissance*) inextricable from misrecognizing (*méconnaissance*)
- controversial: constantly arguing with colleagues, forming and dissolving schools
- talking cure remains paramount

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•In rhetoric, L. practiced what he preached; he apparently believed his complex and arcane rhetoric really did get closer to the truth of the unconscious.

•For him, rhetoric is not about the transparent communication of ideas. Instead (when the discourse of the analyst is employed) it evokes an enlightening response in the audience (analysand).

•L. does not believe in a faculty that lets us perceive absolute truth; knowledge and misinterpretation are two sides of the same coin.

•L. spent his long professional life battling his own profession.

•Ultimately, L. values rhetoric even higher than someone like Quintilian: he sees it, in the service of the talking cure, as essential to our mental well-being.

## Some Major Works in English

- *Écrits: A Selection*, trans Alan Sheridan. The classic English translation.
- *Écrits*, trans Bruce Fink. The new complete translation.
- *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*
- Jane Gallop's *Reading Lacan*. Mixes interpretation, commentary, and opinion.
- Slavoj Žižek, various works including *How to Read Lacan*, *Looking Awry*, and *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan But were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*

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• *Écrits* is the major work. The new translation (just came out this year) is much larger; Malea says it's more readable than Sheridan's.

• *Four Fundamental Concepts* is from a seminar where L. presented what he considered the four most important concepts for psychoanalysis: the unconscious, repetition, transference, and the drive.

• *Reading Lacan* has its fans and detractors, and it's not rigorous. But it's like having a theory buddy for L.: at least you get someone else's impressions of the material.

• Everything Žižek does is Lacanian in some way, and he has about a zillion books out, but *Reading Lacan* and *Looking Awry* (an intro to Lacanian theory) should be particularly useful if reading L.'s work, and *Everything* is handy for film studies or if you just want some sense of Lacanian theory in practice.